


*The Rondout Reader*  PRESENTS

# Stories for a Coffee Waitress



by Kevin Ahearn

*For Erica*

*"Take me to a place I've never  
been and tell me a new truth!"*

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## A Ten-Minute Play



# BIRTHMARK

*"The scariest moment is always just before you start."*

Stephen King (*On Writing*)

Set: Small city apartment. Desk and chair at center stage.

WRITER enters: (Late 20s, carrying a brightly colored shopping bag holding a package)

WRITER: (Holding shopping bag high, gazing up at it.) "Let's hear it for 'The Spirit of 76'. Thirty percent off with a full-year warrantee!"

**Bam! Boom! Blam!** (Firecrackers exploding outside.)

WRITER: (Startled by the noise) "Happy Two Hundredth, America. In one day you'll blow off more gunpowder than Washington needed to win the Revolution."

WRITER: (Removing package from the fancy shopping bag) "Sweet Baby, let's see you without that bag. My destiny in a plain brown wrapper!

WRITER: (To the wrapped box.) "Top of my high school class, then a State scholarship, grad school. Aced the teachers' exam, got a job ten minutes away.

"Students and parents hope I'm there till I retire. After a number of misfires, I'll meet the love of my life, marry, buy a house in the suburbs, have kids and grandchildren. I'll earn love and respect and having lived a proper life, rate a photo with my obit.

WRITER: "Not enough!"

**Bam! Boom! Blam!** (Firecrackers exploding outside.)

WRITER: (Startled again by the noise.)

WRITER: (Calming down, gently unwrapping the package.) "I can't wait to touch you, to hear you clicking and clattering in my *fire*, my ever-burning creative spirit, my need to step up and out beyond myself to *make* humanity take notice!"

WRITER: (Opens box. Takes out new electric typewriter.) "Come to me, Sweet Baby, to the man who's going to passionately pound you *everywhere* at all hours of the day and night!

WRITER: (To Typewriter) "A high number in the lottery kept me out of Vietnam. During the Civil Rights Movement, I was the editor-in-chief of my college newspaper and wrote a series of 'heartfelt' articles. A 'literary light' with a Masters degree, it's time to fight for my future!"

(WRITER sets up typewriter and plugs it in. From the top right drawer, he takes out a fresh piece of paper. The instruction booklet in one hand, he strikes each key.)

WRITER: "Foreplay, Sweet Baby, awakening your every spot *before* we get serious."

WRITER: (To Typewriter) "'Very interesting and well-written!' teachers have been saying about my papers since fifth grade. Read a pile of classic books and taken all the advanced courses. Finally I'm ready, my creative spirit aflame!"

WRITER: "I want to go on living after my death! Like Anne Frank, all alone in my little room, one day my words will stun the world!"

**Blam! Boom Bam!** (Firecrackers louder, closer.)

WRITER: (Shocked by blasts close by, rubs forehead, shakes head as if deeply affected.)

WRITER: (Calm again, pulls out warm-up sheet, slaps in a new sheet of paper.)  
"Yeah, Sweet Baby, our time is at hand!"

WRITER: (Rubs hands together, then stares into his palms. A pause as his fingers near the machine.)

*GHOST appears. Draped in black veils, a man, but we cannot see his features.*

GHOST: "Wait! Don't touch those keys!"

WRITER looks around the room. "What?"

GHOST: "Stop, *now!* Paint, draw, sculpt, play the guitar, but please, I'm begging you, don't write!"

WRITER, (Squinting into every corner and then detects a floating nothingness in front of him.) "A kind of rippling in the air...like a black cloud over a toaster at breakfast.

"Who, *what* are you?"

GHOST: "I am...Who you could not possibly foresee."

WRITER: (After a pause) "Holy blank-e-tee, blank, blank!"

GHOST: (Looks to audience) "..."

WRITER: (Taking a bit to find himself.) "Well, thank God you're not Dad. He died without ever seeing me grow up. Or Mom, she'd be in full regalia with a twenty-dollar hairdo.

"Aha! A dark Angel Gabriel, announcing the arrival of ..."

GHOST: "...."

WRITER: (Feigning a furious drumroll.) "And the winner is..."

GHOST: "Not Jude either. You're a 'hopeless cause', but I'm no patron saint."

WRITER: "What do you mean? I *am* going to be a writer!"

GHOST: "Only you will ever think so."

WRITER: "How do *you* know? Unless, you're... 'The Spirit of Independence Days Yet to Come.'"

GHOST: "Days *without* independence, of a lifetime chained to your 'career'. I've come to spare you volumes of frustration and heartbreak."

