

# FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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## Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

Another successful year completed by FFJ. Many thanks to all our authors, artists, fans and Freedom Friends. It is your dedication, love and passion that keep us going into the 4<sup>th</sup> year of Fiction – an eclectic mix of all genres of short stories. Welcome to 2012 folks.

We promise to keep you enthralled week after week with new weekend reads and more fun through connected RSS feeds. Yes, those links you see in the left-side column is also for your entertainment and information. Linked there are: Guardian UK Book News, Bizarro Blog and Comics, Hot Air Cold Love book and movie reviews and of course the new entertainer [Gyan Dube P.I.](#)

[Gyan Dube P.I.](#) is the new feature presentation from the established stables of Freedom Fiction Journal. Is it a serialized novel? Is it a graphic novel? Is it a comic strip? No, it is “A Novel In Cartoons” – vivid experiences of a metro-based private investigator serialized along with funny images from his daily life and lifestyle. This was launched in December 2011. [Don't forget to like his Facebook Page](#) soon.

As always, this quarterly edition collates the fiction published this last quarter of 2011 into a free downloadable PDF file, for your archives and benefit of reading on mobile devices on the go.

Chris Castle returns with a fourth masterpiece in 2011. He is our favourite and you will fall in love with his words. Newcomers, Rob Ambrose and Jon-Paul Stracco surprise us with insightful and hard-hitting pulp fiction. Very promising authors these two and we keep an eye out for them. Sam S. Kepfield returns this year with a superb and epic historical fiction. And there is still more to brag about the other authors' tales but let's not spoil the fun. Read on and enjoy.

### **Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!**

Best Wishes,

*Ujjwal Dey*

Editor for Issue 11, Vol 03.

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## **“The Eye Of The Beholder” by Rob Ambrose**

**Synopsis:** An admirer, a beauty, passionate love and the search for the elusive.

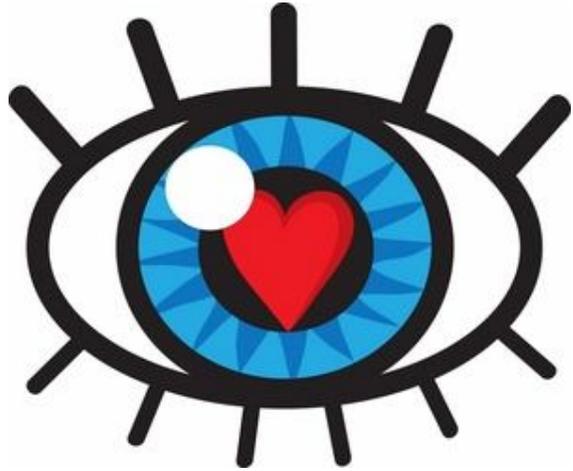
**About the Author:** Rob Ambrose's views of the human race were formed during his experiences in some of the most dangerous places on Earth. As a Canadian soldier serving in Afghanistan and Haiti, he observed many instances of the incredible capacity for evil that is inherent in every human being. He also observed acts of goodness and compassion in places where they had no business being. Now retired at 26, his experiences there provide the main backdrop for his perspective on the world we live in, and his fascination with the darker side of the human condition is often manifested in his writing.

**In this intriguing tale,** a man's quest turns from beauty to horror.

## The Eye Of The Beholder

By Rob Ambrose

I first saw Gin quietly strolling along a darkened downtown street in the rain. It was an early June evening, and it was muggy as hell. The kind of night where the air is so thick you feel like you could grab it. Or it could grab you. Her eyes were mostly downcast, her walk more of a shuffle, and her blond hair hung limply framing her beautiful face. I got the impression of someone who was in a hurry, but going nowhere. My first thought was to catch a second glance, the way a young, (straight) male always does at the pass by of a young, attractive female. But then I caught a glimpse of her eyes when we passed, and nothing would ever be the same.



I don't know how to describe it. I didn't even know for sure that I saw it. It only lasted a split second, a look I saw inside her eyes as they met mine when we passed by each other on the street, and it stopped me like a gunshot. I had seen it once or twice before. Usually in street people. Junkies, really. The kind of people who have given up on life and you know that life had long ago given up on them. But never had I seen it in such a beautiful woman as the one who just passed by me. It held me spellbound for a second, and without thinking, I rushed after her.

"Excuse me miss!" I shouted, as I caught up to her "Excuse me...hi...my name is Ryan. I don't normally do this, but there is something about you that grabbed me just now. I just know I'd kick myself later if I didn't come by and at least introduce myself."

Her eyes widened a little in surprise, as she looked me up and down. I looked in her eyes, anxious to catch a glimmer of what I had just seen. Nothing. In fact, all I saw was a great emptiness.

"Oh" she said, more out of politeness than anything. I got the feeling this was the kind of girl who had similar breathless displays of affection showered on her routinely. She wasn't rude, simply indifferent.

"Well" she went on "Thank you. It was nice to meet you. I've really got to be getting..."

"I'm a photographer" I blurted out "And I would love to shoot you"

Now her eyes narrowed in suspicion. She sighed in frustration, and I could almost read her mind, *another one of these idiots*, I'm sure she was thinking.

"What kind of idiot do you think I am, to fall for a bullshit line like that?"

And I cringed inwardly. She was right. It was a corny line. But it was also true. My name *is* Ryan, I *am* a photographer, and I *didn't* normally approach people like this. Never, in fact. If you knew me, you'd be surprised at my boldness, especially with someone I just met on the street. As an image conscious artist, I typically try to affect the suave, detached cool expected from someone in my station in life. Girls think it makes me brooding and deep. In reality, it just helps me get laid. Had I stopped to think for a moment about what I was doing, I surely wouldn't have gone back. But I was so struck by what I saw - what I thought I saw - that it was pure instinct. You see, ever since I was

a little boy, I've been struck by beauty. Beauty in its rarest forms, the kind that might come along for a second in your life, and never come along again. My entire life has been a search for it. It's the reason I became a photographer. I've always considered the photographer to be an exalted position in our society. In a world so filled with ugliness, it is the photographer's job to seek out and capture beauty, wherever he may find it. And beauty can be found anywhere: A person, a place, a moment, even an idea. And I can't remember the last time I saw something as achingly beautiful as what I had just seen for the briefest of moments in this young woman's eyes.

"Do you have anyplace to go?" I asked, ignoring her quite obvious rebuttal of my affections. I was determined to shoot this girl. Maybe I could capture that which had me so enthralled.

"Yes, I do" she lied "and I'm late. Now, if you'll excuse me..."

"Come on" I interrupted her, grabbing her hand and leading the way. "My place is only a few blocks away."

And she came. Truth be told, I was surprised, both by my actions and hers. The thing that stands out about that moment for me was the strong sense of inevitability that permeated everything we did. We both felt it. There was a scripted feel to our interaction, like we were both merely playing out our roles. It brought me back to when I was a kid, watching Saturday morning cartoon. Wile E. Coyote would unveil his latest, ridiculously expensive looking contraption to catch the Road Runner, and even though you knew how it was going to end, you were still enthralled with the story. And looking back, I think that even at that early stage in our relationship, we both knew what the ending to our story would be. No, let me correct that. I didn't, not then. But I'm convinced that she did.

As we entered my apartment, we made idle chit chat. Both of us talking, but neither of us really saying anything. I made her a drink, as is customary in these situations.

"Nice place. So you actually are a photographer" She said, more of a statement than a question.

"Of course I am. I wouldn't lie to you."

"I know" she said, with a quiet confidence. And I knew she meant it. I had never had a connection with anybody the way I had with her.

Her words hung in the air. I think about that response, even today. In retrospect, I find it even more fascinating now than I did then.

It was only then, in the light of the apartment, that I got my first good look at her. By all appearances, a beautiful girl: Blond hair, firm body, and piercing, soulless blue eyes. More than anything, though, the most striking feature about her was the overwhelming sense of sadness that radiated from her core, something that I would later realize is a permanent fact of life with her.

"What's your name" I asked, suddenly realizing I hadn't asked for it yet. If she thought that was unusual, she never showed it.

"Gin"

"That's an unusual name. Seems a little old for your age"

"It's short for Ginette. And I am old" she said, to my surprise.

“Old?” I asked incredulously “You’re not old.”

And she wasn’t. She couldn’t be more than 23-24, and could easily be much younger.

“You’re a beautiful young woman.”

She smiled at that; an empty, mirthless smile.

“I haven’t ever been young.”

She said this without a trace of self-pity. Merely as someone stating a fact they knew to be true.

“Where were you going tonight? You were soaked.”

“Where was I going?” she murmured, to no one in particular “I don’t exactly know. But then, where are any of us really going?”

Oh god, I thought. The last thing I wanted to do was have a conversation with some pretty girl who had probably never read a book in her life talk about existentialism and the purpose for human existence. I’d had enough of pretty girls and boys who’ve read Nietzsche’s Wikipedia page, and then act like they’re the fucking authority on the subject, usually over long talks in the midst of an acid binge. I hate when dumb people try to sound smart. I was also getting somewhat impatient. I was intently studying her, from all different angles, trying to catch a glimpse of what I had seen earlier. I looked deep in her eyes as she spoke. Nothing. All I saw was the pretty face of a pretty girl. Nothing more, nothing less.

Yes, there was an intriguing emptiness in her eyes, one that I’m sure would make for interesting photos. But, hell, this was Los Angeles, the fucking world capital of beautiful girls with dead, soulless eyes. In fact, it’s part of the city’s charm, really. Nowhere else can one see the extravagant trappings of success so closely juxtaposed next to the abject misery of defeat. The City of Angels can grind you up finer than the grains of sand on the beautiful beaches just a few miles from here, and make you feel just as insignificant. You’ve never felt true loneliness until you’ve felt it in this city of five million people. When I decided to move here years ago, someone I respected once told me that the road to LA was littered with more lost souls than the road to hell. They were trying to dissuade me. Instead, it sold me. As a photographer who finds beauty in the darker side of the human condition, there is no other place to be.

But as impatient as I was getting, something inside me was compelling me to take this further. I realized even then, that I had never had a connection with anything else in this world the way I had with Gin. I could no sooner send her on her way than I could tell the Sun not to rise tomorrow. I looked over at her. She was still talking. I don’t remember what about.

“Can I shoot you?” I interrupted her.

She looked at me for a long time. The air seemed to stand still. Then, as if making a decision, she slowly removed her clothing until she stood magnificently naked in front of me. Her mouth smiled gently, although her eyes did not. I looked her over. I could see many small scars all over her body. Others looked like cigarette burns.

For the next two hours, I shot her. Many different poses, many different angles (all tastefully, of course. I’m not a pornographer). She was the perfect subject, never objecting when she was uncomfortable, never complaining when she was cold. All the while, her beautiful, haunting eyes

stared at me. I had hoped I could capture the look I had seen earlier. But it was not to be. In any case, I was quite smitten with her. There was a magnetic attraction between the two of us, and I was still amazed at the feeling of inevitability we both felt that night. If you had to summarize our entire relationship in one word, that would be it. Every second I spent with Gin had the same feeling: Inevitable. We couldn't have altered anything, even if we'd tried.

Normally, I would've tried to hide her scars. But as I shot her, I found myself manipulating the light in ways that would highlight them, make them more prominent. I just thought they were beautiful. Eventually, and with some disappointment, I realized I was not going to get that which I desired most. I also realized I was tired. And incredibly aroused.

I put the camera down and moved closer to Gin, studying the tiny hairs on her body, running my finger over scars. As I looked in her eyes, it became obvious to me that her biggest scars were not on the outside. I wondered what they were, and what they were from.

After we made love, Gin looked at me and said, "I'm yours now. I belong to you, and you may do with me as you wish, and I will never deny you."

To which I nodded my agreement. Of course. What else could I say? I remember at the time feeling like we were in a story, or a movie. The script was all written for us, and we were merely playing our roles. As unusual as this night was, I found myself not surprised in the least as it was playing out. How natural it felt. Everything seemed to be...just as it should have been.

Throughout the rest of the summer, we spent all of our time together. The only time she left was to buy food. The rest of her time was spent satisfying all my urges, from the carnal, to the creative. We settled into a routine that, somehow, never became routine. We would spend half of our days shooting, in my perpetual search for what I had seen in her that day we met, ultimately in vain. It started to take on mythical proportions in my mind. It bordered on the obsessive, and intellectually, I understand how absurd it was for me to spend so much time and energy looking for a "look." But emotionally, I felt that someone who is dedicated to the pursuit of beauty would be a fool if he did not exhaust himself looking for that which is most beautiful.

After the shoots, we would fuck for the other half of our days. Whether we were shooting or fucking, Gin was true to her word. I owned her, totally and completely. Not once did she ever raise an objection to anything I ever asked, whether it was pose endlessly for hours, in cold and often uncomfortable positions, or any of my requests of her body. There was not an inch of flesh on her body that was off limits to me, no request too much. We had other girls, other boys, anything you can imagine. At the end of the day though, it was always us. Sometimes our fucking was gentle, and sometimes it was rough. We tested the boundaries of pleasure and pain. And every day, I fell more and more in love with her. She was, contrary to my original thought about her, one of the smartest people I'd ever met. We would lay in bed all day talking about anything and everything, from the inherent immorality of organized religion, to the fundamental flaws of the communist political system. We would have long discussions about our place in this world, and what may come after it. But never once did she talk about her past. Despite the obvious gashes in her soul, she never allowed me to see them. Sometimes, the despair was so great that she would feel physical pain, although never complaining, of course. Whatever crosses she carried inside her, she bore alone, either unwilling or unable to share the burden.

Towards the end of the summer, after patiently sitting for an unusually long session, Gin came to me and kissed me on the lips, long and deep, and then she looked into my eyes.

"I was looking for you long before you were looking for me" she said.

I nodded, although not really understanding. I was used to this, to tell you the truth. She frequently said things that I never fully understood, at least at the time.

As we made love that night, something felt different. It was wilder than normal. There was an animal feel to it, as though we both couldn't get enough. I was on top, fucking her, and she put my hands around her neck. This was nothing new, we had played this game many times before. Gin said it always made her come harder. This time felt different though.

"I love you" she mouthed.

Our eyes locked. In that moment, I realized what was to take place. What she wanted me to do. What she needed me to do. As I picked up the pace, my hands tightened around her throat. Her eyes held no surprise, no fear. In fact, for the first time since I'd known her, I saw a glimmer of happiness in her eyes. Of hope, even. She placed her hands lovingly around my wrists. By this time, she could no longer speak, or breathe. Our fucking became frantic. Desperate. Finally, we both orgasmed together, for what would be the last time. *La petite mort*. My body relaxed, but my hands did not. Moments later, the light extinguished from her eyes, and her body became lifeless. As I looked into her open eyes, staring off into the abyss, I almost choked on my own breath. There it was. That beautiful thing that I had been searching for all this time. Only this time, the beauty was not fleeting.

As I think back, I realize Gin had been dead for a long time. Thing was, nobody knew it but her. I thought back to the night we met. It felt like a lifetime ago. In a way, it was.

As I stared down at her lifeless body, I was overwhelmed by my love for her. My heart felt so big that I didn't think my chest could contain it, and it ached inside of me. I had never in my life loved anything more than I loved her at that moment. I realized what Palahniuk meant when he said 'I saw perfection in the destruction of something beautiful'. And looking at Gin that day, I couldn't breathe but for the beauty that lay before me. I realized I hadn't been searching for this since Gin and I met. I had been searching for this forever.

I went to get my camera.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Quit” by Jon-Paul Stracco**

**Synopsis:** Arty thinks he’s seen it all from behind the bar, but his star bouncer changes all that.

**About the Author:** Jon-Paul loves living in the hills of Vermont with his wife and infant daughter. He enjoys wandering the woods, running barefoot, going on adventures and making up stories. His work has appeared in *Pulp Empire: Volume Five* and *Yesteryear Fiction*.

**In this engaging pulp fiction,** we find filth, fights, love, longing and a deserving happy ending.

## Quit By Jon-Paul Stracco



Larry stood over the three bikers.

“Let’s go,” he said sternly.

The whole bar watched as the three leather clad, tattoo covered, muscle bound dudes crawled out the door, groaning and rubbing their jaws. I was glad to see them go. They had been throwing bottles against the wall, causing a general ruckus.

A man with a cowboy hat and a handlebar mustache jumped out of the crowd and grabbed Larry by the hand, shaking it ferociously.

“The names Smithfield,” he said. “I’ll pay you twenty thousand dollars to come to Dallas. I’ll train you to be a fighter.”

“No thank you,” Larry said politely, diverting his eyes. He took his perch upon his stool by the door.

The man stared grimly at Larry like he had hurt his child. “I never ask twice,” he said, with a scowl. “Idiot!”

He kicked open the door and was gone.

As much as I liked having Larry, as much as I *needed* him, the man was right, as were the others who had come before him. They had made offers of ten, twenty, thirty thousand to Larry just to get on a plane. Compared to the peanuts I was throwing him, I had to ask, was Larry an idiot?

He wasn’t family or friend, and the bar was a dump; crooked stools, lopsided pool tables, and a skipping jukebox. Everything was scratched, chipped, cracked or torn. The place stunk, reeked of

sour beer, cigarette smoke and puke. The town wasn't any better with its broken windows, walls missing bricks, graffiti, bleary eyed factory workers, and the wailing of sirens.

The people were thirsty though, and eager to exchange fistfuls of crumpled bills for cheap beer. Where they got the money I never knew, but it didn't matter. Life was cruel, but somehow I got Larry.

Six foot three and built like a rhinoceros, Larry took champagne bottles to the forehead, fists to the chin, boots to the ribs, chairs to the back, brass knuckles to the sternum, chair legs to the knees, pool cues to the wrists, baseball bats to the neck and tire irons to the stomach. He would bleed of course, but never bend, certainly never break. He was as good as bouncers come, the equal of three strong, well trained men. Without him, the bar would have been overrun every night, money and alcohol stolen, men beaten to death in the corner.

Five years can seem like ten or even twenty when every night something bad can happen. You dig your trenches and hope for the best. My plan was simple; work for six years, and save one hundred thousand dollars. Might not seem like much, but it was enough to buy a trailer out in the mountains with a little land and live simply with a tiny pension I got from my time in the army. With one year to go I had seventy thousand. This was the big year, the money maker. Everything was paid for, there was no debt. My only expenses were the rent, which was practically nothing, the electric, the alcohol and Larry.

Sometimes I wondered if it was all thanks to Larry. Because of him I didn't have to hire three men, didn't have to waste time hiring and firing. But life can screw you so bad, that when you finally catch a break you don't go analyzing it too much. You figure, I deserve this one. I told myself, "Just hold on for one more year."

Usually I met Larry outside the bar around one o'clock, hulking in the doorway, his facial expression unreadable. We would shake hands, and exchange a short greeting. He was almost never late, so on the Tuesday at the beginning of September, the day after he beat up the bikers, when he was missing I noticed how hollow the entryway felt, but figured he was due to be late once in his life.

The day started funny. The wind was gusting hard enough to crack open the door; occasionally, blowing in little bits of paper. A car repeatedly honked at an old lady trying to push a shopping cart with a jammed wheel across the street. My first customer, some college kid in a soccer jersey, way out of his territory, blushed after he spilled beer all over his pants. Finally, a good thirty minutes after opening, Larry strode in and plunked down at the bar next to the kid.

"I've got to talk to you," he said, looking directly into my eyes.

This surprised me right off because the truth was that Larry and I hadn't done much talking in the whole five years that we had worked together. I didn't know where he came from, where he lived, if he was married or had kids, who his parents were, what his hobbies were, nothing. Frankly, it didn't matter.

He had hopped out of a sputtering blue pickup five years ago, strolled in the front door while I was sanding down a section of the bar, and filled the whole room like some kind of human mountain. I had hired him on the spot.

There were handshakes in the morning and at closing, grumblings about the weather or the sports teams, but that was it. We both knew the odds were against us. What else was there to say?

“What is it Larry?” I said.

“I’m quitting.”

I choked on some air, and coughed.

“You’ve always been real good to me,” he said. “I appreciate that. I’ll work tonight, and then I’m gone. Since it’s such short notice, I’ll work for free.”

As the air rushed back into my lungs, the level of anger that swelled in my chest surprised me. I ground my teeth to keep from exploding into a mania of curses and insults.

“Sorry boss,” he said. “I wouldn’t do this if it wasn’t important.”

The bad news brought no respite from the horde, and the place filled up like usual. All I could think about was how screwed I was, how Larry hadn’t even given me a weeks notice, how I would have to shut down, try to replace him, with who? How long would I have to shut down? A week? A month? How much would it cost me? Something like this could set me back a year. I couldn’t take another two years of this, it wasn’t in the plan. A year in this dump was like a decade! And without Larry? Would it even be worth it?

A man with a tattoo of a snake running up his neck reached out over the bar and grabbed my wrist.

“Can I get a beer or what?”

I recoiled, as though jolted by an electric shock, and reached under the bar for my club when I caught a glimpse of Larry sitting on his stool.

He was smiling this soft, warm smile. Someone was next to him, brown hair, a white tee shirt and jeans. It was Tammy Wilder, one of the more beautiful women to grace our place. She leaned into him and their lips touched delicately. Larry’s giant hand brushed her hair. They kissed for a few seconds, then eased apart, their eyes locked on each other like there was no one else in the room.

