

## RETURN OF THE SCREW

Kevin Cook

Okay. I'm going to go over all this in my head and see if I'm going nuts or what. If any creatures can hear me—hello.

I don't know how in the hell you can expect a guy to work for a living, drive a cab on the weekends, not go crazy living with a battle-ax like Thelma, and still talk to alien creatures from outer space. I mean, it seems to me the outerspace creatures should go after those science-fiction writers like Kurt Vonnegut and Mr. Spock. But no, they got to come right to yours truly like magnets, or bills. So don't even let 'em tell you Jimmy McQueen isn't the best damn screw-packer, cab driver, and alien creature talk-toer on Earth, or in Indianapolis at least.

I guess I should start at the beginning, which was just this morning, which goes to show you how fast a calm, peaceful life can turn into a real mess.

Little Jimmy put an ice cube down my back to wake me up, which is better than a cockroach but not much, and Thelma started hollering at me it was already twenty after seven and I was never going to make it to work in time, and the john had backed up. Just like any other morning. So I rolled out of bed and tried to get my feet into my slippers. I was a little surprised when one of the slippers I couldn't quite get my foot into turned around and bit me, but then I remembered that the cat never had fit onto my foot and liked to have an excuse for biting me, so he always slept by the bed. Thelma hollered again and little Jimmy fired a piece of scrambled egg into my eye as I stumbled into the bathroom. The kid had good control.

"All right already!" I yelled out at Thelma, showing her who was boss.

Some guys take a brisk shower to wake them up in the morning, but I just step on the linoleum in the bathroom. The floor must be made out of the same stuff they put inside thermos bottles, because it absorbs all the cold on the south side of town and then waits for me to come in barefooted. The bathroom floor and the cat teamed up against me a long time ago.

And there's something wrong with the bathroom mirror, because the guy in it is about forty pounds overweight, only has seven or eight

teeth left, and most of his crew-cut is falling out at the same time as his tattoos fade away. He's getting real old, and he looks kind of like Andy Devine would have if you took away most of his hair and twenty of his teeth. Most mirrors look like that, though, so I don't let it bother me. Personally, I look a lot like Robert Redford, and the only thing I've got in common with the ugly guy in the mirror is we've both got bulging eyes from the linoleum.

Well, I made it through shaving and getting dressed, and got out to the kitchen in time for some of Thelma's bacon, eggs, and coffee, all soaked in Mrs. McQueen's famous-recipe, industrial grease.

Wasn't anything worth reading in the paper. Something about a war in Africa, and a busload of old ladies getting kidnapped out in California, but the Reds had a day off, and the Foreman-Clay (I always call him *Clay*) fight wasn't for another week.

I kissed Thelma goodbye, one of the great mixed blessings of all time, and jumped in the car at sixteen till eight, just enough time to get to work if those downtown stock brokers would just get their behinds in gear and do thirty miles an hour.

The guy on the radio said it was three minutes till eight as I was pulling up next to the executive parking lot at the warehouse, so I did what I always do when I'm going to be late—whizzed my old fire-engine red '66 Olds 98 into the President's parking space (with the big number one on it), jumped out, and then moseyed up past the security guard into the employees entrance and got punched in at 7:59. Smart, huh? Then I took my time going back out to the car, since the prez never shows up before nine-thirty, eased her back out into traffic for a block, pulled into the blue-collar lot back on Shelby street, and over the bottomless chuckholes into my #44 space.

I straightened up my ID badge with the picture that looks like a Polish refugee onto my shirt pocket and wandered back past the overgrown traintracks to the entrance, taking my own sweet time like I always do when I'm punched in on their own sweet time. The security cop, a skinny Mexican kid from Cuba named Davey, looked right at the dumb badge like he did every day, not even recognizing me after he'd been two years on the job. I could have been Frank Nitty, but if I had that badge on I could have grabbed every screw in the place.