WRITER: "How?"

GHOST: "Don't write. Don't even begin to try to. Still got the receipt? Repack that typewriter. Return it and get your *life* back!"

WRITER: "Give up *before* I begin?"

GHOST: "'Writing' is *always* a beginning, to keep you going, and, at the end, you'll find out you never had the heart to *be* a writer."

WRITER: "Oh, c'mon. One short essay and then maybe....At least, let me try."

GHOST: (Raising his arms menacingly.) "No! Stop now forever. One touch of those keys and the dream will take over your blood!"

WRITER: (Rubbing his chin in thought) "An apparition, an *app* from the future? Somebody I'll know who'll die years from now, *warning* me...*Who*? One of my college profs? But everyone said what 'great potential' I had."

GHOST: (Harshly) "You were expecting Hemingway or Faulkner, Steinbeck or Fitzgerald? They get talented young people to inspire. You got me."

(*One of the 'veils' slips from the GHOST revealing half his face and his right arm. He holds a spent pipe. His face is pasty-white. He wears 'Clark Kent' eyeglasses. A full head of long gray hair and bushy mustache. His 'Jack-o'-Lantern teeth never got dental care.*)

WRITER: "You're...materializing like a grainy Polaroid black and white. What if one of my neighbors shows up? Or are you a 'Cosmo Topper' ghost, exclusively for me?"

GHOST: "Appearing solely for a one-man show. Too bad you'll never develop."

WRITER: "Like your ever did? *App* of the failed writer, here to sabotage the 'intelligent *and* creative' young man from *becoming*..."

GHOST: "And whom would you become?"

WRITER: "My own writer! Successful, respected 'cause I have something real to say about the human experience."

GHOST: (Mockingly) "Oh, Last Lamp of Literature, save your final flame for this idealistic dreamer."

WRITER: (Angrily) "Hasn't Woody Allen done you already? 'Cause you don't scare me. Too smart for that. I do *Jumbles*, cryptograms, and crossword puzzles in ink. I'm *qualified!*"

GHOST: "For what? Writing's an ongoing *application*, and when all the blanks are filled in, your spirit lives on the page or nobody does."

WRITER: "You never became. You stayed a 'nobody', didn't you?"

GHOST: (Riled up, poking his pipe.) "Not without a fight, a lifelong battle to break into print. I wrote and wrote and rewrote and rewrote for more than forty years. My novel, an autobio, and an anthology, plus dozens of other pieces...articles, reviews, essays, anything to be read! And never, in all that time, was I ever paid a penny for *my* writing! Plenty of failed writers out there, I was a worthless one!"

WRITER: "You never sold *anything?*"

GHOST: "Okay, okay, so I once got twenty bucks as a newspaper stringer for a 'sports/charity' piece, but they never bought another one."

WRITER: "'Alas, poor ghost!'"

GHOST: "I was whom I became. Born at the dawn of the Atomic Age, well bought up and schooled. But I was educated by comic books, television and science fiction movies."

WRITER: "Tell me about it! I saved my childhood comics. One day they're gonna be worth a fortune. Saw *King Kong* and *The Thing* fifty times on TV. Got the tapes, can watch them any time on my VCR."

GHOST: (Emphatically) "Writing is on the page! Thought myself so smart and original and clever, *above* the crap being published. Dedicated, determined, disciplined, I set out fully equipped...Where're your scissors and glue?"

WRITER: "For what?"

GHOST: "See what I mean? Better you never learn how to cut and paste. In the beginning I didn't know that I didn't know what I was doing, but I wasn't going to 'follow in the footsteps of Great Writers' or seek the style of any 'Grandmaster', not looking to fit in, I'd be a trailblazer!"

"I had my own visions of what the world was and where it was going. Trails and errors perfected my language skills and idiomatic nuances. I had a crafted style, a unique individual in the universe. Brimming with confidence, I sent out my masterpieces!

"I lived from submission to submission, awaiting that magic moment when I'd be 'discovered', a blazing new star in the literary world."

WRITER: "And...?"

GHOST: "Very interesting and well-written, *but*, the replies would say...from publishers, magazine editors, agents. Dozens, scores, hundreds, thousands over the years. In the mail, over the phone, in person at writers' conferences. I became the most rejected author in the history of American Letters."

WRITER: (Sincerely) "I'm sorry."

*(Another 'veil' drops from GHOST. His long-sleeve shirt is tattered and his jeans have holes on both knees.)*

GHOST: "You're sorry? You have no idea how sorry you're going to be. *Writing* is an obsession, a curse! Being a man, a lover, a husband and a father will always be second-string. The 'only thing': 'What do you think of *my writing*'?"