My knees gave out and I fell backwards, caught myself on a shelf and almost tore the whole whiskey section down. God damn, I thought. That’s love.

Where had I seen love before? In a movie? We had our share of late night lust, but love? *Come on*. But there it was, like staring into the sun itself, real love. The club clattered onto the cement floor.

I tried to reel myself in, be reasonable, but it was too late. Maybe my nerves were already shot because of Larry’s news, but something was fluttering in my chest, something warm and alive and it wouldn’t go away.

Larry said a few words to Tammy as she went out the door. He furrowed his brow, not like he was mad, but serious, like it was more than just “see you later honey”. That’s when it hit me.

Tammy was Darrel’s girl. My heart began to thump seriously then. Of all the people in our screwed up world to mess with, Darrel was the worst. He was big like Larry, broad shoulders, huge arms,

and a psychopath; a handsome, charismatic devil. Tammy had fallen for him, then wished she hadn't. He could be found running around town all day with any number of different women, but Tammy had to sit around and do nothing, because everybody knew Tammy belonged to him. I'd seen him flip a guy over a table for just looking at her.

The other thing about Darrel was that he had friends. Lots of them. I didn't want to know what would happen if I ever crossed Darrel, wake in the morning and the building would be ashes most likely, or I would be ashes. The good news was that he spent wads of dough, sometimes five hundred a night, as did his friends. For this reason Larry and I had different rules for Darrel. Larry never threw a punch into the guy, never used any muscle, no matter how crazy he was acting. He would just stand by him and kind of lead him out the door. It was always a strain on us, but what could I do?

Everything flashed before me, Larry and Tammy's secret love building slowly through the years, a glance there, a word here, a few more there, maybe a chance encounter outside the bar, then more conversation while Darrel was busy playing pool or bragging about some made up nonsense, and then secret meetings outside of the bar, maybe picnics, or trips down to the beach and then Darrel finds out and they know they have to get away.

It all made sense. Larry's loyalty to the bar wasn't because he was an idiot, it was because of Tammy! Sweat broke all over my forehead. He could have split, left town, made an escape, and yet there he was finishing his shift, for my sake.

That's a good man, I thought.

"You alright?" some guy at the bar asked. "You're going white as a ghost."

I climbed up on the bar, and scanned the room. There was no sign of Darrel, but over at the pay phone was Jimmy, one of Darrel's buddies, squinting his eyes at Larry. I knew that any moment Darrel was going to come through those doors and shoot Larry in the chest, or put a knife in his neck.

"What are you doing man? Are you losing it? Can I get a beer?"

People were yelling at me, and I was just looking at Larry's calm, happy face. Then behind him, through the window I saw Darrel's blue Trans Am screech into a space.

My heart nearly exploded. I leapt down and did the only thing I could think of, hit the switch for the fire alarm under the bar. A bell started to ring loudly.

"Everybody out!" I yelled.

People jumped up and made for the door. Larry, looked over at me, his face serious again as he held the door open.

As everyone rushed out, Darrel tried to get in, dodging and twisting, only to get knocked backwards, his face red as a tomato.

I ran over to Larry. "Go out the back door."

Larry's eyebrows went up, but he didn't move.

"Darrel's out there," I said.

Larry turned his head a little, but still didn't budge.

The last of the people were in the foyer, it was a matter of seconds before Darrel could burst through.

"He's pissed," I yelled.

Larry glared at me, his eyes piercing like the points of switchblades, and he saw that I knew about Tammy. When the last person was past, he took a step towards the back door.

"Go," I said. "Hurry!"

But before he could even take another step, two skinny guys in hooded sweatshirts ran behind the bar. One started stuffing liquor into his pants, the other fiddled with the cash register.

"I'll handle it," I said. "Just go!"

But Larry would not just go. He vaulted the bar far too easily for a man his size, grabbed the kid on the register by the back of his sweatshirt and hurled him through the air. The kid landed on his stomach, bounced up like he was made of rubber and skipped out the door holding his stomach.

The other kid swung out with a wild haymaker, landing it flush on Larry's jaw. Crack! I held my breath, until I saw the kid hunch over, cradling his fist. Larry picked him up by the collar of his sweatshirt with one arm, pulled three of the liquor bottles from his pants with the other, and placed them back on the shelf. Then he heaved the kid over the bar. He landed on his side with a thud and a groan, and managed to shuffle out the door right past Darrel.

I don't know how long Darrel had been standing there, his arms by his sides, his eyes blazing with drunken rage.

"Tammy's mine," he said to Larry, brushing past me.

"Wrong," Larry said, his face cold and flat. "She don't belong to nobody."

I took a step backwards, and tripped over something. A full forty ounce bottle of malt liquor, clinked against the concrete floor, but did not break. I started to crouch down, but Jimmy emerged out of the shadows by the pay phone like a phantom vampire. I froze.

Jimmy ignored me, and went behind the bar. He stopped about ten feet from Larry. The alarm bell continued to ring, obnoxious, deafening.

Darrel pulled a stub nose revolver from his waistline and pointed it at Larry's head. Larry didn't flinch, didn't even blink.

It wasn't a bluff. This wasn't a bluffing kind of bar, and for all of Darrel's bullshit he was no bluffer.

A panic came over me, a sheer terror for I knew I was watching the death of the last good man I would ever meet, maybe the last real love story in the world. My whole body started to shake. Darrel wasn't just some angry boyfriend with a gun, he was the right arm of this down and out town itself. He was bad luck come again.

No, I thought. No, no, no.

The bottle felt smooth and heavy. I didn't aim, just chucked it.

It spun end over end, cloaked by the blaring siren and exploded against the wall, just above Larry's head. Glass shards and frothy beer shot into Darrel's face. Larry, a blur, grabbed Darrel's wrist and the gun came loose. Darrel jerked away, but Larry's grip was too strong. Darrel, his eyes wild, changed direction, stepping towards Larry, throwing a mean left hook. It whooshed over Larry's head.

He never saw Larry's uppercut catch him flush under the chin, clacking his teeth together, snapping his head back. He dropped hard. Jimmy lunged for the gun, but Larry backhanded and he bounced off the wall and fell across the bar unconscious.

I watched in disbelief as Larry, the expression on his face calm as ever, dragged Jimmy by his arm from behind the bar, then picked up Darrel and hauled them both by their wrists outside and left them at the base of the steps like it was just another fight, just another mess to clean up.

When he came back in he stood at the threshold and let out a huge sigh, then his chest began heaving with sobs.

I'd seen enough. I sprinted over, slammed the doors shut, drew the bolts, and with trembling hands scribbled the words "for good" and then "forever" with a black marker under the word "closed" as I turned the sign.

You'd be surprised how much seventy thousand can buy up here. "Your own slice of heaven," is what I call it. Oak covered mountains, crystal clear cool streams, all the brook trout you can catch, all the buck you can shoot.

Believe it or not, I opened up a small pub in town. It's only open Friday, Saturday, and Sunday. It's laid back, mostly farmers and old folks on social security and pensions. We haven't had a fight yet, hardly an argument, but just in case I know that I can count on my business partner and neighbor, Larry. He sits by the door on a stool and flatters the old women by checking their ID's.

He and Tammy got married last fall, just after we high tailed it out of that horror show city with our savings, the morning after I closed down the bar. They live just a mile down the road in a small trailer like mine. They've got a three month old baby girl named Susan, call her Suzy, who everyone says looks just like Tammy.

I stopped worrying about Darrel a long time ago. Guys like Darrel can't leave their turf, especially not to come up here. I doubt Darrel has ever even seen a full grown tree in person.

Larry and I still don't talk all that much, but we sure do smile more. I can tell he's thankful for me getting him here and I feel the same way about him. What else is there to say?

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Last Bus To Home Planet” by Ujjwal Dey**

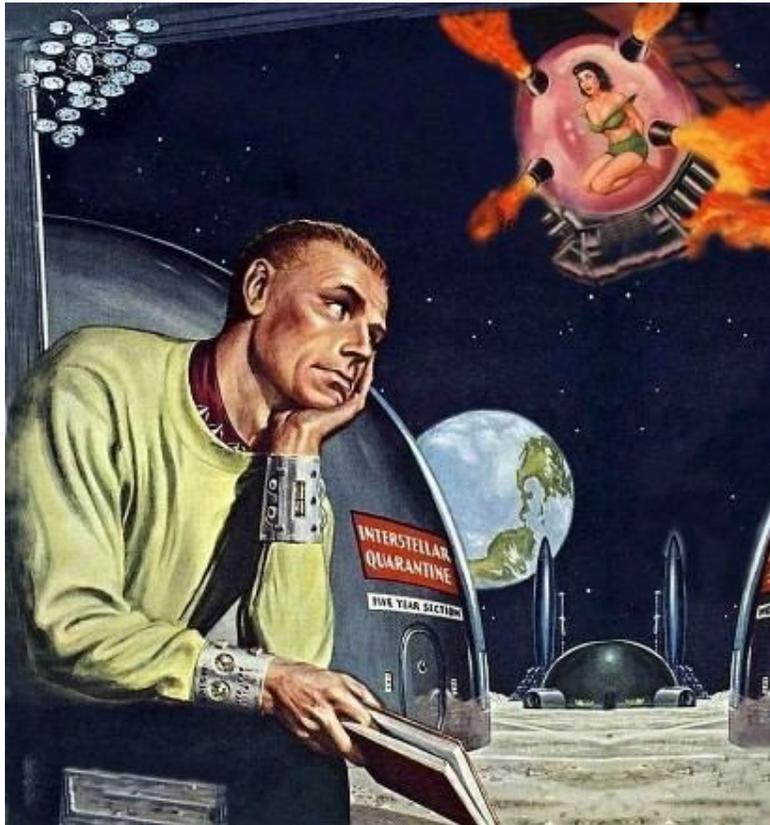
**Synopsis:** What happens when you wish to run far away from everything familiar? To escape the dreariness of our daily lives? Why of course you start afresh somewhere else and enter a new world of dreariness or dread!!!

**About the Author:** Ujjwal Dey is a widely published pulp fiction author and also the Editor of Freedom Fiction Journal. Most of his fiction find a home at Bikernet.com magazine. He loves riding his Enfield Bullet motorcycle on long trips. His travelogues are published at royalfield.com since 2007. He reads and writes fiction in various genres. His choice in music and movies also spans various genres.

**In this humorous science fiction,** Mr. Joe King will ship himself to another planet for a job and then retrun to Earth for good accompanying two delightful imports.

## Last Bus To Home Planet

By Ujjwal Dey



*"Men are from Mars. Women are from Venus. Computers are from hell."*

– Anonymous user

The siren grew louder as we approached the terminal. The evacuation of Zeebu-5, a barely habitable planet, was almost complete; except for me and Kelly. High among the pile of rubble dug up by the robotic mining machines, the sun was setting for the second time today, completing my last hour on this planet which was rapidly spinning out of control. The dense atmosphere looked amazing in its spread of rainbow colours stretching across the entire sky like a canopy over a raving mad circus of freaks. The changing skyline, however, suggested impending doom – not only was the planet spinning faster with the influx of gigantic comet RT-207's gravitational pull, but this tiny planet was also going to lose its North Pole as the comet surged along upwards and around in a loop. The comet had been unpredictable with the gases running out of steam, not before one brilliant finale, a spectacle of intense incineration catapulting it without direction. But this was the least of my troubles.

Having taken the lousy job of 'Personnel Manager' with the space exploration team this summer, I had hoped to escape my loneliness on Earth, while also getting the most spectacular vacation for free. At the age of 30, this was no mid-life crisis; just a logical conclusion that I needed to get away and not just by banging the door against my nosy drunk neighbour's face. Who needs people? They just sap your strength, take up your time, and destroy your dreams. I could do that all by myself by watching TV all day.

"You single?"

“Yes sir. I had a cat but she too ran away with a fella.”

“Any physical deficiencies?”

“None. Why do you ask?” He stared intently at me, and I added, “My ex-wife was my reference only because she has kept my papers as hostage against alimony.”

“Just routine questions Mr. King”

“Just call me Joe”

“Okay Mr. King, how do you prefer to be paid - a deposit in a bank on Earth or the space currency at Zeebu-5 used by trading spaceships?”

“Well, I am signing up for the two-year contract. So space-money for me.”

He adjusted the clutter of hard-copies on his desk, hit a key on his computer and leaned back on his chair.

“Mr. King, please proceed to the factory laboratory. You will be given a standard test. You should be able to smash the duress chip on a dummy robot within the first 3 attempts,” he paused and looked at me from head to paunch, “you can always apply again after 6 months if you fail.”

I thought about my beautiful, sexy ex-wife. Of being so far away for so long from my parents, my prodigious cousins, my successful friends. I saw the vibrant, bustling city outside the window. I got the job with my first swing of the hammer of course!

So the job of managing robotic personnel on a distant planet seemed luxurious. I mean how much monitoring will a robotic mining machine need anyway? The engineers collecting statistical data and doing minor configurations on these machines were sub-humans – a mix of human cloning and android technology – they had limited functionality because they were custom-made for specific purposes. They also came under my job profile, ‘to manage resources with minimal damage’. What my job really was? I had to use a sledgehammer on the ‘duress’ chip to disable the robot or sub-human who was worn out due to intense labour conditions on Zeebu-5. There was no repair as that was not feasible expenditure. It was just cheaper to replace the bots whenever the mining merchant spaceships landed at the beginning of every week. Based on their condition, the ‘dead’ ones were either recycled or used as fuel by the spaceships.

&&&

I met her only after 7 days of work on Zeebu-5, when I was to head back from the port, having signed-off on the status of my personnel. The mining company’s senior managers would go through my report, a single page listing all the functioning features check-marked. The ships never landed. They just held traction-belts that sucked up the planet’s goodies mined by the bots. The taxi-pods transported the senior managers to the dusty floor of Zeebu-5 for their observations and then back onboard their ships.

“Will you be boarding the bus back to Sector D-27?”

“Huh?!?”

"I am the driver of the company bus ferrying the sub-humans." She studied me with her pretty eyes fluttering like delicate petals enclosing a blue diamond in each fold. "I don't think we have interfaced before."

"Joe! Call me Joe!" I managed to mutter.

"Joe!"

"My name is Joe. I am the Personnel Manager for Zeebu-5."

"Hi, I am Kelly."

I took that bus even though I needed to be back at my office in Sector A-11. The stench of the heated plastinated skins of the sub-humans on the bus didn't matter. All I could smell was the bright red hair of Kelly as I sat in the very front row. The hot, torrid sun of this planet could cook an egg inside a hen, but I was provided sufficient means to subsist with an office that multi-functioned as a lounge and a home and a gym as well. The mining company had built that deluxe office expecting that brilliant, qualified people would be glad to work in space explorations and thus the luxury – now entirely serving me.

"So Joe, how long you been here?"

"Just a week. Didn't meet any other officers as I am almost confined to Sector A-11. It has the receiving station that feeds on all the data from the mining activities at all active Sectors on Zeebu-5."

"Busy on a remote planet?"

"Isn't everybody?" And we laughed as we agreed how ironical it was that we were space-explorers with no time to admire its expansive beauty.

"Sector D-27 has the mobile observatory currently," she glanced back and smiled, "Care to stargaze? Bring your own wine!"

"I would love to. See you after sundown."

"I will pick you up." The bus hovered along diagonally now and took a stop at a pod awaiting instructions.

"Why are we stopping?"

"Well Joe, I hailed you a cab."

She is an angel. I couldn't stop looking at her. She opened the door and the hot wind hit me like kisses from a million dust-mites. But I was still smiling back... at her.

&&&

The evening was cool, with the landscape stretching as far as I could see - a calm sea of dirt, the dust-clouds descending now after the day's excavation work was done. I wore a tie. She wore her uniform.

“So Kelly, why are there automated transport pods whereas a driver for that bus?”

“I was supposed to ferry around tourists on that bus. This dump has no prospects for a tourism industry. So they decided it was cheaper to keep the bus here along with me.” She slid the radio telescope’s digital monitor toward me and continued, “That bus ain’t too comfortable for the rich space-tourists you know.”

I peeked into the screen; she had found emissions of a moon of planet Casseeno-8, a tourism hub with luxury vessels with the brilliant, talented, qualified people employed full-time.

“What did they think, a desert safari concept here on Zeebu-5?”

“Yup! I have been here for 3 years and you are the only man I found who doesn’t stink like burning tyres.”

“Hahahahaha!” I laughed at that compliment. “That’s because I sweat. And I take 3 showers a day. I got the extra water option in my contract by forgoing all public holidays for the next 2 years.”

She looked puzzled but smiled, “I stay indoors. No manual labour.”

“How do you stay clean while stationed in Sector D-27? That’s the busiest mining operation on this planet.”

“I just stay in the bus all day,” she smiled as she noticed me admiring her bright buoyant hair again, “I wouldn’t have survived if they changed my job role.”

“Ah! That would never happen.” I beamed. “The amount of approvals and verifications and checks and formalities involved in that is more expensive to the mining company than leaving you here till the end of your term.”

She seemed puzzled again and sighed, “I wish they would consider me again for tourism industry.”

I wished against that silently. I felt filthy and frustrated and selfish and evil. I have only just met her. She already wants to leave. Not because of me, but I like her. I came here to be alone. Why did I ride that bus? Why do I blush and giggle when I am with her, as if I have hit puberty all over again? I passed her the wine.

&&&

All the robots and sub-humans and the space-explorers such as me were centrally employed by the Government. We were working for the mining company which paid our salary, but the Government maintained the resource utility to discourage misuse, abuse or wastage. I knew there was nothing Kelly or I could do for her job role – as long as our contract was active, neither the Government, nor the mining company would take the effort to re-evaluate our needs or skills.

Days and weeks passed. Kelly and I met almost every week, as often as thrice a week sometimes. She knew a lot about this planet, I guess from her tourism training. She even knew a few good songs for a bus party to sing along on the way to a good tour. It became routine for me to take the bus back to Sector D-27 every week from the port. None of the sub-humans would sing, or they couldn’t. But Kelly and I would rock as the bus hovered steadily, taking a different detour every week – by the edge of a scenic artificial crater, a winding uphill climb on a granite mountain, skimming over the glittering water recycling plant, through a forest of windmills sourcing energy,

even chased a dust storm once – it was as if we were the only ones living on this planet and everyone else just faded away into the background.

By the end of my third month on Zeebu-5, I managed to kiss Kelly. A week later I lost all contact with Sector D-27.

I should have known that this oasis in hell wasn't going to last too long. The reports from the mining stations became sporadic and soon turned to junk values streaming at ad hoc intervals. The visits from senior managers were announced to be fortnightly. But they never arrived. What came was a platoon of smart space-troopers. These were indeed humans but they were so organised and disciplined that you would deem those men behind the gas masks as nothing detectably human. Confined to my office, I was told to continue with my job – which was to report that gibberish was being reported to me by all mining stations, which was rubbished by my superior who refused to come down on ground-zero to witness this growing chaos himself. I tried all the standard procedures and solutions suggested by the mining company. They just demanded that I keep at it, repeat the exercises till I make more sense in my submitted reports. It was like convincing a doctor that his patient is dying while he played golf, demanding that you continue with the prescribed medication.

The platoon of troops finally declared evacuation, a week away from my fourth month's paycheck.

"Mr. King, you are not required to serve here anymore as it is too dangerous to hammer the duress chips now," the Lieutenant announced at my doorstep, "We are taking charge of the mining shipment and you are expected to be evacuated by 1800 hours today."

"Thank you! I was hoping I didn't have to hammer those crazy sub-humans, they are on a rampage. The robots ran out of fuel thankfully, but the sub-humans are really tearing this place apart." I looked around the arid desert, an entire planet which had been mined extensively from end to end, "I mean what's left of it."

"Yes, the heat wave combined with radiation from the stray comet – we were hoping to recover some of them – but they have melted and the fried microprocessors are giving them the insanity."

"Am I still safe in this office?"

"Yes, till 1800 hours," he glanced at his watch, "we all have to leave by then."

"Are the other human space-explorers onboard? Did you manage to save them from this chaotic sub-human rioting?"

"There are no other humans Mr. King," the Lieutenant raised his visor, "you are the only man appointed here – the rest are automated robots or sub-humans."

"What?"

"Yes," he looked back at the driver on the radio, "I must see to the salvage operations now. A pod will pick you up at 1500 hours. I am here to ensure that no sensitive data of yours gets lost."

"Everything is already transmitted." I persisted, "But surely there are other people."

"Mr. King, there is no need for another human here. This office of yours monitors your health. The pods transport you. The robots provide you the sustenance. "

The thundering sky with its acidic rain couldn't have drowned the sound of my heart breaking. I packed my bags and made a last ping to Sector D-27. All I wanted to do was get away and now I am alone and still can't get away from the misery of being a human - the loneliness, the melancholy, the emotions, the cowardice of trying to escape my own nature. The only woman I could love was probably losing her processors, frying in the intense heat of gamma radiation. As if the cosmos was telling me I don't belong here or there or anywhere on this vast universe. Then she showed up outside my office with her bus.

"We gotta get outta here Joe!" she yelled through the thunderstorm.