Now—about the place I work. It's called Hardware Supply Co., Inc., and we fill orders from all over the world for nuts, bolts, pop rivets, flat, split, internal and external lockwashers, and, most of all, screws. Caps screws, wood screws, drive screws, tapping screws "A" and "B", brass screws, zinc screws, cad screws, copper; aluminum, brass, bronze, and even nylon screws—you name 'em, we got 'em. In fact, believe it or not, our slogan is "The House of a Million Screws." No fooling. It's right on the building and all the official paper and all the trucks, in big red letters—"Hardware Supply Co., Inc., THE HOUSE OF A MILLION SCREWS." But don't ever rib the execs. about it, because they don't get it. (You know, it just so happens that there's another establishment just down the road a few blocks with the very same motto. Har-de-har.)

I'm a packer, which *doesn't* mean I play football. Beat you to it. When we have an order for, say, 10,000  $\frac{1}{2}$ -14 x 4 (half-inch screw width, fourteen thread count, four inch long) flat head drive screws, Zeke brings me a big metal tray full of them and I pack 'em in boxes of anywhere from ten to a hundred. Those fl. hd. dr. screws would go a hundred in a number two box.

Then I go find the labels on the shelf by the west wall, get my sponge, and put a label on the tops of all the boxes, and then get my stamp pad and box of little rubber numbers and letters that fit on the blank stamper. You wouldn't believe how long it takes to find a one, a slash, a two, a dash, another one, a four, a times, and another four in that box full of tiny little stamps, and you have to remember to put them all in backwards so they come out forwards on the label. I always get the threes backwards, which is to say forwards on the stamper but wrong on the label. Then if the screws are plated with any metal, I get out my brass or cad or zinc or alum stamp and stamp that on the labels. The labels already have the number of items, company name, and "House of a Million Screws" on them, so all I do then is count the boxes (a hundred in this case, unless there were 10,002 in the batch, and then I have to use an extra partial box for the two left over) and put that down on my daily packing record, before Zeke carts off the boxes to the shipping desk.

See, it's not all that easy, is it? And when you do it twenty-three years, it gets a lot tougher. But there's variety in it, which is the best thing



about my job. Why, one day you'll pack all screws, and the next day you'll do nothing but nuts and bolts.

So anyway, I'd just gotten my radio plugged in, my label sponge all filled up with water, and my Boraxo can opened up this morning when this thing you're not going to believe happened. Zeke had just brought over a trayful of oily  $\frac{3}{4}$ -15 x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  hex head cap screws and taken his first break, since he'd already been at work fifteen minutes. I was just standing there at my bench (I always work standing up, because Geneva always comes in early and takes my chair over to shipping) putting on my gloves, when one of those cap screws looked up and said, "Hey there, Jimmy, don't you think it's about time you got to work?"

The Lord's truth. I'm not lying. I was about as flabbergasted as when Parnelli Jones blew an engine and lost the 500, and fifty bucks of mine, on the last lap a few years back—or even more. I said, "Huh? Who said that?"

"You're looking right at me, Jim boy, so I guess you know who it was," the thing said, looking just like any other cap screw except for a mouth that looked like a grease smudge and two tiny little eyes. "Next thing you'll say is 'What are you?' so I'll tell you right now that I'm what you might consider a guardian angel, or something like that. My name is Gbshaw, and I'm from the planet Odannibuoy, which is in the fifth orbit out from Rigel."

"Zeke! C'mere!" I yelled. "They're giving you a raise." (I wanted him to come quick) I wasn't about to talk to this thing by myself.

"He can't hear you," the thing said.

"The hell he can't, I saw him turn on his hearing aid not five minutes ago."

"He can't hear you because I don't want him to, and because he doesn't really exist."

"Tell him that," I said, and went to get him. Except that in two steps, I almost fell into a thirty-foot deep alligator pit, right in the middle of the warehouse floor, which had never been a part of Hardware Supply before. It went all the way around my bench like a moat, about five feet away in every direction. They looked like hungry alligators. I turned back around.

"Did you do that?"

The little grease smudge wiggled around into a smile, and the thing said, "Yep. So don't go running off when I'm talking to you. It's not polite, and the next thing might not be alligators."

"What would it be?" Dumb question.

"How about a dozen of Thelma?" Scary answer.

It stretched a little and rolled over across some of the other screws. "How about moving me up onto the bench, ol' buddy, so I'm not so cramped? These non-sentient cap screws are so inflexible as to hurt my back when I associate with them."