"I was trying to reach you. We gotta get outta here Kelly."

"You look good," she said as I stepped into the bus. There were only 3 rotting sub-humans in the bus and she was one of them.

"Because I am human"

"Wow! Would love to be in your shoes right now."

"Why is that? I hate myself. The only time I was happy in the past 3 years was the 3 months with you." I studied her, trying to make sense of her melting body, her once luscious hair was now dry, frizzled and lifeless, like a doormat made of straw.

"Because the humans go back to Earth while sub-humans get to go to a junkyard on another remote planet. And because my plastic shoes melted hours ago" she still smiled with her face contorted through liquefying plastinated tissue.

I studied her more keenly – it's like a doormat made of straw, chewed by a cow and spat back on top of her pretty head. The head itself now looking like a Pablo Picasso painting morphing into a Salvador Dali sculpture.

"To the port, Kelly. And drive toward the last terminal"

"What will you do when you get back to planet Earth?"

"Find a good mechanic. I think I got a job for you there and maybe we could use this bus too."

"You were always a dreamer, weren't you Joe, a stargazer?" she smiled as steaming beads of liquid poured across her head.

I imagined she was crying, but she couldn't. She was just differently programmed than the other sub-humans, so she could be chatty as a tourist-bus-driver. We reached the last exit terminal, bypassing the quarantine bay setup at front. The troopers didn't want to take any chance with the salvaged goods and even put themselves through the medical checks every 4 hours. I checked in with my id to report my luggage. Kelly was cut up into 2 pieces and packed in a pair of my duffel bags.

"You have to check in those 2 sub-human passengers at quarantine bay," the guard informed.

"Yeah sure, just don't lose my luggage – critical data."

“Okay, your office stuff is pre-approved.”

“And the bus, it is my recommendation to ship it to Earth as it has survived major damage compared to the other stuff here.”

“You are the boss of Zeebu-5 on these things Mr. King.”

“Thanks!” I turned around and signalled the surviving 2 sub-humans from the bus to walk toward the quarantine bay ahead.

“Glad you made it Mr. King,” the Lieutenant spoke even as he waved his right arm to his men to prepare for take-off.

“Yes, can’t wait to get home!”

&&&

First thing I did when I landed in New York back on planet Earth was to grab my luggage. Second was to send in my report – a 300 page file I put together to impress the bigwigs back home. Next – I encashed all my space-currency – the three months’ pay amounting to a loaded wallet. Thankfully, the mining company wanted to retain my services. More gratefully, they couldn’t change my job profile before the end of my term without losing a fat sum, so they offered foreclosure of my contract with severance pay. I asked for the tourist bus instead.

“Yeah! They checked the bus, useless to us, old technology, but robust – a good deal Mr. King.” The same guy behind the same cluttered desk, he leans back and smiles.

“Yes, it is. Where do I sign?”

“Yeah, just take this memo to the accountant and she will credit your account with the last 3 weeks’ pay and the bus.”

The bus purred like a kitten on Earth, a real charm to drive. I took it straight to California with my duffel bags. The tech savvy nerds I knew there drooled at finding my sub-human specimen in front of them. I quoted the fees. They would have done it for free – but we agreed on the repair costs. She was put together and re-plastinated and reanimated. Her processors and memory drive survived.

First thing she said was, “Joe, look at that clean desert!”

“Hey Kelly, how about running a tourist bus service across Mojave to Las Vegas with me?”

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“That Holiday Newsletter” by Diane Arrelle**

**Synopsis:** A parody of the traditional Christmas Holiday Family Newsletter.

**About the Author:** Diane Arrelle, the pen name of South Jersey writer Dina Leacock, has been writing for 20 years and has sold more than 200 short stories and 2 books. Last year was the first time she ever sent out a real Holiday Newsletter and her husband made her rewrite it 3 times before he decided it wasn't humiliating and fictitious any more. When not writing, she is the director of a municipal senior citizen center. She is married with one son in college in England and another son, husband and cat at home on the edge of the Pine Barrens in Southern New Jersey (home of the Jersey Devil).

**In this revealing letter,** a woman narrates her ordeal and spreads her holiday cheer.

## That Holiday Newsletter

By Diane Arrelle

Hi, All Important Family Members and Dear, Dear Friends:

Well, it's that time once again when I know, if you are at all like me, you look so forward to these long personal Christmas letters. I'm sure that you eagerly make time to read every word during the mad holiday rush. Although this year has been very, very eventful and incredibly full for my entire family, I wouldn't want to disappoint anyone and not get our annual letter out. So have cheer, I managed to sit down and get this one done in time, once again.

### January:

The new year began with great things looming for our upcoming year. I began working full time at the mall. I am making 20 cents above minimum wage at a coffee kiosk and the future looks bright. Stu (my husband for all you who have forgotten I got married two decades ago), is still looking for a job, but the prospects are looking up on that front as well. As you all remember from last year, Stu was let go and has been diligently seeking employment for the last nine months. The boys and I have been very supportive in this search and we realize that a man of Stu's intelligence cannot settle for just any sort of job, but must find a position.

But have no fear for us, with my new job and all the overtime I get, once again our house is safe and we have food on the table all the time. Both boys, Andy and Manny went to school every day, not missing once due to sickness, even though I normally would have kept Manny home with that gunky, green eye infection and all. I don't have any sick days yet at work, so even with a fever of 102, I figured that he's still better off in school learning and socializing with all his classmates than home alone watching TV.

### February:

Worked all month. Andy spent an evening at the emergency room for an ear infection and needed drops twice a day for two weeks! It was touch and go the entire time on whether he'd remember those drops, but we were so proud of him because he only forgot to use them twice. He's such a mature and responsible young man now and we are looking forward to him graduating this year. Last year's confusion over all those days the school had wrongly marked him absent is behind us and we are sure that Andy didn't mind the extra year of education.

For Valentine's Day, Stu took me to Atlantic City on a casino bus where we enjoyed an almost free buffet. Stu won a hundred dollars on the five dollars that we got free which was great since I somehow misplaced my paycheck earlier in the week. I was impressed at how long Stu was able to make that \$5 last before he hit the \$100 since I lost my five in about a minute and he was able to keep playing and playing. It seemed like he was putting more money in the machine, but since



he only had the \$5 it had to be an illusion. I mean where else could he have gotten money to gamble.

**March:**

Had my birthday, and yes, I still celebrate them. We all went out for a special birthday dinner at McDonalds and I even got a sparkler in my yogurt dessert. Stu, as always, remembered everything to make my day special. At the end of the month we got the best news of all, Stu finally found a great job and now all our worries are over! I've contacted our lawyer, Larry, and stopped the bankruptcy proceedings just in the nick of time. We are sure that this job will be the one to carry Stu to retirement and there is real growth potential. I'm so happy for him, what, with all those other dead end jobs he had to suffer through year after year. It is so tough to be appreciated in this world and at last, this year, Stu will finally get his due.

**April:**

The boys had a wonderful spring break, they stayed home all week and cleaned their rooms. I am definitely blessed with such wonderful boys so I paid them \$100.00 each for being so industrious. Sometimes when I look at them, I see them both growing up to be just like their father.

Manny worked the whole month on his science fair project, growing leafy plants and drying out the leaves. He kept me busy buying plastic snack bags but I'm sure he will get an A on whatever his project was.

**May:**

We had a close one this month, Stu got a splinter in his finger and it wouldn't come out. I squeezed it and tried to pry it out with a needle but it was lodged deep. Poor Stu. Oh how he suffered, couldn't help with any of the house or yard work for two weeks.

I was so scared he'd have to go to the doctor, but then it got infected and oozed out all by itself. What a lucky event for us and I was so proud of Stu, he was so very brave throughout the entire ordeal although he used up all his paid sick days for the rest of the year.

Once he was better, he took on the job of fixing my car, Louis. Stu told me that after ten years, a car should have a complete tune up and why should we spend all that money on it when he is perfectly capable of doing it himself. Am I lucky to have married such a versatile man or what?

**June:**

Louis, my car, and I were in an accident. I was all right thanks to my seatbelt although strangely enough the airbag failed to deploy. I still don't know what happened; all of a sudden I was off the road and into the trees. Lucky for me I had decided to take the long way to work instead of the cliff road.

Louis had to be out of commission for 6 weeks and the insurance company tried to total him, but Stu stepped in and said that this was my car, and damn it, I deserve to keep him if I want. It was touch and go and we were afraid we might lose him, but Stu managed to get the parts we needed and Louis pulled through and is almost as good as new. He pulls to the right and the brakes slip about 50 percent of the time, but Stu insists that it isn't really dangerous at all and that I shouldn't worry. I'm so lucky to have married a man as caring as Stu. He always makes me feel safe.

School ended and, sadly, Andy somehow forgot about his graduation ceremony and we all missed it. But he said not to worry because the principal would send him his diploma during the summer. Both boys are happy to be home. They are busy catching up on their sleep and I find I have to wake them when I get home to make dinner. Kids...gosh they never change.

**July:**

We spent two afternoons at the community pool this month and we used our brand new charcoal bar-b-que grill repeatedly. I couldn't believe that Stu had actually gone to the store and got it for our anniversary! Is my man thoughtful or what? Thanks to that grill, we ate hotdogs and burgers almost every night. I just love a grilled hunk of red meat with a side of corn smothered in butter and a baked potato topped with sour cream and melted cheddar cheese with real bacon bits. Although such healthy well-balanced meals are good for us, it's a good thing we got to swim those two times and get some exercise! What a special month that was, and what a special 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary!

**August:**

I proclaimed August clean the house month and every weekend we all worked together as one big happy family cleaning and dusting and vacuuming every room. I'm sure we've created wonderful memories of family togetherness that will last a lifetime.

Manny was so industrious that he kept his spring science project going and now has 14 of those leafy plants in the backyard. He is such a good farmer.

Andy went out several times this summer to collect money door to door for the scouts. It came as surprise to me because I didn't even know he joined the scouts and I thought he'd be a little old for that, being nineteen and all, but my sons are always a constant source of pride for me. Children are always full of pleasant surprises and the scouts must be so happy to get all the cash he raised.

**September:**

Well, back to school month again and Andy told us he signed up for classes at the community college. I was so glad that he took those two classes, that we told him he needn't find a job. Gosh, both boys are in school once again. Who would have believed that Andy would want to continue his education. College must be very different than high school because it seems to me that his two classes are constantly meeting on different days and at different times. I found that he sometimes even had go to school on Saturday night. The poor boy must have been exhausted driving to school all the time.

Manny has taken up collecting music games for his new game system and tons of blu ray movies for his new flat screen high def television. When I asked him where he got the money for this new hobby, he said he found an after-school job. And I had thought he had been home after school everyday doing his homework. What a great kid, getting a job as well as doing his homework.

Stu started working overtime once the autumn hit. He stayed late almost every night trying to get an important project finished on deadline. It was so good to see him happy with his job. He came home after midnight every evening and although he was too tired to even kiss me good-night he was very happy.

**October:**

Stu went off on a business trip and made a special, new friend from work. They are spending lots of time together, but Stu said it was a busy time at work with the new project and he had to put in even more night and weekend work. I was glad his new co-worker Sheila was there working at his side so he didn't feel lonely at the office. In fact, as soon as their schedule slows down, I'm going to fix Sheila up with my cousin Tony.

I discovered that Andy had a special little girlfriend, because he was constantly on the phone all night with her. Sometimes I overheard their conversations and I got such a kick out of hearing him moan, "Oh Baby," over and over. How cute!

**November:**

Great news. I earned a free turkey at the supermarket so we had Thanksgiving at home for the first time in years. It was a shame Stu had to work all weekend but I saved him leftover turkey and he said it was great. We had a mystery here at home, our phone bill was \$978.00 and filled with 900 number phone calls. I know I made a few to the psychic network just to be sure that Stu wasn't doing anything he'd regret with Sheila, but I certainly didn't make those calls to Hot Babes in Bikinis. We are working with the phone company to have them remove those calls since they couldn't have possibly been made from here.

**December:**

Well, it has been an entire years of thrills and excitement and here we are, almost at the holidays again. But what an eventful month December has been.

Sadly, Manny was arrested in school for selling pot. I have no idea where he got the stuff, but when he gets out, I'm sure he will have learned his lesson. After all he has always been a good and smart boy.

The phone company continued to bill us for those Hot Babes in Bikinis calls. Hopefully, our lawyer Larry, when he gets back from vacation, will be able to clear that up because although I may have turned a slightly blind eye to the boys antics, they are still and always will be my sons.

Stu has had it rough as well. He lost his job and it appears Sheila, who has mysteriously vanished, was embezzling huge sums of money from the company. Stu said she has framed him.

Worst of all, it appeared that someone took Louis for a joyride and his brakes completely failed and he went over a cliff. Unfortunately, he burst into flames and when the wreck was recovered, there was a headless woman's body burnt to a crisp inside the trunk. Stu has been arrested for the embezzled money and the mysterious body in the trunk.

On the plus side of all this, I am hoping that he can bond more with Manny now that they have criminal records in common.

As for me, as you've probably read in the papers or saw on the news, I'm probably dead, my murdered body discovered in that accident.

And even, if by some chance, that slut Sheila was the body in the trunk instead of me, and I'm really still alive somewhere on a tropical island with Stu's missing company funds that I accidentally found in the garage, and I'm there with Larry our lawyer, well, then I'll be really, really busy taking notes for the next 11 months so I can keep everyone abreast of our special little family.

Happy Holidays and the best to everyone.

Jill

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Voodoo Radio” by Chris Castle**

**Synopsis:** An offbeat tale of empathy and sympathy.

**About the Author:** Chris is English but works in Greece as an English teacher. He has been published over 250 times and his work ranges from fiction to horror. His influences include Ray Carver and Stephen King. He can be reached at [chriscastle76@hotmail.com](mailto:chriscastle76@hotmail.com), as well as facebook, twitter and linkedin.

**In this small town adventure,** we find compassion against prejudice.

## Voodoo Radio

By Chris Castle

Amy looked down at the laminated menus as the boy she was dating took her coat. Both of them were dressed up, looking like kids who'd broken into their parents' closets. They were eating by the window and her house was in sight, a half mile down the road. Both of them ordered unsteadily, unsure of what came next and she was aware of the waiter smiling, though she didn't know if that was a good or a bad thing. As she ate she stole glances of the other dishes as they went by and realised she'd made the wrong choices.

As they sat and waited for the bill, Amy looked out to her house, feeling somehow free and trapped at the same time. At seventeen she knew it was wrong to be out on a Friday night and still have the shadow of your front door running across your best dress. The boy across from her had tried hard but his eyes were cool and too precise; *he's waiting*, she thought, *waiting for the end of the night*. Once or twice she had tried to start a new conversation, to talk about things outside the town, the weekend, but each time he had steered it back to where he wanted the words to go. He's scared, Amy thought; scared to talk about anything different.

She'd been trying to think of how to end the date without causing a scene when all of a sudden a man flashed by the window, making her jump. She had almost screamed and only just put a hand to her mouth in time. The boy appeared at her shoulder and laughed gently. When she glanced up at him he was smiling at her, but it was not a nice gesture. He's so proud to know something I don't, she realised. For a second she thought about it and then understood; *he's trying to be an adult*. She knew, in a flash, she could never fall in love with him.

"He's Radio," the boy said. As if on cue, the man appeared back onto the road. He was too old for a bike that size, Amy thought; somehow the scene looked unreal and grotesque.

"He's crazy as hell," he went on. "He cycles around day and night. Sometimes he comes up close to people and shouts at them, just to scare them. Did it to me once, walking home at night. Scared the hell out of me."

"What did he say?" Amy watched as he looped round, oblivious to any traffic, people, the stars and the moon.

"Nothing that made any sense. That's why we call him Radio, because it's all just white noise and static. He's crazy after all, right?" She turned round and looked at him. *That's not an answer*, she thought, but said nothing. Amy waited for him to save himself, to say something that would tell her he was wise, that he knew something, something she did not. But instead, he just shrugged and a part of her heart closed down in that moment. She smiled all the same. As they went back to the business of the cheque she edged slightly away from him, though he didn't notice. When they were done he insisted on paying and she only relented by leaving an over the odds sized tip. As they slipped on their coats, she stole a glance out of the window, but it was empty.



He had walked Amy home and then lingered by the door. As she stepped onto the porch he lunged at her, his hands already over her chest and his face on her neck. She pushed him away roughly and in the second time before he tried again, he had seen her eyes and stopped himself. She felt the coolness running through her, the pure rage and knew it would be enough. It was her father's gaze, a look she had feared as a kid and now tried to adopt as she turned into an adult. He muttered a single word and then walked away without another glance.

"Son of a bitch didn't even try to hold my hand first," she whispered and then started to laugh. Amy drew her hand to her neck and felt soreness where his face had pressed onto her throat. *Thank god he's not man enough for stubble or I would have had to explain away a rash*, she thought. As she stepped inside her house she replayed the evening at double speed; she noticed the boy's face was already forgotten but the man on the bike, Radio, was still clear in her head.

Amy made her way to her bedroom, sticking her head around the living room door, just long enough to see her father asleep in his chair. She smiled, remembering what she had said to him before her date; a laundry list of rules, clues and signs. Her favourite was that if he didn't set his cutlery together in the middle of the plate when he was done, he was no gentleman. She thought about the messy knife almost hanging off the table and nodded to her sleeping father; *right on the money dad*, she whispered and gently closed the door.

Her father and mother had met on the long walk to the local lighthouse. Amy wondered how her dad always managed to make the story sound different, though the facts were always the same. She figured it was because he made the different, smaller details seem important, so the picture kept on changing. 'The small moments make up our lives,' he'd told her and she'd never forget that. Each year on her anniversary they would make that long walk down to the lighthouse. By the time they had reached the beacon she had laughed and cried several times over. Once, Amy had asked him if he'd ever got out of breath when he'd walked that first time with her mother. 'I could have walked a 100 miles and not felt a thing,' he'd said and his face creased into just about the saddest smile Amy had ever seen.

It was midnight by the time she had calmed down enough to think about sleep. Already, she had begun to play the Monday rumours over in her head and thought about the best ways to deal with them; by ignoring them. The worst way to react to small town rumours was with small town behaviour, she thought. Let them gossip, she decided and walked to the window. The town was still and empty and all that was left for the stars.

"Radio," she said out to night and then crawled into bed.

&&&

After that first night, Amy kept seeing the man on his bike. She didn't know if she was looking for him-or if he was looking for her-but they seemed to pass each other, over and over in that next month. As she walked to the library or to the diner he would loop into the corner of her eye, not quite breaking into the town square but staying on the fringes. No-one else reacted to seeing him, or maybe, chose not to see him, while he was spinning around. It was only later in the night, when the bars kicked out, that a few drunks cat-called after him, but by then he was gone. *But he was still riding someplace, someplace away from all these small town people*, Amy thought, as she quickly walked away from the men and the girls on their arms.

Her classmates talked about him as if he was some sort of devil and inevitably, stories started surfacing about the terrible things he was supposed to have done. The fact that none of them made any actual sense seemed to pass everyone by, except Amy. Once or twice she tried to

puncture the stories but the girls simply screwed up their faces as the boys started calling him her boyfriend. As she walked away to the library, a part of her wondered how she had ever been friends with any of them.

Amy claimed the binoculars from her father's attic and began to follow him at night. She patiently waited for hours, listening to music, until he appeared on the borders of the square. While there was no pattern to the way he moved, he always seemed to spin in long, flowing arcs; it reminded her of ice skaters on TV. She wondered why no-one else thought it was beautiful. Amy shivered and smiled at the same time; *maybe I'm crazy, too*. Even as the idea popped into her head, she understood that it was okay to think like that when you were nearly eighteen. She flipped on a fresh record and continued watching him.

It went on like that for weeks; after a while she found herself turning down invitations to parties just to watch him. Her dad poked his head round the door once or twice but she always made sure she had a book open at the windowsill. In the margins of the books she made notes of the patterns of his journeys, even though no two were the same. Amy started to think maybe he wasn't crazy, just free and wrote that down in her text book.

"Not crazy, just free." Amy blushed as she said it back out loud, thinking it sounded like a poor man's lyric to some Clash song. Regardless, even as she felt herself go red she also knew, on some level, it was true. As he looped around the empty roads she found herself saying the words out loud, over and over, like a prayer and imagined he did too.

It all changed on a Sunday night. It was always going to be on a Sunday, because that was the day when the whole town seemed to slowly melt and people fell into what was known locally as 'crazy-haze.' People walked with no pace, either hung-over or dreading work; kids skimmed around the edges of town, restless and bored with no money left in their pockets after the weekend. Sunday was the day when there was trouble, never Friday or Saturday. That was the day the boys started to go hunting for Radio.

There had been talk of it bubbling under for weeks. Summer was always the time when schemes got hatched and bad ideas took hold. 'The heat makes smart people lazy and gives voice to all fools,' Amy's dad had always said. As a kid, she had laughed when he wheeled that saying out but as she grew up she started to see the truth in it. It was the time old properties always burned, fights always started and rumours went into overdrive.