I picked it up real slow and careful; and covered it in both my hands so I could have a minute to think. I wasn't really too scared, since twenty-three years of working in a warehouse sort of stiffens up your mind, but I'd heard some bad things about alien monsters.

The Boraxo can said, "Okay, smart guy, lemme go or the alligators will sprout wings and come up after you."

I opened up my hands to see if I still had him and he hopped to the top of the bench. "Jimmy boy, I really wish you wouldn't do dumb things like that. I'm not gonna hurt you, and we'll just have a nice little talk. So don't force me to end our relationship before I have to ol' pal."

"How'd you make the hand cleaner can talk?"

It giggled. "Hee-hee . . . easy! I just pulled a transference and took it over, leaving this body unoccupied. But I'm much more comfortable here in this hex head c/s. Ready to talk?"

"I can hear alligator stomachs growling."

"Oh, sorry. SEX!"

The pit disappeared.

"What's *that* got to do with it?"

"Don't you know?" The thing sounded surprised. "That's the magic word in your world."

"It is?"

"Naww. Hell, Jimmy, I was just pullin' your leg. My race doesn't need magic words, but I wanted to see your facial capillaries fill up."

I looked around for Geneva or Larry or somebody, mainly so they wouldn't see me talking to my work. But it was like everybody else had gone on break at the same time, leaving me all alone on the whole first floor, except for—it. So I just sucked in all my gut and belly and asked it the question.

"Are you gonna kill me; and take over the world?"

It flipped over and giggled like the leprechaun in the Lucky Charms commercial, like I was a real mallethead.

“Hoooo boy, Jimmy—have you got a lot to learn. Sit down on the edge of the bench here, while I tell you what I’ve been trying to get into your thick skull all morning.”

Now, I know my skull isn’t so thick that they didn’t make me head packer on the first floor, but I didn’t say anything but a little ‘Sheeeeit’ to let him know I didn’t put much stock in any of this stuff. He rubbed his threads together and got set to tell me what looked like a long story.

“Well, Jimmy, it’s a looong story. But I’ll cut it down to the bare bones, since I know you’re as long on attention span as your are on brains.”

He settled back. “Y’see, I come from Rigel Five, like I said, and my race is a group of beings you’d have to call ‘Projectors.’ We’re a metallic people, so we can’t move around too much, but we do have the most advanced mental powers in the Galaxy.

“About eleven million years ago, we came into sentience, gradually, as a great mass of still-molten iron compounds beneath the surface of our planet. We probably would have evolved into an iron-based animate race, you understand, if we could have worked our way to the outside. But we found ourselves just below the crust, and that crust had a disproportionately high concentration of one metal. It had a very large amount of zinc in it. Unfortunately, because of the way we’d evolved, our negligible physical but amazin’ mental powers are unable to do a damn thing to penetrate zinc, so we were trapped for all of nine million years, shielded from anything beyond the planet’s surface. You following this?”

Bull. Sounds like science fiction theatre on Channel Four, I thought. “Sure,” I said.

“It’s *not* bull. You want the alligators back?” He sounded offended.

“I believe you,” I said. “I’m listening.”

“So, around two million years ago, there was this massive upheaval in the mantle, which forced some of the lower crust up through the upper crust, and hosanna boom de-ay, we were up above the zinc. We owed our freedom to a giant Odannibuoyquake.

“Through the period of our captivity, we’d had nine million years to evolve into almost entirley psychic beings. And it sure didn’t take us long to find out that we could vacate the premises and skip out interplanetary distances with just our personas., Now, is that class, or is that class?”



I wasn't all that impressed. "Great, but so what?"

"So what? So eventually a bunch of my colleagues and myself found *this* cheap little planet, inhabited by a race of microscopic white grubs with no external senses. You."

"Who, me?"

"You. The human race."

I don't mind telling you, I was insulted. Now, I didn't understand most of what he was saying, but I was pretty sure that he's just called the human race a bunch of grubs, and I didn't have to listen to that kind of stuff.

"Don't go callin' us grubs," I told him. "Grubs are little worms. We're people with arms and legs and brains and bodies."

"You think you are," the thing went on, with no sign of slowing down. "I'll admit you have bodies, tiny ones. But nothing else to speak of, or with. Without us, you would be in this great gray state of existence with absolutely no sensory input except a little bitty sensitivity to light. Don't you see? That's what's so great about you! We have these fantastic minds all contained in energy waves, but we can only take shape in things that are close to our original substance, and those things are inanimate and boring. But each one of you presents a blank slate where we can create whatever kind of world we want, and share it with you guys, and you're all the better for it."

"You mean you aliens made up everything in the whole word, and it's all fake?"

"No, it's real, all right, if you mean is it concrete and tangible, like anything on any other planet. It's all made of real matter. But we can change it any time we want to. And I'm *your* personal Projector, and I've created everything you can perceive. You're lucky you got me, too, because I came right out and chewed the fat with you before . . . well, uh, before I had to move on, if you know what I mean."

I knew I didn't like the sound of that, so I changed the subject.

I said, "I'm leaving on break, and don't try to stop me. I don't want to talk to you anymore." I took a few steps toward the back stairs that led to the snack bar on the second floor, watching out for deadly alligator pits, but there wasn't anything but old grease on the floor. Figured if I got a twinkie and talked to somebody for a while, maybe all the screws would keep quiet when I got back to work.

The second floor snack bar is like an oasis in one of those Rudolph of Arabia movies. All the rest of the warehouse is hot as hell, smoky as a

factory, and there's grease all over everything. Everything. The water fountain looks like an oil well. But the snack bar is *clean*. It's all air-conditioned and wood-paneled, and when you open the slick wooden doors there's a "whoosh" as a little of the cool air goes out and gets a heart attack from the heat everywhere else.

The windows are big and clean, since that Puerto Rican kid win-dexes them every day, while all the other windows in the building are painted over gray. Coming in the door is like coming in from a wino alleyway into Mary Tyler Moore's kitchen, and the snack bar is where all the execs drink coffee when they're not checking up on us. I always feel kind of lousy when I go in there in my gym shoes and overalls and they can see me in the reflection off their shoes.

I'd never, *ever*, seen the snack bar empty, but there was nobody in the place when I finally got there, watching out for alligators all the way. I sat down in one of the yellow plastic chairs and watched the linoleum for signs of pits.

After awhile I came up with a dime and a nickel and went over to the machine for a coke. The thing never worked right, and you always had to give it a left jab to get it going, so I did.

"Take it easy, for cryin' out loud," it hollered through the coin return. "I'm coming—why'd you have to press "no ice" and foul things up?"

After my head bounced off the ceiling I noticed I was spread out all over the floor. I wasn't drunk. Wasn't crazy. I was being followed around by a cap screw that could turn itself into a coke machine.

"Gyaaddammit!"

"Leave my brother out of it," it said. "Here's your coke so now sit down and let me finish my story."

The coke machine wanted to finish his story. I sat down.

"As I was saying . . . you're lucky *I'm* your Projector. You can understand that after a period of time it gets kind of boring arranging the life of one of you guys, so we have to terminate the partner we've been with and take up with another one, or even go off somewhere else in the Galaxy. Now, most of us don't say word one to our hosts before we uh . . . send them back to their natural habitat, but I think you deserve better than that, Jim ol' buddy, and I figured you were tough enough to take it like a man. Or a grub, as the case may be."

"Fun-ny."

"No offense."



"But what about Thelma? And the kids?"

"Jimbo, haven't you seen by now that they're just figments of my imagination? They're part of the illusion I've created just for you. Look—if not for me you couldn't see, couldn't feel or hear, or *anything*. After about a half hour without me, your perception of life would revert to just a big empty expanse of dark grey, a little like being the third cell from the left on the toe of a poison ivy plant. I created all of "reality" for you, and you oughtta thanks me."

"Poison ivies don't thank coke machies." I was proud of that quick retort.

He gurgled his syrup. "Well, a coke machine isn't the right place for me, anyway, because the metal is too refined. I can occupy the substance of any mental but zinc, but give me a good old ferrous screw any day. Come on back downstairs, and we'll finish our little talk before I have to recharge."

"No way." *Sure* I was going back down there so he could try turning me back into a grub. I didn't feel like a grub, but I wasn't taking any chances.

That was until some alligators came in the other door of the snack bar, ate up the candy machine, and started moseying up to me like they were out for a stroll in the park. They herded me all the way back down to my bench and then waited around me in a circle. Never knew alligators could climb stairs so good.