Amy had heard them bragging about it in the diner but thought it was just their version of big-talk to impress the girls. Amy had switched on when they'd started shooting off about Radio and switched off when the dumb rumours came running out of their mouths. They were going to do this and that...she went back to her books and thought nothing of it. It was only when she looked over briefly as she made to leave that she saw their eyes burning bright and wild. Amy rocked on the balls of her heels, as she realised they actually meant it.

That night she felt apprehensive, not helped by the way all the air seemed to simply evaporate by nightfall. For the first time that summer, she hoped he wouldn't appear but sure enough, as everything closed up and people scattered, he veered back into the town. She watched him for close to an hour when the boys arrived. It looked wrong, seeing them appear like black dots on the road; they looked like hungry ants, primed and vicious. Amy watched as they slowly spread out, making him slow and slow until the bike itself came to a halt. Her heart broke a little to see him caged in like that and suddenly helpless.

Amy felt tears rise in the corners of her eyes and something else, something hotter, just under the surface. Before she knew what she was doing, she had pitched the binoculars onto her bed and ran out of the room. Her heart was pounding and she was scared, sure, but more than anything, she was full of rage. She launched into the street and sprinted through the dead streets, seeing everything and hearing nothing, until she reached the bike, overturned and tossed against the kerb. The boys were bunched in a corner and each voice was hoarse and rough; *they sound just like when they're getting ready to make a move in the back seat*, she thought with a dull horror. Amongst it was a low whirring sound and for a terrible second she thought they were carrying a weapon of some sort. As she drew closer she realised it was the man's voice.

*Five or six*, she thought, *barely a crowd and not enough to start a riot*. Amy walked up to the fringe of the circle and tried to decide what to do next. Should she charge them, kicking and screaming, or try and talk them down? Or maybe even scream blue murder and pray the town woke itself up? The popping sound of the first punch changed all that and without another thought, she launched into the crowd of boys. At first, she was dimly aware of landing one punch and two heavy kicks to the shins. She heard one of them squeal and another swear. For a second it was perfect and then a hand snapped out and she saw stars.

For the next few seconds, Amy felt thumbs and palms slap onto her body. Even though her eyes were open, she only saw the darkness bunching around her. At first she wondered why the blows were not hurting more and then she understood. *They are not hitting me*, her mind screamed, *they are getting me ready*. Her t-shirt tore in two places at once and her bracelets snapped off and rolled against the kerb. As she was pushed against the concrete, she felt her ass hit the asphalt and her elbow slam heavily against a rock. At first she thought she had been lucky not to hit the back of her head and then a new roar of terror rode into her; *a palm cushioned my head as I fell*. *They want me to be aware when it happens*.

Faces appeared above her and spoilt, bared teeth lowered themselves over the tip of her nose. Amy looked at all of them and did not flinch. *I will not close my eyes*. Somewhere below her, she heard a snapping sound and she waited for a jolt of pain; at first she had thought it was her ribs but then she realised it was her belt being unbuckled. A second of silence followed where everything seemed to still. Then, as they moved in closer, sneering, unsure, hungry, something else drew up above them all and seemed for a second to eclipse the moon.

The bike clattered down in such a way it seemed to smash against all of them at once. Bodies rolled to the left and the right, the pressure easing off Amy enough for her to spin to one side. Two of the bodies lay still, while the other three drew up, suddenly uncertain. She moved in quickly, kicking the nearest one directly between the legs. He fell, howling in pain and the other two backed further away. Amy looked round, just as the man lifted the bike high above himself again, although this time he was not aiming for any of them. Instead, he hurled the bike into the glass front of the empty bar, the glass shattering on impact and the sound impossibly loud against the backdrop of the sleeping town.

The two boys stood stunned for a moment, watching the glass sprinkle against the pavement and then turned to run. The third groggily stood and shuffled away, while the other two lay prone. Amy watched them scamper away like stray dogs and wanted to follow them, to track them down and hurt them, but she forced herself to head over to the man. As she walked towards him, the moon lit the shattered glass and it looked for all the world as if the stars had fallen down onto the uneven, bloodied street.

"Are you okay?" Amy heard herself say. Her voice was scratched and she brought a finger up to her throat. She could already feel it swelling; *no razor rash tonight*, she thought angrily.

"Voodoo, radio," he mumbled. Not radio, radio, she thought and felt insanely proud she had made out the difference. *I'm in shock*, she told herself. Amy followed his gaze and realised what was wrong. The bike sat twisted in a heap amongst the broken shop front.

"Your poor bike," she said and suddenly felt a wave of sadness rush over her. "We'll get you another one," she went on. "I'll get you another one." In the distance she heard a siren and something in it made her want to get away from the place, from all of it. She stood up straight and held out her hand. The man looked at her blankly and she reached down and took his. *Has anyone ever held your hand?* She thought suddenly. His grip was strong, almost too strong, but she said nothing. As soon as they started moving he let himself be led.

As they walked away, Amy paused for a second, stooped down and grabbed her jacket. She flung it over her free arm and held it tight in the crook of her elbow. After she'd finished doing that, she kept walking, forcing him forward and away from the men, the glass and the shattered bike. The stars were getting brighter overhead and seemed stronger than the streetlamps to either side of them. The siren grew louder and she instinctively walked down the side-streets away from it. Amy looked over to him but he simply stared straight ahead. Then, after a while, she looked down to her jacket, the sleeve hanging down like a tongue and the words, written in her clear block capitals. They were easy to see in the moonlight.

"Not crazy, just free," she said and looked back to the man. Even though he didn't look round, she squeezed his hand tighter and said it again, her voice just loud enough to be heard over the oncoming sirens.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Storyteller” by Mark Kiewlak**

**Synopsis:** Fables are not about morality. They are about life experiences and they aim to inspire.

**About the Author:** Mark Joseph Kiewlak has been a published author for more than two decades. In recent years his work has appeared regularly in *The Bitter Oleander*, *Bewildering Stories*, *A Twist of Noir*, *Wild Violet*, and *Cezanne’s Carrot*. His story, “The Present,” was nominated for the 2010 Spinetinger Award: Best Short Story on the Web. He has also written for DC Comics.

**In this fable,** we get enchanted along with the protagonist.

## Storyteller By Mark Kiewlak



I was talking to myself across six lifetimes. The links would not last forever. But hopefully they would give me what I needed in order to know my purpose in life.

Like everyone else I was taught at a very young age that the existence I knew, the being I was, was part of a greater whole -- a physical aspect of an entity far beyond the physical. I was taught also that I had many selves across space and time, and that someday the time would come when I would seek them out and learn to hear what they had to say.

Today was that day.

Riding in the shuttle with the tribal elder I had been very nervous. I wouldn't let go of his hand. The forests below were passing at a blurring speed.

"What did they do before?" I said.

"Fought wars, I think. Wars with other nations, with their neighbors, with themselves."

"That sounds sad," I said.

"There was great sorrow in their existence. They needed to learn that such sorrow was not necessary."

"Because the universe is unconditionally good?"

"Yes," the elder said. "There is no evil but that men created it."

The shuttle was slowing down. I watched its reflection as we passed over a great crystalline lake. The shuttle was as a giant bird floating across the surface of the sparkling water. I had seen this bird many times in my dreams.

"You are frightened by this initiation," the elder said.

"You went through it, right?"

"Yes. A long time ago."

"What did you learn?"

"I learned about the interconnectedness of all life. The movement of the spirit through boundless dimensions. I also learned that my parents would not be the ones to raise me."

"What do you mean?"

"Sometimes a child is best cared for by a community. Sometimes it can suffocate or be held back by those closest to it."

"I've been living on my own for three years now," I said.

"I know that, William. You have done very well."

The shuttle landed in a field of flowers at the edge of another dense forest. The elder let go of my hand.

"I have accompanied you this far," he said. "The rest you must achieve on your own."

This too had been explained to me. But that didn't make it any easier. I made my way to the exit and down the ramp. I had been told, when facing a fear, never to look behind or too far ahead -- to concentrate on the moment and on each step of the journey. I disappeared into the forest and became one with my surroundings. If I saw a bird I was that bird. If I saw a squirrel I would run along the branch with him. I was the wind and the dew and the bark and the grass. Humanity was in all things. All things had memory and life and vision.

And then I came upon the tower.

There were forests I had not yet seen, where the trees were thousands of years old, stretching into the sky, where men could live in clouds, but were not allowed to. These trees were sacred, preserved, untouched by any hand. They were revered, and, it was said, brought tears to any who beheld them. They were sculptures of bark, and I thought about them now as I looked upon the tower.

The tower, of course, was metal. No one knew how many stories it rose into the sky. It had been built by one man, the work of his entire lifetime. No one spoke of this man. No one knew if he was still alive. But many came here for their initiation. Many were changed forever within its walls.

I could see no windows in the structure, no doors. This was an old trick -- a test of perception. I closed my eyes and began walking straight ahead. I listened to the crunching of the leaves beneath my feet. And then the crunching was gone. I opened my eyes. I was inside.

It was said that the body perceived time differently within the tower. Even as I began my ascent I immediately lost all sense of its duration. The stairs were rising on to infinity and I kept climbing and climbing. My self was stripped away. I was not who I had been. I was now only the task I performed. My actions defined my soul. I was the man climbing the tower.

And then I wasn't. For I had reached my goal.

There was no ceiling, no roof. Only sky above and the narrowest of platforms upon which to stand.

I was more afraid than ever, but I took my place there, as I knew I should. The clouds surrounded me, swirling and dancing and making me dizzy. And just as I was about to fall...

... I became someone else entirely. Six someones. Six other selves. I was talking to myself across six lifetimes. I knew the links would not last forever. But hopefully they would give me what I needed in order to know my purpose in life.

At first I did not understand through the confusion. I had been taught only one way of seeing. Now I had six other pairs of eyes, six other consciousnesses.

In one reality I was a police officer in ancient New York. My current self did not know what this meant, what a police officer was, but because of the connection I understood. I understood everything.

I was a female detective who investigated the most heinous of crimes. Mankind, at this stage in their evolution, had little control over their own thought processes. The detective herself was filled with hatred, with thoughts as ugly as those of the people she investigated. She had tried to be a good person, to do good in the world, but she had surrounded herself with evil. Or what she perceived as evil. In those times they still believed in evil as an actual force in the universe.

Living her life for those precious few moments I felt all the pain that was driving her. Her sister had been raped as a teenager. The man had never been caught. Later this sister had committed suicide. Now the detective had tracked him to his apartment and was standing outside the door. Her gun was drawn.

My focus shifted slightly and I was far in the future. I was something that did not yet exist in the world as I knew it. I was evolved into energy. Through this self I felt freer than I had ever been. I no longer had a body. But there were others who still did. It was a choice, I understood, whether to be physical or to try other forms of being. This self understood its infinite nature. It played games all day long and learned through these games more about the nature of its abilities and desires. The games involved light and color and forces no one had bothered to name. Experience was at the focus of this self's being. It wanted to know things.

As I came to know this self I saw that there was a crisis of specificity -- perhaps the only crisis it had ever truly known. It had felt a pressure building throughout its existence to shape itself into more specific forms. There was confinement in this, a sort of labeling, though it made communion with others far easier. This self abhorred language and would not process its thoughts into anything but images. Yet these images themselves were but swirling masses of energy, and sometimes it was hard for others to understand what they meant. This self was now truly considering a more concrete form.

I saw again through another's eyes and I was flying above the world. I was alone, without aircraft, without protection. I was a super-hero. In this reality such wonders were allowed to exist. No one questioned how a man could fly or move faster than light. They still believed in universal laws such as gravity and time, but they also believed in individuals who could overcome these laws. I was a flying protector of the world. Countries did not exist, nor boundaries of any kind. Man in this time did not consider other men his enemy. But he still fought against Nature, and so disasters still occurred. Disasters were created by the collective consciousness in order to move the race forward at key times in key directions. Such a disaster was occurring now: a tiny ball of energy -- a

piece of the sun itself -- had broken loose and was traveling through space on a collision course with precious Earth. Upon its arrival it would incinerate half the surface of the planet. I, the flying man, was on my way to stop it. But I didn't know how.

A truly ancient self then called to me and I was in the world before any of the civilizations ever recorded. This being was neither a man nor a woman, but both. S/he was a teacher. Others were gathered around him/her in a circle on a mountaintop. There was no language, no clothing. S/he was trying to impart a new idea but did not know how to go about it. Sharing in this existence I could see the idea and all its beauty. It was an elevation beyond what any of them had ever thought they could be. But s/he believed in it. This was not the first group s/he had ever gathered. But s/he was beginning to despair. It was time to try something desperate.

S/he led one of the group away from the others to the edge of a cliff overlooking a ravine. S/he pushed the other over the cliff and concentrated as hard as s/he could upon this newborn idea. The body of the other traveled a great distance, disappearing as a splash in the water below.

S/he did this again and again until there was only one remaining in the group. They stood together at the cliff as s/he instructed what need be done. The other revered the teacher greatly and did as told, shoving the teacher from the cliff and then watching to see the result. I was with this self as s/he plummeted.

The time I knew next was unidentifiable to me, for this consciousness did not interpret the world by any conventional means. All I understood was that I was a magician of fragrance. And that I was insane. This consciousness was an interweaving maze, turning back on itself but never duplicating its path. It worked with scent the way a musician employed notes, stringing bouquets together in a way that baffled yet delighted all those around him. He was not content unless he was creating something new. The smells, when allowed to linger, turned harsh, acrid, and betrayed their earlier message.

He spoke this way because he could, and he was a genius at it. Soon others copied his art and told their own stories through scent. Some of these fragrances had true power and caused those who feared their own worth to begin a process whereby all further creations were sanitized into allowable categories and acceptable wholes.

My fragrant magician kept on creating and did not care what others did after. He fought a loneliness in the cell that was his home and wished only to reach out with a perfume that could give his life purpose.

The sixth of my senses activated then and I was myself ancient. I had eyes that were digging into the soil and arms reaching for the sky. I was a tree as tall as the world -- one of those I had heard about, but now grown much older, impossibly high, impossibly thick. I could feel the Earth's center connected intimately with my own. I could look up into space.

This tree had long ago realized it could never fall and had embraced such divinity as its birthright. It was warmed by the light of heaven, while at the same time realizing that it itself created such concepts. It was permanent but ever changing. And nothing was beyond its sight.

I did not sense any crisis within this aspect of myself and I wondered if it wasn't, of all of us, the self closest to its own greater aspect of being. I wondered ... and it existed.

The link was strongest now that I had lived a portion of each life. We were communicating in our knowing of each other and they too had lived my life. I possessed a gift as far back as my memory

ran -- that which I had imparted to myself and never fully realized. I was alive in a time when nearly everyone was a master of their own existence. No one wanted to hurt one another because everyone was fulfilled. But I had thus far chosen not to be. Of course I was young in this life. But I had made the path difficult to tread. I put myself in circumstances where no one had matching experience enough to appreciate my ability. I had given myself so much to overcome. I had not allowed myself the freedom to accomplish my goals, and now I began to despair that I ever would.

And so my despair traveled across the links and was felt by all. I knew that others had been brought here to the tower to receive guidance. Many didn't listen. Many thought it was a prison of fate. But as I touched each life I suddenly allowed for something I never had before.

Union.

As my teacher self plummeted from the mountaintop s/he detected in the air the faintest scent of strawberries. The magician of fragrance had reached him/her and sent this last pleasure through his/her being. I saw through the teacher's eyes the ravine drawing closer and felt all at once in his/her mind the releasing of a burden. S/he had sought to impart a vision to others without ever truly believing in it himself/herself. But now as s/he touched my super-hero self s/he did believe. S/he knew that another aspect of him/her would one day fly. And this was the thought s/he held in his/her moment of fulfillment as s/he entered the ravine.

The magician knew then that someone had understood him/her and that s/he was not alone. The aromas flowed outward in a way they never had -- a dance of creation that was understood by my energy being self as something that could only truly manifest when all doubt had been removed from the process. It was not necessary to concretize oneself for others to understand. The energy being saw now that it was the intention behind the forms that truly mattered. And its intentions had always been pure. There was no need to create a false self or to live in a world that would only bring pain.

This knowledge traveled to the detective as she raised her fist to knock on the door of her sister's rapist. She could see herself harden and concretize with this act into a person far less open to joy for the rest of her life. She would then be just as she had always seen herself -- the worst of the monsters, hypocritical to her own kind. She saw the tree growing on to infinity and did not wish to become a lifeless limb. So she walked away. From the job and the life. She would learn, as I had, never to know what a police officer was, or a gun. She would become a teacher.

And, feeling her decision ripple throughout our being, my super-hero self then decided that he too would turn from the life he had known. As the ball of solar fire raced toward the planet, he knew that he could not deflect it, nor absorb it. But, like knowledge or wisdom, he could filter it through himself.

And so it was that the light was spread through him to all below -- each their own portion, each having to deal with that amount which they had brought upon themselves, and to accept without fear that the nature of the world and their own nature ... were one and the same.

And, having accomplished this miracle, my super-hero self knew that it was no longer his job to shoulder the responsibility for defeating disasters that were not of his making. He was a crutch to the populace, an avoidance of their own godhood. He would find some other way to inspire others, without having to do battle. He would learn to be still, and wait for the answers to come to him. He would no longer fly above the race of men but be welcomed as one of them.

There came to me then a single word whispered across a chain of lifetimes.

And I awoke.

The gentle caress of the sun was upon the platform. The wind had left, ashamed. I began my journey back to earth. The tower again worked its magic and I was selfless. I was the man descending the tower.

The tribal elder was waiting for me outside.

"You built it," I said. "You built this tower."

He had for this no answer but a smile.

"I owe you a great debt," I said.

"I am myself," he said. "You owe me nothing."

"I know my purpose now," I said. "But I'm not sure how to describe it."

"Think of it as a tree you will plant within the sacred forest of Man. A new food for their souls. You will give them stories, and they will feed and grow, a seed within each of them, and new lives waiting to be born."

We returned to the shuttle -- the great bird -- and were headed off into the boundless sky. As before, I took the elder's hand. But now I was no longer nervous. Now I was complete.

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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## **“Jackson Jones: PPI” by Nicholas Coriz**

**Synopsis:** A paranormal private eye gives us an insight into spiritual crimes.

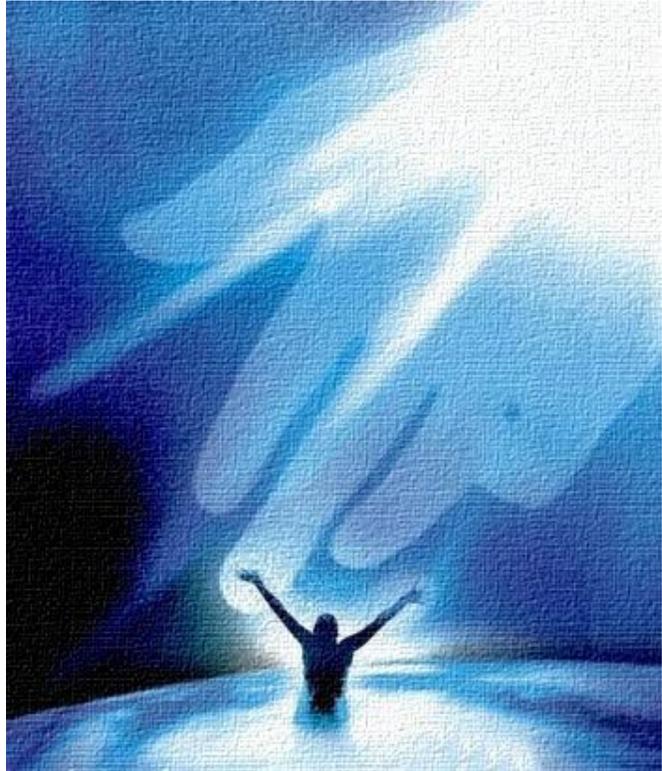
**About the Author:** Nicholas Coriz lives in Albuquerque, New Mexico. He does not own a car, nor a bicycle and instead favors to walk everywhere he goes. This wreaks havoc on his shoes, and as of this writing he is tired and his feet hurt. Oh, and if you should see him illegally jaywalking he would thank you to not run over him even though it would be his fault. For this, he kindly thanks you in advance.

**In this offbeat adventure,** we chase a runaway soul.

## Jackson Jones: PPI

By Nicholas Coriz

The names Jackson Jones and I run a private detective agency for all things bizarre and/or horrific. What constitutes as bizarre and/or horrific is anything that involves reaching across the void of reality and tapping into ones self for the strength and will power to overcome it all and a check for forty three dollars and seventy three cents up front (which is non-refundable, by the way- read your disclosure contract). It's not about money though, even if I perform very *special* services here, and feel I could very well charge up the wing wang woo for them. But I like to try to make my services affordable to everyone, it's not right that a rich person should be able to have demons exorcised from his bathroom toilet and a poorer person just has to deal with them scratching at his ass because someone like me wants to exploit the situation. That ain't *right* and what I do is out of the goodness of my dear heart and I mean that, never mind those small surcharges, there. Really those are just to buy booze and smokes after I've tapped out all the money for the rent. This work also happens to be *very* stressful.



Dig this caper that walked in today- a fourteen year old boy with the itch to find his soul. "Listen kid," I say. "You're fourteen, and most of your age demographic sits in front of the goddamn internet all day playing footsy with robots- the feeling you get from that is not uncommon to not having a soul, y'see? Are you sure *that's* not the problem, not reading a goddamn *book* every once in a while?" He shook his head no, and I could tell he was serious because he had this weird depressed look in his eyes- and no, it wasn't a *normal* weird depressed look for a kid his age. It was something *clearly* different. Lifeless almost. I said I'd take it, but I'd need a flat five hundred up front because the lease on the building was due. He said he didn't have that kind of money so I bargained him down to buying me a couple packs of cigarettes. I happen to be *very* flexible, as well.

So I get in to my normal soul stealing Q & A: "Alright kid, you been playing with any Ouija boards lately?" No he said like a damp towel on a clothes hanger. "Ok" I said "Fine," I lit a smoke up. Damn, menthol. I made a face. I should have told him before he ran to the corner store but he's just a kid and probably didn't know the difference. "What about... tarot cards? Satanic rituals? Anything weird?" I asked. He thought about it this time and still shook his head "No."

"Hmm, ok," I said and thought about it. "You got parents, kid? What do they think about all this?" The kid got this long drawn out stare and sighed, "Well mister," he said in a voice just as equally long and drawn out- this kid either looked like he was coming from some sort of dope fest or he hadn't slept in a week from *looking* for a dope fest. "It's like this... see? My pops is a preacher, right? And if I tell him my soul is missing he'll be *awful* upset, you know?" I blew smoke out of my

nose, and gave him a raised eyebrow, "and your mother?" "Aw... *heck*," he said "Gee, you know... I tried'ta tell her, you know, but she just felt my forehead and gave me some vitamin C."

I blew out a big puff and put it out. "Typical parents. Billy's making up stories so let's just rub a little ointment on his owie and send him off to bed. You don't know how many cases I get like this. Next thing you know he's being carted out the front door by aliens with metal rod up his butt and Mom and Dad are wondering where's he run off to." The kid just stared at me in a daze for a few seconds and said "Yeah... well, *shucks*... that's why I came to *you*." A fly could have buzzed in this kid's nose and ran out of his ear. I mean I know his soul is missing but geez. "I understand, kid- and I'll do my best. But you want to do me a favor and watch the potty talk while you're in my office? That's not the way we speak to our elders."

"*Golly*... sorry, mister." He said. I eyed him again. "That's your last warning." I said, and lit up another one. "Alright kid, tell me what you were doing when you lost your soul- think back and try to recall what *happened*..." He blinked once and said "Okay." Then he closed his eyes and breathed in real deep and exhaled. "I remember, now. Yes, it was last Tuesday. Me and my friends were talking about the big crazy rap dance that was going to take place that week. The last time I remember having a soul was, about that moment."

I bit off a chunk of my fingernail and spit it out. "Alright kid, can you tell me who your friends are? Are they potheads? Freaks? Hooligans? Miscreants?"

The kid blinked at me. "Hmmm..." He said "I don't *think* so, sir. But we're young, if not now then perhaps in the future..."

I nodded. "Right, right," I said "Can you give me some names?"

"Sure," he said "My older friend Ritchie, whose dad is a registered psychotherapist, and my younger friend Daniel who once threw up on the twisty-go-round at the state fair."

"Fine, fine- we all like to brag. Where can I find these kids?"

"Well, right now they're both at baseball practice, but they live on my street; Eisenhower Drive."

"Good," I said, cigarette hanging from my lips while I wrote this all down. "I'll head over there this afternoon. Meanwhile stay away from graveyards and Indian burial grounds and the like. In fact stay home, pour a ring of salt around you and sit in the corner of your bedroom, understand me?"

He simultaneously blinked and nodded his head at the same time, "Yes, sir." He said.

"Good," I said "Now I'm headed down there so I'll give you a ride," I put on my suit jacket and checked my pocket for some gum I could give to the kid, chewing gum is good to do if you've lost your soul because it keeps you busy and gives you something to think about. Remember that, it may come in handy some day. Unfortunately I had none for him at the time.

I grabbed my keys out of the desk, took a swig of 'Ol Porter and told the kid to c'mon. Then I stopped just before reaching for the door, "Say kid," I said, "Something just occurred to me- do you remember what *exactly* you were talking to your friends about that last time?"

The kids' large, toad like eyes looked around at nothing in the room, "Yeah," he said "We were talking about... *girls*, I think."

I thought about that for a moment. "Huh..." I said. I shrugged and we walked out the door.

"Alright kid," I said, "Here's your house, come by my office tomorrow at three and we'll discuss what I've found."

"Ok." He said and slinked out of my car.

"By the way," I said, "Which ways the *school*?" He pointed down the street and trudged off. Nice kid but I don't even know if having Rip Taylor's soul could save him. I looked at how much gas I had in my tank. Shit, it's on "E". That would leave me only enough to get back, maybe. I sighed. "Fine" I said out loud to no one in particular, "Time to hoof it," I could use the exercise anyway. That being said I climbed out of the car and lit up one of the kids' menthols. By now I was getting used to them. They had a pleasant minty flavor to them that reminded me of my first interpersonal transcendental séance where the mint tea they gave us was loaded with hallucinogens. Boy, I'll never forget that one. Really, even if I *wanted* to I couldn't forget that one.

Suburbs are always weird. This one was no different save perhaps it was a little bit weirder. I felt like an alien here. Here was row after row of identical houses and you knew people *lived* in those houses, but you didn't see anyone in the street. It was like they hid in these houses. And I couldn't shake the feeling that they were staring at me from their windows, or something. That's when I got the feeling that I was being followed. I looked behind me though- no one. A dog barked in the background and a bird chirped. I quickly looked to the side. Nothing. Why was I getting the feeling like some psycho was going to pop out in a yellow polo shirt and attack me with a lawn mower?

Just to be safe, I made an immediate turn on the street where I was. I could feel it now more than ever. I think I even heard some scuffling behind me. If I didn't look out of place before in this clone dump, I did now. That made me feel even *weirder*. I looked behind me; I swear I saw a shadow disappear behind a pine tree. I ran at a medium pace, almost like a fast walk- a head disappears behind a car. I can't even get a good look at the person. There's a park coming up- I'll get behind a tree or a bench and get my gun out. I get in the grass at the park, do a rolling tumble behind a tree, take a puff, and get out my ol' widow maker. I take a breath, turn around from the tree and go "HA!"

There's nothing there. I'm getting goofy. Something's wrong though, I know it. I've been doing this for so long I can tell you at the exact point when unseen forces are up to no good... or I really am getting goofy. The apex of the two feels the same, really. That's why they call it a 'gut instinct' and not a 'brain instinct'. I laugh at this out loud. Unbeknownst to me this whole time I see two children playing in a sand box looking up at me totally frozen. They were to the left of this tree, and couldn't look more than four years old. "Oh-!" I said "Hey, kids- sorry about that", I try to laugh it off but it just makes me look more oblivious. "Say, do you guys know where the *school* is?" They just sit there staring at me, jaws dropped. I realize now I still have my gun in my hand, and I stash it away real quick, "Oops!" I say "Let's just put that away! You know what; I think I can find it from here- thanks though!" I get the hell out of there, back the way I came. I can tell they're still staring at me.

I fix my tie. *What the hell is wrong with you?* I ask myself.

I creep up to the high school still edgy from the *encounter* I just had; whatever the fuck that was. I ve got to either just have coffee in the afternoon and no booze or vice versa because I tell ya mixing the two is freaking me out... or at least I hope that's it. I dunno. Anyway, I'm coming up to the high school now and I start hearing voices- not crazy in your head voices but low little whisper voices. At first I'm alarmed, considering of what I just came from but I stand frozen just listening. It starts to creep me out but then I realize it's coming from the bushes, and most importantly I don't

think it concerns *me*. I walk slow and quiet towards it. Soon enough I'm close enough to poke my head through the trees and see what's going on.

Its kids. Two of them. They've got cards laid out in front of them. "-that's according to the *old* ones, dude." One says. What are they talking about? "No, if you use a black magic ritual at the fourth rung you can use the soul for whatever you want, *even* chaos control." The other one says. This is getting real suspicious. The other kid rolls his eyes. These kids look like two freckle faced blonde haired atypical Johnny White breeds, they're up to something *spooky* here. "You have to have *dominion* to control a soul after you steal it, Ritchie- it says it in the *book*."

I knew it. Malarkey. Ritchie, *the kids'* friend. I had inkling that "the friends" were up no good, I had a *feeling*. I pull out my gun and bust out through the trees, "Hold it right there, goddamn it!" the kids jaws drop and they freeze. I yell and grab the skinnier, smaller one and put him in a head lock.

"Oh my god!" Says the other little fatty.

"Please don't kill me!" says the one in my arms.

"Nah, I'm not going to *kill* ya kid-! But I want *answers* goddamn it- where's your friends *soul*? You'd better give it back!"

The kid tries to worm his way through my arms. "What are you talking about? We didn't take anybodies soul! I swear!"

"It's true!" says the other one.

"Oh yeah," I say tightening my headlock on Ritchie, "then who *did*? Looks like you've got a little magical *operation* going on here, I see. Why should I *believe* you, huh?"

"Magical- what? What are you talking about?" The kid buried in my armpit says.

"These *cards*!" I say and point down. "These weird little sick cards you have- these are some demonic soul stealing *psycho* cards aren't they?" I yell.

"What?" Says the other. "Magic? Mister- you don't understand, these cards... are... they're like, a *game*!" I squint at the pudgy kid; it clicks to me that he's Daniel probably.

"I'm not playing games here, kid."

"No- its true!" says the one in my arms, I squeeze him harder and he gags.

"Yeah! It is true!" says the other one. "It's like a game! Like a stupid little card game! It's nothing close to magic at all-! In fact it's really juvenile and ridiculous! No one in their right mind past the age of *nine* would want to play this game! That's why we play it in secret! Honest!"

I look down at the colorful little cards in front of me. They are brazen with trolls and vampires and witches and wizards tossing out fireballs out of their hands and what not. Still, I think its funny looking, and not in a cute way, no sir. "Okay," I said "But I just heard you talking about controlling *souls*, what was *that* about?"

"Oh," said the fat kid "You see after you kill a monster and you use the black soul siphon card which is a *whistlers lament* set card and not a *moon army genocide* set card where you have to spend two surges in order to-

The kid in my arm interrupts "-That's in the *old* set of kings passing and not the new set of *infernal discovery* that you didn't buy because you went to go see transphasevestites with Tommy which you didn't invite-

I drop the kid and cover my ears. "Alright, alright! Yak yak yak, I get it!" I put my gun away and wipe the sweat off my forehead.

They both look at me. And then Daniel looks at his friend and starts saying "The old rules are still cannon, they're *cannon*, because I went online and-

I interrupt another lengthy monologue about fantasy land pomp and circumstance. "Ah!" I say. "I said shut up, damn it! Both of you sit down, right here." I sit down on the leaves and take a breather. They look at each other and sit down in front of me.

"So," says Ritchie, cradling his neck "You said something about a *soul*? Are you talking about *Marty*?" he asks.

I look over at him, "Yeah," I'm panting, sweating. I ask, "You guys are his friend's right?"

Daniel spoke up, "yeah, but he's been acting weird lately- is that why? He lost his *soul* or something like that?"

I shrug. "I think so. Know anything about it?" The kids were silent. They looked at each other again.

"I don't know," said Ritchie, "he's been like that ever since *the dance*."

"Yeah," said Daniel "the *dance*."

I light up a smoke. They've peaked my interest. "Ok," I say, "What happened, there- or what do *you* think happened there, I should say."

"Well," said Ritchie, "I think the last time I saw him act normal was before he ran off with *Becky*."

"Yeah," said Daniel "Now that I think about it, when he left with her that night to Makeout Creek."

"Who's *Becky*?" I ask "Marty didn't tell me he had a girlfriend."

"He *doesn't*..." said Ritchie, "That's just who he went to the dance with- she was his date."

"So you don't know what they did after the dance? Was he ok *during* dance?"

They both looked at each other and shrugged. "Yeah he was alright I guess, and I don't know what they did after the dance at Makeout Creek. *Made out*, maybe?" Daniel said.

"I don't know," said Ritchie, "She's not really into him. He would have had to like, really given her some outrageous line of crap for her to do that." They both laughed.

Something clicked in my head. "What?" I said, "Why do you say that?" They giggled like mental patients.

"She didn't even like him all that much- in fact he practically had to corner her to get her to go to the dance with him. She was pretty embarrassed."

I stood straight up and knocked my head on a branch. Out of anger I kicked the pile of cards sitting between the two of them. "Ow- fuck!" I said. "Oh whoops, sorry. Listen- do you kids know where I can find this Becky girl?"

"Uh, yeah," said Daniel. He pointed towards the end of the football field, "She's about two blocks that way, it's a blue house with a brown car in the driveway, but be careful, her Dad doesn't like people asking for her though- Marty learned that the hard way."

Ritchie said "Pfft- yeah he was picking that buckshot out of his butt in my moms bathroom for like, two hours."

"Great," I said. "Thanks guys. Sorry to disturb your little game here but I've got to run."

"Wait!" Daniel said.

"What?" I asked, thinking it was important.

"Don't we get some money or something for helping you? I heard that the police department gives people rewards for information about crimes."

"Yeah!" said Ritchie, "Besides, you pulled a gun on us and ruined our *game*, dude!"

I rolled my eyes. "Alright, geez. But only because I feel bad for squeezing your head off- and don't tell your parents about that for Christ's sake. I have enough lawsuits on me already."

"Awesome!" Said Ritchie. I threw two of my hard earned cancer sticks on the ground where their cards were and started running.

"What are we supposed to do with *these*?" Daniel yelled.

"I don't know!" I yelled back, "Trade them for new *cards*!"

As soon as I leave the school grounds, I get this funny feeling again. The funny feeling like I'm being watched or followed again. Every step I take I notice I'm feeling more and more. I stop. I think about to my psychic training in the Himlayas. I know what's going on here, and I know just how to deal with it. I stop and sit right down where I'm at on the side walk in front of a pee-yellow house and assume the ol' lotus position. I start my meditative trance. I clear out all noises and distractions and people in mini vans slowing down to stare at me and what the hell I'm doing and create an atmosphere for myself in my own astral space. I imagine what's following me; no details yet, just imagine it. Then with my imagination I put form to the thing. Just guess work, a little something I learned in Mexico from a cool cat named Don Jose about putting faces and personalities to questionable spirits of a mysterious nature- If you bullshit sometimes you can get halfway of what it actually is, and then the thing will eventually reveal itself to you if you assume it's nature. I envision it getting closer and closer until it reaches me, and I'm staring straight at it. I now start to add features to the face of what I *think* it looks like based on the vibe I get from it.

Blonde hair, blue eyes, freckles. Hey he almost looks like Marty, but more alive, more vibrant and full of zest while he strangles me as I sit here.

I open my eyes. Marty's soul is cutting off my oxygen with his ethereal hands. I wave him away and use my Himalayan training to ward him off with my secret mantra to repel spirits: "Hey! Get the fuck away from me!" I shout (the monks let me design my own mantra). Marty's soul backs off, snarls at me with his freckly bucktoothed face and vanishes into the air. It doesn't want me going to Becky's house. I've caught it in its little game. I know *exactly* what's going on now and I'm sure of it. I run down the street towards her house. I can't feel Marty's soul following me anymore but I know somehow it's keeping tabs on me. That's fine. If he's looking for a fight I'll give him one. I've got a job to do. Those bills aren't going to pay themselves.

Well, there's only one blue house with a brown car on this street so I figure this is the place. If this isn't it I don't know what I'll do. Maybe see if those kids are still in the bushes back there, although I don't want to have to give them two *more* cigarettes. Now one of them said Becky's Dad is a bit of a hard ass so I'd better watch it and put on my best boy scout uniform. This yard is trashed by the way. There's auto parts and broken lawn furniture all over the place. I wonder if this chick is some kind of hillbilly or something. No matter. I straighten up my tie, step over the empty flower pots and ring the doorbell.

A moment later the door opens a crack and I can see a man's face from behind the chain. Some graying white guy with a leathery face, he doesn't look like a hillbilly though so I guess that's either really good or really bad. "What?" he says abruptly.

I clear my throat "Good evening... sir," I say, "I'm a detective... of some sort, and something has happened to a friend of your daughters, may I speak with her? I'll only take a moment of her time."

At first he says nothing and looks me over from head to toe. I reach into my back pocket and pull out my license and flash it really quick. He eyes me again. I smile. He squints. "Okay," he says, "wait here."

"Thank you." I say. I wait for a good solid minute. It's quiet as grave out here, and I glance at my watch. After about two more minutes I start to get a weird feeling that something is going to happen.

I hear all the locks on the door click open, one by one, about five. I snap my self out of paranoid daydreams and look sharp. The door swings wide open, but there's no one standing there. I look around inside. "Hello?" I say. It doesn't look like anybody's inside. I start to back off, when suddenly Becky's Dad steps out from behind the open door with a shot gun. "Oh shit!" I say and run towards the front of the house and make an immediate right in front of the garage where I'm out of his view. I hear a loud blast off and I can feel a hot chunk of rounds just barely miss the fat of my ass as I turn. Oh for gods sake. I take a breath; I'm sweating like a pig again, because I know I'm going to have to get in there still one way or another. I pull out my gun and get in a crouching position. I switch the corner and pump about three rounds near his head as he finishes reloading. The bullets surprise him and he ducks back behind the door.

"Sir," I say. "I just want to *talk*." You've got to fight fire with fire sometimes. I didn't want to intentionally hit him or anything, and I'm lucky I didn't because actually I'm a terrible shot. So I guess everything worked out OK, for now.

"Liar!" he says. "I know who you are!" My first thought is I know this guy thinks I'm some sort of sexual predator or college loan application officer, and that's OK, too. I just have to lay it down on

the line and let him know what's really going on and he'll get off my back. I know the type I'm dealing with here.

"Look here, sir," I say, "I'm a private detective looking for something a kid lost and I think your daughter might be able to help me. I mean no threat, I promise."

"Bull!" He says. I can hear in his voice he's about ready to pounce. "I know *exactly* who you are- you're that guy that convinced my ex-wife that her dead boyfriend from high school was haunting her- so she ran off on me with a decomposed *corpse on a motorcycle!*" He shouted, and swung back through the door, gun aimed straight at my face. I dodged just in the nick of time as chunks of brick and mortar dust my face. Holy shit, I'm thinking, this guy *did* know who I was.

"Man," I say, "You know, geez that was a long time ago, and I don't think I had anything... *directly* to do with-" Two more shots blast from the front door and take out chunks of the house. Great. This is why they always told me to be a cop, you know. Just be a regular Officer Joe if I wanted to get into law enforcement. They told me I'd be shot at as a cop but you don't get shot at *as much* I think. I couldn't count on five hands how many times this happens to me.

I hear the guy reloading, I searching around for cover and I've got to act fast. The car. The other side of the house. Think man. Suddenly I hear a shrill girl's voice somewhere inside the house.

"*Dad!*" She screams. *That* must be Becky. "Do you have to *shoot* at everyone who comes to the *door?*" She made a good point, but I can't say I wouldn't want to shoot Marty for coming to my door also if it were my daughter. So in essence they're *both* right.

"*Pumpkin-*" I hear him say. "This is a... *personal* issue for Daddy, here. Why don't you go to your room and later we'll go get something to eat or something, ok? I promise this'll only take a second."

"*No!*" I heard her scream and stamp her foot. "Put the gun *down!* I *mean it!* This is *embarrassing!*"

"How do you think I feel here kid, I'm the one getting *shot* at." I say, to no response whatsoever.

"Sweetie," He says. I can really feel the compressed rage in his voice at this point. "I promise I'll be *done* in a minute, the *adults* are having a little... *disagreement* right now, and-"

"*No!*" she screamed again. "This is *stupid!* I'm going to Megan's house!" I hear her stomp off and next thing I know she's whizzing out of the backyard on a bike with white headphones in her ears. Shit, I think. I have to go after her. I get up and start running.

"Hold it!" He says. He's got the gun right on me. I fall behind the car and he shoots a hole in it, shattering the rear windows glass. "*Damn it!*" He says, "I just got that *fixed*, you *ass!*" Don't blame me pal you're the one who can't aim right, I'm thinking. I can see Becky go down the street and make a right at the stop sign, barely missing an oncoming car that slams on its brakes and honks. I can't lose her. I look under the car and see he's reloading again. Time to make a break for it. If I weave between the light poles, garbage cans and mail boxes I might save myself a trip to the emergency room, or the morgue. I'm running, full speed ducking and weaving and then I turn around to see if anyone is following me and there's no one there.

First I think, "That's great!" but then that feeling of accomplishment just yet again melds into that cold dark feeling of paranoia. Marty's soul is somewhere around here. I don't have time to sit and meditate upon him right now. What is the problem with this thing? Why is it doing this? Most soul's

advertently seek out their bodies and return to them. Why would his be inclined to keep me from preventing that from happening? I ponder these things while running around the block. I lose sight of the fact that I am indeed running around the block and not paying attention to my surroundings and manage to rack my genitals and knees on a big yellow fire hydrant. The pain from the force is so bad it causes me to fall on my back and groan like a wounded puppy. I close my eyes tight and when I open them I notice Marty's soul hovering over me. He looks at my gun lying on the pavement and kicks it straight into the gutter. "Hey!" I say, "Don't- wait-!" His crooked face gets this ugly little grin on it and he dissipates into nothing.