The  $\frac{3}{4}$ -15 x 2 $\frac{1}{2}$  alien monster was waiting. I decided that this must be the Ultimate Screw.

It wiggled its grease stain around in an understanding smile. "Now, Jimmy, I don't want you to take this too hard. You've been a good host, I've learned a lot, and really enjoyed being with you these forty-two years. I'd give you a gold watch, but grubs don't have any arms."

He was all heart.

He started to roll over, and said, "Sooo, I'll see you . . ."

"Wait! Wait a minute!" I was maybe a little upset.

He looked back, real reassuring. "It's okay, take it easy. You've got a while left to go. Y'see, we have to store up radiant energy for a little while before we can transport any great distance or make a major change on any plane or reality. Now, there's no place to run or hide, and I'm indestructible, so why don't you just accept reality and enjoy your

last few minutes? Do yourself a favor. It's not such a tragedy—being a microscopic bug isn't so bad, you just don't have so many distractions. So just relax, don't do any work, and I'll come back and chat a little more before I cut out the painless way. I'm known as a prodigious talker; you know. See ya soon."

"Wait! What about these alligators?"

"Aw, they can't hurt you." And then the little mouth and eyes were gone, and all of a sudden there were people working over at the loading dock and at the shipping desk, while the monster cap screw was nestled in my shirt pocket.

I yelled out to Larry down at shipping to come down and help me with the gators, which were just lolling around like St. Bernards. He came up closer to hear me and stepped right on a scaly green tail but didn't notice anything unusual. I paid him the five bucks I owed him for the Bears exhibition game, and he went back to boxing bolts.

I gave the gators a long look, while they kept turning their heads sideways to see me better. And smiling. "Nice gator . . ." One of them came up and licked my hand. I could feel his teeth, and smell the worst case of bad breath in the continental United States, but he seemed real friendly.

They all lolled out of the way when I stepped real easy around them, then I wandered back to the stairs. Thought I'd go talk to Charley up on the fourth floor about the whole thing, since he's about the smartest guy at Hardware Supply, and his brother went to college for a year. Didn't know what I was going to say to him when I found him, since I wasn't even sure I believed anything that had been going on, but I wanted to talk to somebody who wasn't an alien creature or an alligator.

Charley works in plating up there on four, and he's always hard to find in all the smoke and soot, in between all the big boiling pots. Took about five minutes to find him. He was way up in the scaffolding, trying to get one of about a million chains that are up there back in its track. I climbed up the metal ladder, which was hot as a radiator boilover, and joined him up there. I think this was around the time I beginning to feel awful worried.

He was grunting and groaning with that big chain, all covered with smoke and oil, but you could never say about Charley Waterman that he wasn't always a big, friendly type of guy. Anyhow, I owed *him* money

from the Bears game, too, so he was specially glad to see me.

"Jimmy!" he yells, with a big smile on his face. He clapped me on the shoulder with one of those big ham hands of his and about knocked me off the platform, then grabbed me and straightened me up real fast like a punching bag, all of which was what knocked that cap screw out of my shirt pocket. Both of us watched it fall.

"Awww, DOGCRAP!" Charley yelled, his favorite expression. "If the foreman sees that, he's gonna wanna kick my ass! What did ya have to have that in yer pocket for, Jimmy?"

It bounced off the edge of the vat of hot copper, right into the vat full of boiling zinc. And you know, that set me to remembering what the creature said about his people and zinc—that it was their only weakness. Guess falling in that vat won't kill the thing, but it'll sure put it out of commission for a million years or so.

Of course, that's if you believe all this stuff that talking  $\frac{3}{4}$ -15 x 2½ cap screw had to say. I was going to ask Charley what he thought about the whole thing, except that a minute ago Charley disappeared, along with everything else.

## EMILY IN PLATO'S CAVE

For H—

Sherry Gamble

"The truth must dazzle gradually  
or every man be blind."—Emily Dickinson

Shadow chained to shadow  
In cavernous ignorance  
If catapulted into sun  
(Unequivocal bright light)

Night's unlearning—their yearning  
Turns to blindness—their blight.  
Saints and poets—philosophers only  
Are spared unimpeded sight.