I scramble to my feet still reeling from the pain of getting cracked in the nuts and see what he was grinning at. It's Becky's dad. Turing the corner from the exact way I was headed to. I can hear the gun fighter music playing in my head. He cocks his gun and blasts the top of the fire hydrant, which is protecting my bruised stick and berries, and water goes spraying everywhere. He's reloading. I could run. I could come out swinging and risk a real shot to the system, but something inside me, possibly erupting from my third chakra or my good old fashioned gut instinct set in. I step from behind the spray of water towards him.

"Paul?" I say. He looks up at me. He's fidgeting with his rounds, desperately trying to cram them in his barrel while he has the opportunity. "I remember you now; I just remembered your name." He still fidgets with his gun, and even drops a couple of shells.

"Yeah," he said, "So what?"

"No," I say, "I mean... I remember what happened. Your house was haunted... and your wife came to me in secret because she thought it was her ex-boyfriend's ghost..." I get closer to this sweaty, red faced man trying to kill me.

"Pssh!" he says, and cocks the gun, aiming it straight at me. I put my hands up,

"I know," I say. "I understand what happened now... you were... you guys got married at a young age..." He's got the gun straight on me, looking very intent on murdering me now if he wasn't before.

"What? What are you...?"

"Just listen-!" I say, "You guys were only dating for about a month after her first boyfriend died, you know the one, uhhhh what was his name?"

Paul grit his teeth, "Duke." He said.

"Yeah-! Duke! That's it!" I say. I've still got my hands up, trying to pose no threat. "She came over to your house the night he died, and you tried to comfort her, remember?" He was getting very bewildered, now. "And you guys, like, you know 'did it', that night right, because... you always liked her and wanted to be there for her, right?" I was about two yards away from him right now, standing right in front of his weapon. "But... she never got over that... she never got over her boyfriend dying."

Paul looked like he wanted to cry or at least say something, but he looked like he just couldn't. I wasn't trying to put this guy under the gun so to speak, after all this was a very risky thing to bring up while I'm *actually* under the gun. "And then... at that class reunion..." I said, "When they paid tribute to Duke. She left a rose on his memorial and he started coming back. He was *haunting* you guys, right?"

"... Yeah?" Paul said.

"And then... he came back, right? And she left you. She left you with two kids and a house to pay for all by yourself... for a dead guy on a motorcycle who never graduated college while holding down a steady job because he had no mouths to feed at home..." I was right up in front of him now; my chest was almost touching the barrel.

"I remember." I said "I remember that case. You must have been pretty upset guy. And I feel really bad for you, I really do. That's a whole lot of load to carry there... but it's not my fault, Paul..." I looked him straight in the eye; he could probably smell my breath from this distance. "...and if killing me is going to take that all away..." I breathed in deep, "Then do it." I said. "I understand. I dig it. Just not in the face, okay. I'd like to look nice in the casket..." He closed his eyes real tight and was shaking. "I mean I'd like to look better than how Duke turned out... Jesus, did you ever see that guy's mug after the crash?"

He laughed. I made him laugh. He put the gun down, fell to his knees and started weeping uncontrollably. I made a grown man weep uncontrollably, and honestly felt worse about that than if he would he would have shot me and then felt bad about *that*, if that makes any sense. "How could she?" He said, tears running down his face, clutching his gun at the end like it was a teddy bear that could comfort him. "I thought we had *something*... I just don't *understand* it..." He cried some more and I sat next to him in the middle of the street. I put my arm around him and patted him a couple of times. A car was coming around the street at that time. It stopped right in front of us and honked.

"Go around!" I said, waving my hand, "Jesus!"

"Look," I said, "I'm sorry, it'll be ok. I promise. These things take time, and I guess it helps to get them out in the open... even if it has to be this open... in the middle of the street here... here!" I said, "Have some booze! I always carry some in my front pocket!" He wiped the tears and snot from his face and took a swig.

He gagged on it and said "Oh my gosh, that's *strong*- how can you drink that?"

"Well," I said "It's a small flask so I have to up the concentration if you know what I mean... and it's warm, too. It's gets all hot in there when it's next to my heart and it's racing because my life is being threatened, you know. What can I say? Hey I know, have another one." He took another long swig and gagged again. "Easy," I say, "I still haven't even cracked this case yet- I might need some of that later. Not like I don't have more in the car... by the way, I've got to find your daughter. It's really important. Where is she at?"

Paul got up and dusted his pants. "Well," he sniffed, "She said Megan's, right? I think she's the next street over, right on the corner."

"Thanks," I said, "I've got to boogie, Paul. I'll tell your daughter to come home after I'm done questioning her. She'll tell you all about it later, I'm sure."

"Thanks," he said, "Really, thanks a lot... by the way... sorry for... you know, trying to kill you and all."

"No problem," I said, I pat him on the back again. This time a firm, manly slap of reassurance. "Happens all the time, believe me." I started running.

"Wait," he said, "I know you don't know me that personally, but... you don't think it was *me* do you? She just got tired of *me*?"

I stop, turn around, and shake my head, "Nah," I say, "She was weird. I mean you wouldn't boink Marilyn Monroe's corpse even if you had the chance would you?"

He put his hand under his chin and got real quiet. "I guess not," he said, "...thanks."

"No problem," I said, and started running again. I wondered why he had to think about that for so long.

Megan's house. The end of the line. I know it. I see Marty's soul sitting on top of the house, legs hanging off the side of the roof. He's not going to try and stop me this time and I wonder why. I stop short of the pavement in front of the house and see if I can get a feeling for any dirty tricks, and I don't feel any that I know of. This is it. I knock on the door and some Beverly Hill looking soccer Mom answers. "Yes?" she says.

"I'm looking for Becky- is she here?" I say, and of course at this point during the day I'm drenched in sweat and looking real shaky. She probably thought I was a loon or something.

"May I ask who is looking for her?" she says, real stick-up-the-butt like you know.

I sigh. "My name is Jackson Jones and I'm a Private Investigator," I flash my card in my wallet, and say, "I need to know what happened to her boyfriend's *soul*." She gives me this bizzarro look, which I'm sick of getting. Especially at this point in the day. "Listen lady, can you just go get her and I'll be out of your hair when I'm done. I just need to ask her a few questions. It'll only take a moment, ok?"

She squints at me. "Wait here," She says. I can here a muffled conversation behind the door, barely. But I do clearly hear Becky scream "he's not even my boyfriend!" and Megan's mom shout back "Just go talk to him!"

The door opens. Finally, it's little Becky. "Becky," I say, "I'm private detective Jackson Jones- your Dad and I were just having a... discussion of sorts a few minutes ago. He wants you to know everything's OK and you can come home anytime you want to."

She rolls her eyes and sticks out her bottom lip, "What do you want?" she says.

I light up a cigarette, and stick my other hand in my pocket "I want to know about Marty Kaufman's *soul* and what happened to it." I blew smoke all over Megan's moms' patio knowing fully well she could be coming out at any moment griping at me to put it out. Becky looked all huffy again. "You're not in trouble... if you just tell me how I can get it *back*." She was silent. She looked down at her cell phone and sighed. I rolled my eyes. "All right, kid. Something's not right here. You got something you want to tell me?"

She crossed her arms and leaned up against the door frame. "*Ugh!*" she said, and threw her head back. "Marty is so *annoying!* He wouldn't leave me *alone!* I only went to the stupid dance with him because he was going to embarrass me in front of every one right in the hall! He's so *stupid!*"

"So where's his soul? What *happened?*" I asked.

She got quiet. "Nothing... we went to the dance and... like, the next day he didn't have a soul because he's a *moron!*"

"No!" I say, "That's not what happened-! You want to know what *I* think happened-! He took you to Makeout Creek and you convinced him to sign his *soul* over to you if he wanted to *get* anything and *you* took it because you wanted him to stop *bothering you!*"

"No!" she screamed and stamped her foot. "I didn't *do* that! He just *gave* it to me! He signed it in *blood* and everything! It was really *weird* actually- and I didn't *care*! He gave it to me and I was like, 'whatever- that still doesn't mean I *like* you or anything!"

"*What?*" I said, "So you just *took* it anyway?" She shrugged. "Yeah. I mean, it got him off my back, so it worked. He just dropped me off back home after that, and I haven't heard from him *since*. So... in retrospect it seemed like a pretty good idea..." She kind of stared off into space a little after she said this. I personally didn't know what to say. I was dealing with an epic of teenage drama snowballed into something pretty goddamn strange here. This was my business, so I was used to the *strange* aspect of it. What I'm not used to however, is kids, and the predicaments they get themselves into. Marty is clearly an idiot, and this girl; well, she's just *loud* at the very least.

"So what did you do with his soul? Do you still *have* it?" I asked.

"Well," she said, and crossed her arms again. "At first I was like showing it to people you know, just my friends. And then I thought if too many people saw it they would think that like we're dating or something, and I didn't want anyone to think that because everyone knows I like Brad Beefsson and he just broke up with his girlfriend, so like I could have a chance with him because they say he likes girls with "U" shaped eyebrows and that's totally me-!"

I shook my head, "Alright," I said, "But where's his *soul*?"

"Oh," she said, "God, I don't *know*. I didn't keep it or anything. I just threw it in the *river*. Leave me *alone*." And with that being said she slammed the door and left me standing out on the porch like a schmuck. That was it. She threw it in the *river*. I put my hands in my pocket and sighed. I could go look for it, but who knows, it was probably halfway on its way to Timbuktu by now.

I turned around and headed out, and saw Marty's soul sitting cross legged on top of the mailbox. He looked pretty beat.

"So you heard all that, huh?" He shook his head. "Geez. Sorry, kid. Although I'm sure at your age I hope you'll heal from this a little bit healthier than *her* dad." He was silent at first, and then nodded. "So," I said, popping another cigarette in my mouth, "How's about going back to your body now, eh? Don't you think it'd be for the *best* at this point? I know your body misses you, that poor little weirdo."

He was silent at first, then he said, "Why? I'm free here. I can do whatever I want now, and there's nothing to hold me back. Why would I want to go back to the same old boring life where school sucks, girls hate me, and my parents just want to sit around and read novels about the Rapture all day. I can go wherever and do anything now, you know."

"Well," I said, "yes... and *no*. Sure, it's boring and bland here in the real world, but there's always the huge possibility of you ending up just like, you know astral waste somewhere, enslaved by alien or foreign astral entities to fuel power for sublime ages old hatreds and/or machinations of

control. Or you know like, you yourself could just vanish into nothing without the real experiences of being a real person to ground you your true feelings, desires and thoughts. It's a pretty steep price to pay either way, but yeah, I agree, school sucks and all that, for sure."

He dished out this real freaky look to me. I couldn't help but to smile. "Really?" He said.

"Oh, *yeah*." I said. "Happens *all* the time, you'd be surprised. People's bodies just become autonomous slaves of their lizard brains. You ever get on a public city bus?"

He tilted his head almost like confused dog, "Yeah?" he said.

"Well," I said, I looked straight into his eyes and blew smoke out of my nose, "Most of *those people* don't have *souls*."

That was it. I'd sold the deal. He shook his astral head vigorously and got off the mail box. "Alright," he said, "I'm ready to go back. Are you coming with me?"

"Of course," I said, "Lets go."

We walked back up the street together. In our wake we saw the destruction caused by Becky's dad. Mail boxes, trash cans and cars all smashed up with hot buckshot. There were about six cop cars all up and down the neighborhood. The police were questioning him right now and even had him on the curb in handcuffs. He nodded to me and smiled "Hi". I waved back. It's rare in my line of work that I actually get to feel good about anything. I mean I feel good every time I solve a case, but that feeling is more like I've just patched up a big overgrown mess. Today, despite all odds, I actually managed to do people some *good*, even though one guy got arrested and one guy got is heart broken, but *that's* what I like doing the *most*, is *helping*. The *cops* couldn't have gotten that kids *soul* back, hell not even Jerry Falwell could have done it- or I don't know, *maybe*- but the point is *I* did, and that's just great, see. I'm here for the *people*, and it feels good when I can actually *help* them (and even some kinds of demons, spirits and ghosts as long as they're *nice* to me and pay up front as per my policy, it's in the contract). Its days like this I feel pretty proud of what I do.

Unfortunately, the kid had no money just as I suspected, and I was out on my ass the next day. So I guess... that proves it, *right there*.

\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\*

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## **“Vanguard” by Sam S. Kepfield**

**Synopsis:** An alternate history of the great United States of America with Communist comrade Lenin in a unique role – flashback to a new past, move forward to a different future.

**About the Author:** Sam Kepfield is a writer who is forced to earn a living as a criminal defense attorney in Hutchinson, Kansas. He has a bachelor’s degree from Kansas State University (B.A. 1986), a law degree and an M.A. in History from the University of Nebraska ('89, '94), as well as doctoral work at the University of Oklahoma. He has been an avid reader of science fiction since childhood, and several years ago decided he’d try his hand at it. So far, his stories have appeared in *Revolutions SF*, *Jupiter SF*, *Science Fiction Trails*, *The Future Fire*, *Cemetery Moon*, and *Atomjack*, among others.

**In this epic historical adventure,** the Confederate glory is revisited.

## Vanguard

By Sam S. Kepfield



“To Southern Independence!” A hundred glasses were raised in a toast, tinkling as the crystal filled with the blood-colored California wine echoed through the dining hall, and the voices echoed Col. Jesse Donaldson’s sentiments. The voices were male and female, the dulcet tones of the Virginia Tidewater to the broad nasality of Arizona and the accented English of Oaxaca, even a few Gallic notes in the chord. The small wooden Commanding Officer’s quarters could barely contain the crowd.

“Fifty years, and five hundred more!” came the enthusiastic, tipsy voice of Melinda Harper, wife of Richard Harper, the Confederate ambassador to Novya Rossiya. She, like all the wives gathered, was decked out in a satin gown, gloves and bejeweled in a manner that would befit Richmond society more than a frontier outpost. She took a healthy swig of the local wine, an ’05 vintage that was one of the best in memory.

“Hear, hear,” added Col. Henri Ducrot, the French military *attache* in California. “His Majesty Napoleon V extends his congratulations and greetings on this occasion for celebration.” As *well he might*, Donaldson thought, smiling and returning the toast. Without the Lafayette Brigade – a Confederate cavalry unit on loan to the French Army – wreaking havoc in the Prussian rear at Sedan, Ducrot would be goose-stepping and eating bratwurst, married to some plump Teutonic woman straight out of Wagner, rather than the bewitching svelte olive-skinned Gallic creature at his side.

Scenes of Confederate glory done in oils looked down upon the crowd. Longstreet and Hill’s final charge at Sharpsburg that had rolled up and shattered the Army of the Potomac. The signing of the Treaty of Annapolis, fifty years ago this day, that had ended the Second Revolution; Lee, Longstreet, Benjamin and Seddon for the South, Seward, Meade, Scott and President Hamlin (Lincoln having resigned in disgrace after the cease-fire) for the Northern States. An apocryphal rendition of Lee’s Emancipation Declaration being read to grateful, even worshipful, slaves, certainly the least accurate of the paintings on the wall, left by Donaldson’s predecessor.

The well-wishing ensued throughout the crowded parlor, and then spilled out into the rear porch that gave a breathtaking view of the Pacific Ocean, carrying Donaldson along. As commanding officer of Fort Stuart, California, Donaldson had plenty of perks, but this was perhaps the most satisfying.

Donaldson had been born in Sequoyah forty-seven years ago, when it was still Indian Territory, suffered through dusty hot summers and never saw more water than the occasional muddy creek. His first posting out of the C.S. Military Academy had been to Fort Marion on the Golden Isles of Georgia, and there he had fallen in love with the sea. More than once he wondered if he hadn't joined the wrong branch of the service.

In the quarter-century since, he'd been posted to Fort Bowie in Galveston Bay, and to Fort Tyler in Veracruz. But California – there was something here, in the salt air, that drew him. The gentle basso heartbeat thump of the waves crashing onto the beach several hundred feet below lulled him to sleep every night. He already planned to retire here when he put in his thirty years and mustered out.

Donaldson stood at the rail, took a cigar from a silver holder in his tunic, and lit it, took a deep draw on it.

"Marvelous," said a cultured voice at his elbow, carrying the overtones of Eton and Oxford. "Cuban, isn't it?"

"It is," Donaldson said.

"Thought so. I can always tell. Marvelous tobacco, that. Do you have more?"

"I just got a shipment in last month," Donaldson said. The battleship C.S.S. *Mallory* had sailed from Havana through the Canal and resupplied in San Francisco. Her skipper had been an ensign when Donaldson had been posted to Fort Marion, and the interservice rivalry had been trumped by the gripes about superiors common to all newly-commissioned officers. He'd kept in touch with Capt. Harley Stebbins since, and they arranged mutual trades. The price for a crate of Cuban cigars had been three crates of California wine.

Donaldson handed a cigar from the case to Stephen Hyde-Sandys, His Majesty's Deputy Consul to America, in Los Angeles. Sandys was tall, thin, horse-faced with a pronounced overbite, with wavy but thinning sandy hair. He wore a morning coat, since the celebration merited dress grays for the post's officer. Sandys took a match from a small silver holder, struck it, and lit the cigar.

"Superb," he whispered, shutting his eyes. "Better than Turkish. Better, dare I say it, than your Virginia tobacco," he said with a twinkle in his eye.

"Sir," Donaldson summoned mock outrage, "wars have begun over lesser insults." Donaldson took another puff of the cigar. "But, between you and me and the flagpole yonder, I might agree with you – to a point." The Virginians got a bit full of themselves sometimes.

They stood enjoying their cigars, gazing into the western horizon that had turned from orange to azure and was approaching velvet. A *poof* sounded over the gay conversation, and a second later the sky erupted in blue and red light.

"Enjoy the fireworks," Donaldson said. "Got 'em all the way from China."

"My," Sandys said, admiring the sky as a second shell burst in green and gold. "I wonder what our Russian friends will think." He nodded his head north, towards Fort Ross. "Knowing them, they'll think they're under attack."

“Hardly,” Donaldson said. “They had a big shindig a few days ago, celebrating the three hundredth anniversary of the Romanov dynasty. And they’re a ways off. All is quiet on the Western front, Mr. Sandys.”

“Mmmm,” Sandys replied. The cigar glowed red as he inhaled again. “For how long, I wonder?”

“As long as I can keep it that way.”

“Might not be long, from what’s come across the cables.”

“Oh?” Donaldson pricked his ears up.

Another inhale and a bluish puff of aromatic smoke, and Sandys began speaking in a low voice. “The Russians are moving troops into the border regions with the Ottomans, along with the Austrians and Hungarians.”

“It’s a territorial grab,” Donaldson said dismissively. “Same thing they did back in ‘78.”

“More than that. The Ottoman Empire is not well –“

“Hasn’t been for decades. That’s hardly news.”

“One more push might be all it takes for a collapse. And when that happens, the Russians get dominance in the region, plus a warm-water port or several, putting their Navy on an equal footing with ours.”

“So what’s that got to do with us out here in Indian Country? Seems too far away to matter.” He could guess, but he was drawing Sandys out.

“Colonel, you’ve studied your history. Think strategically. European conflicts have a way of spilling over into your corner of the world. And vice versa, I might add. Wolfe’s victory over Montcalm ended the Seven Year’s War, and paying for that war led to your first Revolution.” Donaldson shrugged and conceded the point. “And of course British and French recognition of the Confederacy after the disaster at Sharpsburg – what the North calls Antietam – in the fall of 1862 successfully concluded your rebellion, although it took six months for the Union to face reality and negotiate the treaty.”

“So you’re worried that the Russians could move on California?”

“Yes, and not without assistance. The United States have never reconciled themselves to the Rebellion. We believe they may be plotting some sort of concerted action.” Which was logical, when he thought about it. Nicholas II, Tsar of all Russia, was one of the few European allies of note that the United States possessed, having lost the French Empire by default in ‘62.

“From where? Deseret? They’d have to get through the Mormons first.” The sundering of the Union and the need to protect a new boundary had lowered resistance to the Saints’ more notorious practices, and Brigham Young’s mini-empire had come into the Union, along with six other western states, in 1876, partly lifting spirits in an otherwise gloomy Centennial. But Deseret was still a nation within a nation, the joining to the Union more a matter of necessity, an insurance policy against Russian or British adventurism for the Union and for the Mormons.

"I wouldn't rule it out. Washington has been looking for an outlet to the Pacific for over a century. Lewis and Clark found the way, but the gold strikes at Fort Ross in 1839 kept the Russians in California and the Oregon Territory, just as they were thinking of giving it up and your people were thinking of moving west. After your army took New Mexico in '48, the North lost California in the Rebellion. Manifest Destiny has never gone away. It's just been bottled up for a half century." Sandys lifted the snifter of brandy from the railing. "It looks peaceful now. But I fear that will change."

"I hope not," Donaldson murmured. "I've grown too fond of this country. I'd hate to see a war here." But, as commander of the northernmost outpost of the Confederate States of America, forty miles south of Fort Ross, fifty from Novya Muscovy, even in the Year of Our Lord 1913, it was his job to be ready for just that.

&&&

"This makes a fine defensive position," Laurent said, putting the binoculars to his eyes. "I can almost hear them whispering their plans to one another." Fort Ross stood twenty miles north, home to the largest Russian military force south of Sitka, Alaska, five regiments of infantry, two cavalry, and assorted artillery.

Laurent was a tall dapper man with a thin mustache who hailed from New Orleans. The relaxed attitude that permeated the city seeped into its resident's genes. His polyglot upbringing meant Laurent lacked the vicious racism that characterized the poor piedmont whites. He was also free of the condescending paternalism of the rich Tidewater set, treating the troops as more or less equals. "Black or white, they still bleed red, *non?*" he'd told Donaldson one evening over a bourbon three months ago after his unit had arrived on horseback at their new posting. The 8<sup>th</sup> would be accompanying him on his reconnoiter today.

The huge fort had initially begun as a small mission north of San Francisco Bay, at Bodega Bay (renamed Rummyantzev) in 1812. The Russians relocated it south of the Bay in the early 1840s as a guard against American and British encroachment upon one of the most highly sought ports on the Pacific Coast of North America.

The border between the two nations was a frontier in the European sense, noted by concrete markers set on roads or trails, with guards posted only on major thoroughfares. It was wholly unlike the fortifications that demarcated Virginia from Maryland, or the breastworks and constant armed patrols that separated Kansas from Sequoyah.

"Too far forward," Donaldson said. "We'd be a bump in the road, leaving the rest of the coast open."

"Possibly suitable for a harassing force," said the senior sergeant who had joined them. Julius Tanner's bloodlines hadn't been corrupted by any Virginia planter tomcatting around the slave quarters in the dead of night; his skin was almost blue-black in the sun. "Maybe a squad or two with a Maxim gun, a few claymore mines, a mortar. Take a few out, then run. They drain off more men to search and secure the hill."

"Workable, if your horses are faster than theirs, and if you don't get encircled."

"Our horses are plenty fast, Colonel," Tanner said, his teeth a white contrast to the black skin. "Wild mustangs that we broke ourselves. They know the land, can live off it. And that ravine down

there is a natural path. They *have* to come through here. No other workable routes for mass movement within twenty miles.”

“Long as you’re willing to take the chance, Sergeant.”

“I’d insist on it, sir,” Tanner said firmly. He was a damned good soldier, and would make a superior officer, if only the C.S. Army would permit it. And therein lay the rub. Limited emancipation had come in ’73, transforming slavery into a form of serfdom. Filibustering in 1894-95 added Cuba, Puerto Rico and smaller Caribbean islands. Confederate assistance in assisting Maximilian I, the French puppet emperor of Mexico, had added the northern part of Mexico even after Maximilian had been driven from the throne.

The nation devoted to white supremacy thus quickly found itself a polyglot multiracial empire forced by reality and sheer numbers to make certain concessions that were never too closely examined nor debated. To permit blacks in the ranks was a concession to the reality that the Confederacy had swallowed up an enormous swath of territory running from the Atlantic to the Pacific in the War of Secession, and that the birthrate among Southern womanhood was far from sufficient to provide a police force. Colored troops were better suited to the tropics, seemed to fare better as new masters, and so the old inhibitions against darker skins had begun to slowly melt away among certain of the upper classes. The lower classes, most threatened economically, were another matter, and they tended to congregate in the American Party which had sprung up in the 1870s to end the Democratic party’s monopoly. But letting them into the brotherhood of officers was in the future.

They rode along the border, through a couple of small dusty towns that afternoon. Donaldson and Laurent took notes on the villages, relics of the Spanish occupation that had ended in 1848, not much more than a cluster of adobe hovels erected around a whitewashed adobe church, and not a word of English to be heard. Donaldson’s Spanish was passable, from his time in Veracruz, but Laurent spoke it fluently, along with French and Italian, as well he might, given his birth in New Orleans. They sized up the towns as defensive positions – not promising – and as supply depots – again not promising. The natives, Indian and *mestizo* alike were all too poor to do more than subsist day to day. That state of affairs suited the Confederate government in Los Angeles just fine, as a safeguard against uprisings.

He’d planned on the scouting expedition taking several days, and they made camp at the top of a hill near another village in the afternoon, as the sun was dipping toward the Pacific.

“We’ll bivouac here,” he told Tanner. “Post a guard. Captain Laurent and I are riding into town.” The campsite was out of the line of sight of the village.

“Yessir,” Tanner said, and turned to his task without saluting, a standard field maneuver. The man everyone salutes becomes the first target for a sniper.

“Reconnoitering?” Laurent asked as Donaldson opened up a saddlebag and pulled out a set of rough linen clothing, began stripping off his butternut field uniform.

“Of a sort,” Donaldson said. “Surveying the human terrain. Gathering intelligence.”

“No problem. You can sure enough pass for a Mex,” Laurent said. His Cherokee mother had given Donaldson the thick dark shock of hair and the dark complexion and chiseled features of an *indio*.

"You're close enough, too," Donaldson said, pulling a second set of clothing from the saddlebag, and threw it to Laurent. "And your Spanish is better'n mine."

"A matter of necessity, Colonel. Without it, I deprive myself of the company of the *senoritas* in the French Quarter."

Donaldson shook his head. Laurent was a womanizer, oozing Gallic charm, sliding from one beauty to another with ease. Donaldson had been a one-woman man, and ever since Miriam's death seven years ago, a no-woman man. "Change over, and we'll ride in." After donning the linen clothes, they removed all of the government-issue gear from the horses, leaving only the saddles, and slung their rifles over their shoulders.

The village was like any other Mexican-turned-American settlement, adobe huts around a church, dogs and children playing in the dusty streets, and a few signs of life now that the siesta was over. A line of adobe and timber buildings formed the nearest thing to Main Street to be found. Donaldson and Laurent tied their mounts to a post in front of a blacksmith shop. He could feel the heat from the door, and hear the hammering of steel on steel.

Next door stood a *cantina*, with a rough-hewn timber awning and swinging doors. Clusters of large red peppers hanging from the rafters gave off a pungent odor that almost forced a sneeze. "In here," Donaldson said. Watering holes were, by definition, the best sources of gossip and information to be found anywhere, populated by shadowy characters who dealt in secrets that he needed, their tongues loosened by liquor or sudden monetary losses at games of chance.

This establishment offered no such opportunity. The interior was plain, more adobe with a crude wooden bar at one end, unpainted shelving holding a variety of clear bottles with a variety of poisons, all lit by smoky kerosene lamps and obscured by a haze of smoke, some tobacco and a biting odor of cannabis. It was also empty of customers.

The bartender was a heavyset man with a thick mustache, dressed in a white tunic and dark trousers. "You order?" he asked.

"Whiskey, straight," Donaldson said in Spanish. "Two." He laid down a Confederate silver dollar. The bartender produced a bottle and two glasses that were, to his surprise, clean, and a silver half dollar. Donaldson poured two fingers for himself and Laurent and downed it. The whiskey was surprisingly smooth, not some locally made rotgut.

"*A donde va?*" the bartender asked.

"San Diego," Donaldson said.

"Passing through?"

"To Novya Muscovy," he said. "Business," he said in a lowered voice, implying the "business" wasn't exactly above-board. "Where is the best place to cross the border, without too much trouble?" Meaning away from the eyes of Confederate and Russian sentries.

"You'll want to avoid the *gringo* fort," the bartender said, "though most of them couldn't find their own asses with both hands." Donaldson repressed a smile at that, saw Laurent briefly bristle out of the corner of his eye. "There's a narrow road ten miles east of here, that's not too heavily traveled. The border guards are lazy —"

"Which ones?"

"Both the *anglos* and the *oso*," he said, using the Spanish term for *bear* for the Russians. "They can be bribed easily. Or they're too lazy to send out patrols to look for illegals."

"Really?" Donaldson asked, a smile on his face.

"*Si*. And when you get there, tell them to stop sending those fucking *Communistas*. They're a pain in the ass."

"Communists?" An exotic, European ideology that had gained some purchase in the North, with its industrialization creating huge gaps in wealth and envy among the urban lower classes, but it had withered and died south of the border.

"Idiots." He reached under the bar, pulled out a stack of newspapers and pamphlets. "I can't even read half of these, they're in Russian. And most of the people here can't even read Spanish."

"Why do you keep them?" Donaldson asked, staring at the indecipherable front page of a paper done in Cyrillic.

"My customers use them to wipe their asses in the outhouse," the bartender snorted. Donaldson flipped through a few, while he finished his whiskey. He pulled out a few pamphlets in Spanish, a couple more in Russian, one almost a book.

"Where did they come from?"

"Some *loco oso* comes riding through here two Saturdays ago. Stands on the steps of *la iglesia* here, shouting about fighting our oppressors, starts handing these out all across town, leaves some here."

"What did he look like?"

"Short, bald, funny little beard," the bartender said. "Dressed like he was heading for a funeral. Very strange."

"Mind if I take a few of these?" he asked. "It's going to be a long journey north. Hate to use poison ivy."

"Be my guest," the bartender said with a wave of a ham-sized hand.

They finished their whiskey, and left the cantina as velvet night was falling. "Interesting," Laurent said. "Now what?"

"We take these back to be translated," Donaldson said, getting a hard look in his eyes. "And I do a surprise inspection on the border guards."

Five days later, the border guards had been given proper re-motivation, taken off duty and assigned to a forced march/reconnaissance of some fifty miles in three days. Half of them had fallen out, and were promptly replaced. The other half had been given light duty by the camp doctor for severe blisters, sprains, shin splints, and other ailments that told Donaldson they'd gotten little too used to the easy duty.

On a Tuesday morning, then, Donaldson did morning formation and inspection after sunrise and morning reveille. He then motioned Laurent to follow him, and they walked to a door hidden away in an alcove in the northwest corner of the fort. 37<sup>th</sup> SIGNAL read a small wooden placard nailed to the door. Donaldson knocked, then entered.

A tall, horse-faced man with spectacles looked up over a stack of files and dispatches at his visitors. He stood and saluted, and Donaldson waved it away. "At ease, Harman. Where's the rest of your crew?"

"Laying new cables north of here, at the forward positions you marked for me. If we're attacked, it'll give us plenty of advance warning."

"Outstanding," Donaldson said. "How long will it take?"

"Ought to be done day after tomorrow, sir," Harman said, in his soft Virginia accent, sitting down. "You didn't come here for that, though."

"I didn't. You translated what we brought back?"

"Almost all of it, except for a couple of the broadsheets. Spent every night here deciphering this stuff. And it ain't easy, that's for sure. Reading Chekov or Tolstoy in the original Russian is one thing, but this Ulyanov character has them beat. The prose is almost incomprehensible in places."

"I don't doubt it," Laurent said. "It doesn't translate well into Spanish, from what I read on the way back in the saddle. Who is this fellow, anyhow?"

Harman shuffled some files, searching for something. His brow furrowed, and then lightened. "Ah. Here it is, right from Richmond yesterday. Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, Russian citizen, goes by the name 'Lenin.'"

"Never heard of him," Donaldson said.

"Not surprising. He's largely unknown outside certain radical circles. Here's what the *Okhrana* has on him. Born 1870, Simbirsk, Russia. Older brother hanged for assassination attempt on Tsar Alexander III in 1887. Expelled from Kazan University same year for causing a riot. Law degree from St. Petersburg University in 1892. Under constant surveillance first as the brother of a terrorist, then as a terrorist himself. Practiced law, but exiled to Siberia in 1897 for trying to finish his brother's work with the current Tsar."

"An anarchist?" Donaldson spat out the word. Anarchists had been around for years, but not until the assassination of President Gordon in Houston in 1891 had they been considered a threat.

"No," Harman shook his head. "A Communist." He held up a pamphlet, the red paper cover dog-eared, the writing in Spanish. "This is their Bible, so to speak. Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *The Communist Manifesto*. Written in 1848. Another one," another pamphlet with a green cover, "Essential principles of *Das Kapital*, 3000 pages boiled down to fifty by our friend Ulyanov. Pretty dense stuff. I took economics at Ole Miss, and hell, I can't understand half of it myself. Simply put, it gets down to the struggle between the exploited classes – laborers – and the exploiters – businessmen. It ends with the proletariat overthrowing the established order."

"I've read some of this," Laurent said. Donaldson looked at him, eyebrows raised. "Studied at Tulane, sir. Had some political science classes there, professor made us read it. Ol' Woody Wilson

had some pretty queer ideas on good government. I never believed a word of it. My question is," he turned to Harman, "how does this fellow Ulyanov think he's gonna start a revolution out here with a bunch illiterate peasants?"

"That's not the real danger, and you know it," Donaldson said, and left it there. All three men knew what he meant. Emancipation had been forced upon the Confederacy in 1873, one of President Lee's last acts in office, and one that only the architect of military victory and independence could make the nation accept.

Forty years later, the slaves were free but most still lived on the plantations as heavily indebted tenant farmers or hired workers. Southern leaders could point with pride to the condition of the freed slaves versus the squalid conditions that most wage laborers endured in the sprawling cities of the North. But the resentment was there, the economic deprivation and the denial of political participation was a pile of dry kindling waiting for a spark. "Is the Tsar sponsoring him?"

Harman spread his hands wide. "Damned if I know. All I can say is what we get through the channels from Fort Ross and Novya Muscovy is that the officials there are getting a bit concerned about him and his friends."

"If that's so, how did he get over here?"

"Like I said, he was exiled to Siberia in 1897, but didn't stay put. Kept winding up at all these Socialist conferences, London, Zurich, making speeches and accomplishing damned little. He got in on their little failed revolt back in '05, and the Tsar kicked his ass out of the world but good that time, sent him over here. Originally to Sitka, but he got in trouble by trying to rouse the rabble in the gold fields there. So he got sent down to Khlebnikov, just north of Novya Muscovy. They got *Okhrana* officers there keeping tabs on him. He began publishing a newspaper," Harman held up a ragged copy of a paper. "*Iskra*, or 'The Spark.' And penning these political and economic shinplasters. But he slipped away a few months ago."

"Any pictures?" Donaldson asked.

"One. It's old, but it's all we could get." Harman held out a fuzzy photograph, showing a balding man with a vandyke beard. Donaldson and Laurent looked at one another.

"Sounds like he's been riding the range out here," Laurent said, "trying to start a revolution."

"We could let him keep it up," Donaldson said. "Doesn't seem to be making much impact." He told Harman of the bartender's assessment.

"Too dangerous," Harman replied. "Richmond wants this man stopped." Donaldson had sent off a report on the matter the day after his return, and the reply had arrived by wire late last night, from the Secretary of War himself. With trouble brewing in Europe and the danger of a Russian grab for California, all fifth columns were to be eradicated in advance of hostilities.

"How you plan on doing that?" Laurent asked.

"Don't rightly know yet. But you're going to come with me."

&&&

The next day, Donaldson left his XO, Major Braxton Connelly, in charge of the fort. He and Laurent, dressed in homespun clothing, saddled up and rode out just after sunrise, heading north. Their saddlebags held rations of salt pork and flour for a week – in non-military tins and sacks. They carried civilian-design Richmond .30-06 rifles with Colt revolvers. They kept to the less-traveled trails inaccessible to motorcars, heading north.

“You got a plan for finding this fella?” Laurent asked around noon, as they broke for a lunch of canned salt pork and pinto beans; Laurent splashed his liberally with Tabasco sauce. The horses were watering in a small stream.

“Nope,” Donaldson said. “We ride until we find him. Follow a trail of badly written flyers, I reckon.”

“Maybe he’s out stirring up the Indians,” Laurent said. “They might attack travelers out in the open.”

“I’m not worried,” Donaldson said with mock severity. “Your skin might be dark back in New Orleans, but around here you’re just another paleface.” That got a laugh out of Laurent. “Way things are going, I reckon Ulyanov is riding these same trails, figuring if a war comes St. Petersburg is too far away to deal with him here.”

“So why are we heading to Fort Ross?”

“I think his main game isn’t grabbing more territory, I think it’s setting up his own little socialist paradise here. The stuff with the locals is just a diversion, Maybe the Tsar thinks Ulyanov’s trying to stir up some unrest on Confederate soil the *Okhrana* will leave him alone. If he succeeds, they get some more turf. He fails, they can disown him.”

“So how’s your Russian?” Laurent asked.

“Passable. Enough to get us around.” The academy required two foreign languages, preferably ones spoken on the Continent.

“Enough to keep us out of a jail?”

“Colonel Colt speaks all languages,” Donaldson said. They finished and mounted up again.

They were a few miles from the border when a rifle shot split the air. Dirt puffed in front of Donaldson’s horse, and he fought to bring it under control, finally succeeding. Laurent had his rifle at the ready, dismounting and seeking cover behind a rock, pointing to a low rocky ridge to the east. Donaldson slid off his mount, took the rifle from its scabbard and joined Laurent.

“See the shooter?”

“Just part of ‘im, sir.”

“Mex?”

“Or Indian. Hard to tell at this distance. We could be surrounded.”

“What this ‘we,’ paleface?” Donaldson said, showing a rare broad smile and a mischievous twinkle in his eyes. Laurent took it in stride.

They waited for several minutes. "They may have moved on," Laurent said. He took off his hat, put it on a stick and raised it slightly above the level of the rock, visible to the sniper. No shots followed the first.

"They've moved on," Donaldson said. "Standard tactic."

"Or they're very, very patient," Laurent countered.

"We'll see," Donaldson said, and crept around the rock, and tossed a small stone which landed fifty feet away. No shots, so Donaldson rose to his feet and ran to his mount. Again, silence. Laurent followed, and they headed off at a gallop to the ridge. The horses handled the grade with little difficulty, and they crested the ridge, halted. There were no other humans to be seen.

"Over there," Laurent said, pointing to the north. "Grass there is crushed, maybe two men." He dismounted, walked over to the area where the grass lay flat, got to his knees, searched around for a moment. His face brightened, and he held up a brass cartridge.

"It's not our Russian friends," he said. "The lettering is in English. A 30.06 caliber round." He raised his eyebrow.

"Standard caliber for U.S. government-issue Springfields," Donaldson finished. "A Northern patrol doing reconnaissance?"

"Wouldn't firing on us give them away?" Laurent asked. "They may be grasping, greedy self-righteous moralizers, but stupid they are not. Such would be considered an act of war."

"Right now there's people spoiling for a war. Maybe whoever it is wants to start one."

"Then perhaps they should send better marksmen, eh?" Laurent asked with a laugh.

"Or someone wants us to think it's Northern soldiers."

"Who? The Saints? Or maybe the Russians?"

"The Saints have a good deal, getting protection from Washington. As for the Russians, why would they invite an attack on themselves, have to fight a two-front war?"

"Who can tell with politicians and diplomats?"

Donaldson thought for a moment. "Someone is playing a different game here, for their own ends. And we won't find out who it is standing here and jawboning. Saddle up."

As they rode, Donaldson tried to puzzle out the political maze that was the border between Russian America and the Confederate States of America. He quickly concluded he much preferred the simple life of a soldier.

The Confederate States of America, upon the conclusion of the War for Secession in March 1863, had acquired all territory south of the 37<sup>th</sup> Parallel, from Indian Territory to the Pacific. The CSA had claimed areas south of the 35<sup>th</sup> Parallel in 1861, but after the victory at Glorieta Pass, New Mexico, in March 1862 and the smashing of McClellan's Army of the Potomac at Sharpsburg that September, the peace negotiators pushed and got the whole of New Mexico and Arizona territories; a separate treaty with Russia in 1869 formally set the boundary. The Confederacy thus

acquired California, an underdeveloped coastal area that had escaped the rapid development of Russian America to the north. California was an agricultural area, and the lush Central Valley had taken well to the cultivation of fruits and vegetables by plantation owners who had migrated westward, seeking new lands to replace the worn-out soil of Alabama and Mississippi.

The Confederacy had relied upon the Five Civilized Tribes in Indian Territory (later renamed Sequoyah upon its admission as a state in 1885), and as such had a slightly more enlightened Indian Policy than the old Union. The climate in the Southwest prevented large-scale agricultural settlement, as in the more hospitable lands to the east and north, and so the tribes in Arizona and New Mexico were largely left to their own devices.

Exchanging one foreign power, the Union, for another, the Confederacy, hadn't ameliorated the ill will that the Southwestern tribes felt after three hundred years of domination. And the idea of some *agent provocateur* stirring up domestic rebellion in the West while the two American nations were distracted with larger problems was not, the more he thought about it, in the least farfetched. It was, the more he thought about it, the most likely scenario.

They crossed the border early the next day on the narrow dusty path that barely merited the designation as a road. Up ahead, Donaldson spied a cloud of dust. He pulled his rifle from the scabbard, his Colt from the holster at his hip; Laurent did the same, and they slowed their mounts.

Over the hill came half a dozen riders. They were Indians, and clearly armed with rifles.

"Any idea what tribe they belong to?" Laurent asked.

"Nope," Donaldson said. "And if they don't speak Cherokee, we're clean out of luck." They halted their horses as the Indians drew near and halted their mounts twenty yards away. The riders were dressed in a mix of native and anglo garb, beaded shirts over denim trousers and boots. The rifles they held were new, the blued steel gleaming in the sun.

"Good morning," Donaldson said quietly but pleasantly.

One of the riders advanced warily, rifle held in one hand, the butt resting on his saddle. He was a large man, broad-shouldered, long graying dark hair tied back behind his head that spoke of Indian heritage. But his skin was lighter, and he sported a mustache, the result of the not infrequent intermarriage between Russian men exiled from home by edict or opportunity, and native women.

The Russians were not unlike the French in Canada, who had mixed with the natives and in some cases become members of tribes who had fully accepted the children of such unions. By contrast, the English colonists discouraged such unions, considered them badges of shame and shunned the children – this much Donaldson knew from personal experience. His Cherokee half had given him no end of trouble, and he'd had to prove himself with his fists more often than he wanted.

It all came down to what the colonists wanted. The Russians and French were interested in trade. The Spanish and then the English were interested in land. When you didn't have the predisposition to displace natives by any means possible – war or disease – then relations tended to be more harmonious. God only knew what California would look like had the Spanish remained here. Or, he thought grimly, had the Union and its grubby industrial hordes taken hold of it.

Their *laissez-faire* attitude had allowed the Russians to triumph over the British for control of the Pacific coast in the 1840s and 1850s. While The Great Game played out in central Asia, the two

powers grappling over Turkey and the Balkans, the Russians had allied with enough tribes to push John Bull and the Canadian border back to the Rocky Mountains.

“What business do you have here?” he asked severely.

“None here,” Donaldson replied. “Further north. Novya Muscovy.”

“What business?”

“I own a plantation near Los Angeles,” Donaldson said smoothly. “We have a vineyard there. I’m looking for opportunities to export. Novya Muscovy is the largest settlement in these parts.” At fifty thousand people, it was smaller than Los Angeles’ two hundred thousand, but it was the gateway to parts north.

“Hmm,” the Indian snorted. “Los osos won’t have anything to do with it. They have vodka.”

“I brought some samples,” Donaldson said. He’d packed a couple bottles of a wine ordered from a plantation down near LA and steamed the labels off. “You’re welcome to try some –”

“No.” The man sounded offended. The Russians hadn’t sought to ply the local tribes with alcohol the way the Americans had for three hundred years in an effort to break them and take their land. Novya Rossiya was more sparsely settled, and the settlers there were largely involuntary and content with small plots. “Why aren’t you traveling by boat?”

“This is cheaper.”

“Why aren’t you taking the main road?”

“This is more convenient.”

“Ah. I see.” The man nodded. “My name is Nikolai Charkov. You’re comin’ with us.” Six rifles were leveled in his direction, leaving the two officers with no choice in the matter.

Charkov’s small village hugged the coast, a small semicircular inlet dubbed Half Moon Bay. An old Spanish mission sat at the center of the village, a relic of the former occupiers who had been pressured first by the Russian-American companies and then dethroned by the Treaties of Guadalupe Hidalgo in 1848 and Los Angeles in 1869. Tilled fields surrounded the several dozen wooden lodges, and from the beach several docks with fishing boats moored to them stretched into the waters.

Charkov led them to the mission, where they tied their horses to a wooden railing. “In here,” Charkov said, motioning them to the door with his rifle. “We got orders to bring in suspicious characters and trespassers.”

“We’re traders, I told you.”

“Mmm,” Charkov said. “And on Russian territory, to boot. You look too good for traders riding up from Los Angeles. Only seen Army officers ride the way you do. Posture like you got a board in the back of your shirt, scouting the land, looking for things traders don’t know or care about.” He smiled. “That, and your hair’s too short. Now get in.”

The mission was dark and cool inside, and Charkov showed them to a small office in the back. He knocked, and received a muffled reply. He opened the door, poked his head in, said something in Russian. The voice replied in Russian, and Charkov swung the door open. Donaldson and Laurent entered the small office, lit by a kerosene lamp. Antique bookshelves stuffed with leather-bound volumes covered one wall. On the far wall hung a red flag with a yellow design. It took Donaldson a moment to identify it as a hammer imposed over a sickle, two tools he was intimate with from his boyhood in Sequoyah.

"Vladimir Lenin, I presume," he said in what he hoped was correct Russian to the short man seated behind the desk.

The man stood up. "You are correct. And by your accents, and direction, I assume you are both Confederate army officers sent to spy on us." He wore, incongruously, a three-piece suit with a red silk tie knotted perfectly, a gold watch chain dangling from his vest and a white silk handkerchief in his coat pocket.

Donaldson decided there was no point in continuing; he was disappointed that their ruse had been so quickly discovered. "We're officers. But we're doing a simple reconnaissance, and wandered over the border." As he said it, Donaldson knew it sounded weak.

Lenin barked out a short expletive that showed what he thought of Donaldson's explanation. "Then you are the enemy, or soon will be," Lenin said. "No doubt you were infiltrating behind Russian lines, to sabotage communications and transportation lines. Where are the rest of your forces?"

"None. Just us," Donaldson answered.

"Hah. Then they are in the saddle and heading this way even now," Lenin said, his eyes narrowing and glinting.

"Hardly. Nice little operation you have here," Donaldson said. "Planning on setting up your own country, do you?"

"I am the vanguard of a socialist revolution that will sweep away the imperialist capitalist forces in this land, and replace it with a true worker's state."

"Alone?"

"There are others who have gone forth to the masses to spread the word of the coming revolution," Lenin said confidently. "We coordinate our efforts."

"Looks kinda lonely to me," Laurent said in English, looking about the office.

Lenin's eyes flashed, a vein on his temple throbbed. "Charkov!" he bellowed, and their captor appeared at the door. "Take these two to the jail and secure them at once." Apparently he'd picked up enough English in his years here to understand Laurent.

Charkov motioned again with his rifle, and the two officers filed from Lenin's office. Charkov led them across the large courtyard of the village, across the dusty square to a low adobe building with bars in the windows. The rest of Charkov's party were inside.

"Touchy fellow," Donaldson said. "I think he is planning to set up his own little kingdom here."

“And they must be old Baldy’s own police force,” Laurent muttered, nodding his head towards Charkov and his comrades.

“Quiet,” Charkov warned. The two officers went inside the jail. The interior was dark, and as soon as their eyes adjusted they saw a crude setup, rough unvarnished wooden tables and chairs, and three cells at the back of the building. One cell held three locals who were sleeping off a drunk, from their prone boneless posture; the other held a man in a blue army uniform that Donaldson recognized as Russian. They were shoved into the middle cell, and the door clanked shut behind them.

Donaldson waited until Charkov left and only one of his crew remained, sporting a new Springfield rifle, bandoleros and a Colt at his hip. The guard put his feet on the rude desk, leaned back in the chair, and crossed his arms over his chest.

“How secure do these bars look?” Laurent asked.

“Don’t let it fool you,” Donaldson said. “There’s adobe buildings been around longer than you or me.” Donaldson kicked at the wall with no effect. “We had a pickax, that might do it.”

“I got a pocketknife in my boot,” Laurent said.

“Wait til he goes to sleep,” Donaldson replied, nodding at the guard.

“Excuse me,” said a voice in heavily accented English. It was the uniformed prisoner in the next cell. “You are American?”

“Of a sort,” Laurent said. “The Confederate variety.”

“Ah,” the prisoner said. He was younger, perhaps thirty, with dark hair and a large mustache. He was standing against the bars, and was slightly taller than Donaldson’s six-one, with a muscular build. “I am Captain Nikolai Yevgenevich Pomarov, with his Majesty the Tsar’s Army.”

“You were out scouting enemy positions, too?” Laurent asked.

Pomarov didn’t take the bait, though he did raise an eyebrow at Laurent. “I was traveling through this village, on my way to inspect border and coastal fortifications, when those Cossacks seized me and threw me in jail. When this report is transmitted to St. Petersburg —“

“It won’t be,” Donaldson said.

Pomarov deflated slightly. “I think Lenin is planning some kind of Revolution of his own.”

“That’s what we figured, too,” Donaldson said, choosing his words carefully. Fellow prisoner or not, Pomarov was still on the other side. And Donaldson was fairly sure that Pomarov hadn’t been out scouting fortifications, but was attached to the Okhrana and had been looking for Lenin. “Makes sense he wouldn’t want the Tsar to know what’s brewing out here.”

“That’s old Nick’s problem,” Laurent said dismissively, referring to the Tsar. “Any trouble here helps us.”

“You think Lenin is going to be stopped by an imaginary line?” Pomarov said. “The man’s talking about world revolution. He’ll start here, but California will be next.”

"He's right," Donaldson said; the wire from Richmond had reached the same conclusions. Tsarist forces might be able to crush Lenin's uprising. But the truth was that even in this supposedly enlightened time, of limited emancipation, that the Confederacy remained vigilant against possible insurrections. Gabriel Prosser and Nat Turner and the Stono River rebels back in the 1700s had etched a fear of the servile classes in the hearts of the plantation-born and bred who still ruled the South.

"So what do we do?" Laurent asked.

"For now, as long as he's awake," Donaldson said, indicating the guard, "nothing. Wait until night. Then we find a way out."

"And that would be?"

"We have plenty of time to figure that out. Until then, we amuse ourselves the best we can."

"Usually I read," Pomarov said. "But Lenin took my Pushkin volumes away. Called it 'reactionary and bourgeois romantic crap.'"

"Some people have no taste," Laurent said sympathetically, and then reached into one of the pockets in his shirt, produced a deck of cards. "Y'all play poker over in Russia?"

"I have heard of it," Pomarov said guardedly. An experienced card-player like Donaldson immediately sensed that Pomarov knew far more than he was letting on. "Perhaps you could teach me."

"Yeah, go easy on him," said Donaldson. "They don't pay their officers as well as we do."

"I will endeavor to show restraint, *mon colonel*," Laurent said.

Several hours later, Pomarov was in possession of a nice pile of Confederate paper money. Staid portraits of Jeff Davis and Lee and Longstreet mixed with tsars and empresses.

"I'm startin' to think maybe you've played this game before," Laurent said despairingly.

"Once or twice," Pomarov deadpanned. He began folding the money to tuck it into his tunic.

"You gotta give me a chance to win it back," Laurent said, pleading with Pomarov.

"You're in deep enough," Donaldson warned him off. "Face it, Jean, you've been had. Now give me that knife of yours." Laurent frowned, dug into his boot and withdrew a small bone-handled knife. He handed it to Donaldson, who began chipping away at the adobe while the guard dozed.

Fifteen minutes in, he had a small dent in the windowsill near the bars. If he kept at it, Donaldson figured, they might have one bar out by midnight.

"Slow going," Laurent observed.

"It might help —" Donaldson's voice was cut off by a distant *crump* and a whistling noise. "Take cover! Incoming!" he shouted, and the men dove against the walls. A moment later an explosion rocked the building, dust and pieces of adobe rained down on them. Another *crump* and whistling

noise, and the cell next to them disappeared in a roar of fire and shards of clay and timber splinters.

“That’s naval artillery,” Laurent shouted, but Donaldson could barely hear him. Laurent shoved against the fractured wall, causing a four-foot wide chunk to fall outward, and he climbed over the debris, through the adjacent cell, and back into the jail through the twisted and broken steel bars. The guard had been knocked unconscious or dead by the blast; Laurent took the keys and opened Pomarov’s cell.

Donaldson followed, took the guard’s rifle and ammunition, tossed the pistol to Laurent. Pomarov grabbed the keys from Laurent and unlocked the gun cabinet in the corner. He retrieved a rifle and cartridge case, as well as a pistol. “These are mine,” he shouted as another shell exploded outside, nearly knocking him to his feet. “Help yourself.” Laurent ducked in and took a Springfield from the cabinet, along with two boxes of shells. The three men ran out of the jail into utter chaos.

A crater marked the spot where the village well had stood in the square. Villagers were scurrying for cover, heading out of the town to the surrounding countryside. Charkov and his gang spilled out of the mission, weapons drawn. Pomarov skidded to a halt, took aim with his Mosin-Nagant, and hit three of men, Donaldson was quick on the draw, took out one with his Springfield, and Laurent dropped another. The last man threw down his weapon and fled around the side of the mission.

“Leave him,” Donaldson said. “We’ve got a more important quarry.” Guns drawn, they charged the mission and reached the doors as another shell hit an adobe house and turned it into a cloud of splinters and dust.

Lenin nearly bowled them over rushing out of his office, clutching a sidearm. He didn’t see the three men until it was too late. He abruptly stopped, began to raise the pistol, but thought better of it.

“Drop it nice and easy,” Donaldson said. Lenin tossed the revolver to the ground. “Good. You’re coming with us.”

“A prisoner? I expected to be shot.”

“I don’t shoot prisoners. Besides,” Donaldson said with a wry smile, “You may be useful yet.”

“I’m hardly scared. I’ve been in jails before, and always escaped,” Lenin said defiantly.

“Don’t make this more difficult than it has to be,” Laurent said menacingly.

“Wait,” Pomarov said. “Where’s my Pushkin?”

“That garbage? In the trash can in my office,” Lenin scoffed.

Pomarov looked as though he’d been shot, but darted into the office, and emerged a few seconds later with the two leather-bound volumes in one hand. “They cost me twenty rubles in St. Petersburg,” he admonished Lenin.

“A waste of money,” Lenin said.

“Move,” Donaldson ordered, and they guided him out of the mission. “Livery stable – where is it?”

“Down this street, at the end,” Lenin said. “If it hasn’t been hit yet.”

“Then we’d better hurry,” Donaldson said. They ran down the street, Laurent behind Lenin with his rifle trained on his back. The stables had not been hit, but the shelling had spooked the horses and driven off the proprietor and hands. The three officers found their mounts unharmed, saddled them up, and found a relatively calm horse for Lenin to ride. They rode out into the square. From the vantage point on horseback, Donaldson could finally look out into the bay. What he saw made him haul his mount to a halt.

“It’s the *Mallory*,” Donaldson said, pointing to a gray vessel several miles out on the sparkling smooth ocean. The Confederate battleship was surrounded by a host of smaller ships. He could spy several landing craft approaching the white beach below.

“If they’re shelling here. . .” Laurent began.

“Then we are at war,” Pomarov said dejectedly. “And I’m a prisoner.”

“No,” Donaldson said, shaking his head. “I’ll guarantee your safe conduct back to your unit.”

“You can do that?”

“A Confederate officer and gentleman always keeps his promises. But only if you allow Captain Laurent a rematch at the card table.”

“Done,” Pomarov said, relieved.

Donaldson turned to Lenin. “Give me your handkerchief,” he said. Lenin glared at him, but complied.

They rode to the beach, and arrived just as the landing craft beached themselves and Marines began wading ashore. When they saw Pomarov, the Marines leveled their Lee-Enfields at them. Donaldson waved the handkerchief at the Marines, and identified himself. “Ask Captain Stebbins. He knows me.”

“No need.” The voice belonged to the commander of the Marine detachment, a tall man who had the same dark coloring as Donaldson. “I was ashore when Stebbins traded a crate of Cubans to this man for three cases of wine. Damned fine stuff, by the way. Major Carlos Taylor,” he saluted Donaldson. “I’m in command of this landing force. I can figure out our Russian friend here, but who is that?” he pointed at Lenin.

Donaldson quickly explained the situation, and Taylor listened as the Marines formed up in squads. Taylor turned to a Captain, and gave quick orders to approach the village in two columns and take it. His second-in-command saluted, and led the Marines off.

“There won’t be much resistance,” Donaldson said. “The naval bombardment took care of that. So I take it we’re at war?”

“We are,” Taylor nodded. “Perhaps Captain Stebbins can explain that.” He ordered one of the landing craft to take the four men back to the *Mallory*.

They were escorted to the bridge of the battleship by an ensign in khakis. Stebbins, hunched over a large map in the center of the bridge, looked up and greeted Donaldson warmly.

“Harley, it’s good to see you again. Although I’m not happy about the circumstances. It’s war, then?”

Stebbins, a stout man with a gingery beard shot through with gray, nodded. “The Russians began a march on the Turks five days ago. The mutual defense treaties triggered a mobilization by the British and French. And we’re obligated to mobilize as well. We were in the neighborhood, so Richmond ordered us to seize a port here to support a defense of the border, possibly an attack on Novaya Muscovy. But you seem to have gotten the jump on all of us.”

“Unintentionally, I assure you,” Donaldson said. He briefed Stebbins on their mission, capture and escape while Lenin stood glowering in the corner.

Stebbins stroked his beard when Donaldson finished. “Since you promised our brother Pomarov here safe transit back to his unit, I won’t rescind that order.”

“Thank you, Captain,” Pomarov said gratefully. “Your actions will be noted.”

“We’ll wire to Fort Ross, have you taken there under a flag of truce. Godspeed, Captain.” Stebbins turned to Lenin. “Take him to the brig and put him under guard.” Two Marines escorted Lenin off the bridge down into the steel bowels of the ship to a string of curses in Russian. “I’ll wire Richmond, let them know we’ve captured a spy. They’ll probably want him taken back to LA and interrogated, if not shot.”

“Not so fast,” Donaldson said, with a far-away look. “I have an idea.”

&&&

Before he was escorted back to Fort Ross, Pomarov and Laurent had a rematch at the card table. Pomarov graciously allowed Laurent to win back most of his losses.

The next day, the Marines from the *Mallory* had secured a beachhead and supply ships began unloading supplies and temporary docks. Several cavalry detachments from Fort Stewart, including Laurent’s, arrived the next morning to provide security for the perimeter. Donaldson and Laurent went ashore to confer with their subordinates, and by the afternoon the situation was well in hand. The Confederate Army was prepared to meet any advance by the Russian Army from Fort Ross.

At evening on the second day, they returned to the ship. The brig was below decks and aft, close to the engine room. Two Marines were posted outside the metal hatch. Donaldson and Laurent entered and found Lenin seated on the small bunk, an empty metal tray on the floor. He was furiously scribbling away on a sheaf of paper with a pencil nub. A stack of lined sheets sat neatly in the corner.

“So, the time has come to make me, as you say, walk the plank?”

“We’re not planning on making a martyr out of you, no matter how much you want it,” Donaldson said, leaning his frame against the wall – *bulkhead*, he corrected himself, now that he was on board a naval vessel. “Actually, we were planning on releasing you.”

Lenin looked surprised, but the look of relief was replaced immediately by one of suspicion. "There are conditions, no doubt."

"We're not going to let you run loose in Novya Rossiya again," Donaldson agreed. "But that's doing you a favor."

"Not let me continue my work?"

"Be honest," Donaldson said. "How much progress were you making with the *indios* and Mexicans?" Lenin remained silent. "The problem I see, from reading your works, is that you depend upon a large proletariat, meaning a large working class. Translation – you need a lot of beat-down factory workers taking poverty wages back to a run-down tenement house with a dozen squalling brats in it living on bread and water, if they're lucky. Working in lousy conditions, losing arms and legs. It just isn't here."

"There were the workers in Novya Muscovy," Lenin said.

"Mainly dockworkers and some light industry like fishing and canning. You got what's left of the miners, but most of that played out back by the end of the war. Didn't work any better up in Sitka, did it?"

"Tell him what they were using his pamphlets for," Laurent suggested with a lazy grin, and Donaldson hushed him.

"Closest thing to what you need is further south, in the Central Valley areas south of here. Lot of Mexicans and freedmen working on the plantations, harvesting cotton and vegetables. But they're a pretty conservative lot, like most peasants."

"So what do you propose to offer?" Lenin asked defiantly.

"You want an urban proletariat, we're happy to give you one. There's a war going on in Europe right now, the British and French Empires against the Russian Empire along with the German and Balkan states. Naturally, we're getting dragged into it, so that pits the Confederacy against the Union again. You want an urban proletariat, you got it. I propose to put you on a train here in California, with a ticket clear to Chicago. Lots of oppressed laborers there with all the class consciousness you could hope for, and a fair amount of them speak Russian so you won't have as much trouble being understood."

"It's a start," Lenin admitted hesitantly.

"I'll sweeten the pot," Donaldson said. "Ten thousand dollars in gold, to finance your little revolution."

"Fifty."

"Twenty-five thousand," Donaldson said.

"Thirty."

"Done." Donaldson had been authorized to go as high as forty by the War Department, but only if he had to.

“When do I leave?”

“How long is it going to take you to pack?”

It took an hour to collect the few personal items and clothing from his quarters at the mission. Three days later, Donaldson and Laurent put Lenin, with a half dozen armed guards, on a military transport car hastily added to a freight express headed east on the Transcontinental line from Los Angeles to Nashville. From there the train would then head north to Chicago.

“I get a bad feeling about this,” Laurent said gloomily as they watched the train depart in a storm of black smoke and cinders. “We may have thrown away thirty thousand in gold to a con man. Or there might be something to all of his revolution talk. I read it myself, and if I was a dumb bohunk making five bucks a month, it’d sound pretty good.”

“I agree. I’m planning on that.”

“This is just supposed to cause trouble in the rear for the Yanks, but what if he actually succeeds?”

Donaldson gave a dismissive wave of the hand and laughed. “Relax,” he told Laurent. “Lenin is dedicated, but far too obtuse for most American’s tastes. Nobody here would ever fall for Communism. What’s the worst that could happen?”

**\*\*\*\* THE END \*\*\*\***

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