WRITER: "But I'm different! Worked hard on my language skills and vocabulary. I'll write and I'll write, rewrite and rewrite."

GHOST: "Oh, how I know you will, but you will fail miserably."

WRITER: "No! Not me! I'm better and smarter than you ever were!"

GHOST: "Are you? You're in love with the *idea* of writing, your own exclusive solitary act on the literary stage, the romance of the struggling creator alone, questing for his original truth."

WRITER: "What's wrong with that?"

GHOST: "Too late I realized that a writer must never be alone."

WRITER: "So I'll meet a nice girl who'll be bright and supportive."

GHOST: "Fool! Not talking about your love life. So hung up on your perceived brilliance, you'll be oblivious to the most important person in the world...the *reader*! Writing for you will be a classroom exercise, a self-promotion to show off your style and technique, all brain and no heart!"



WRITER: "Because that's what you did?"

GHOST: "Too late I realized that writing is an art and a skill, but storytelling...*storytelling is a quest for intimacy.*"

WRITER: "With whom?"

GHOST: "Before you conjure up 'an original concept' or 'thrilling plot' or 'cute gimmick', instead *imagine*...the most beautiful woman in creation, a siren, a goddess, a supermodel!"

WRITER: "For a sex fantasy?"

GHOST: "No. You and she are not in bed, but together on the most sensuous place of all...*the page.*"

WRITER: "And then?"

GHOST: "Don't come on with your superior intelligence, your talent or experience. The encounter is not one of seduction or conquest. Don't push to impress."

WRITER: "..."

GHOST: "Leave your literary ego in the inkwell and open yourself up. Tell your truth in your own confident 'voice' -- Engage, enlighten, amuse, enrage, encourage, thrill, but most of all, *touch*...by writing more for the reader than about yourself."

"Be enjoyed, trusted and remembered. Make the reader *imagine*. Otherwise, you'll be left alone, lying on the page, forever unread."

WRITER: "Like you?"

GHOST: "Worse, far worse. I learned to live with rejection to the point where I'd be expecting a turndown no matter what I wrote. Then I was just ignored, by the industry, even family and friends. And in the end..."

WRITER: "How did you get here?"

GHOST: "I made a deal, upped my departure date for the chance to come back."

WRITER: "You quit?"

GHOST: (Softly) "Yes."

WRITER: "Gave up?"

GHOST: (Softly) "Yes."

WRITER: "Then killed yourself... to appear only to me?"

GHOST: "Yes."

WRITER: "*Why?*"

GHOST: "I was already long dead. My inner fire...you're either burning or you're out. I was done cold. Not a spark even smoldering, and not enough Social Security to keep me *and* the dog alive."

WRITER: "A *dog?*"

GHOST: "Loyal to a fault. I was the one who no longer mattered. The world had changed and I never bothered to. Nobody reads anymore. Instead, we're watching and being read to.

"The printed word is going the way of the dinosaur, and soon, those 'fossils' no longer recycled will be converted into energy, 'The Last Lamp of Literature.'"

WRITER: "The dog went to a good home, right?"

GHOST: "Made sure of that before...(With sudden anger) You mean, you can't feel my pain, can't *identify* with me?"

WRITER: "Not for my life, you poor pathetic old hack, whining about your meaningless existence, insisting I'll do no better. But why me? What gives you the right to return from the grave to run my life?"

*(The last 'veil' falls from the GHOST. A beaten, broken old man stands fully exposed.)*

GHOST: (Removing his glasses.) "You don't get it, do you? Look at me."

WRITER: (Looking) "Well?"

GHOST: "Look harder, see with your heart and soul!"

WRITER: (Eyes widening.) "My God, no! You can't be..."

GHOST: (Pointing at WRITER) "Yes, I am *you!* So stuck on yourself and your great talent, I'm whom you're going to become!"

WRITER: "No. You're a fake, a mirage, an *app*. No way I'll ever turn into you."

GHOST: (Unbuckling his belt, and dropping his jeans.) "See for yourself."

WRITER: "No, please. Not on the rug. Use the bathroom."

GHOST: (Jeans halfway down, points to a spot, a smudge the size of a fingerprint above his right knee.)

"Behold irrefutable proof. Mom called it 'unique', remember?"

WRITER: "*My* birthmark! Then..."

GHOST: "I am who you'll be. You've seen your fate. Care to change it?"

WRITER: (Stares at the typewriter keys, then his hands.)

GHOST: (Frustrated!) "My God! I'm not listening, never did, not even to myself."

WRITER: "As Mom used to say, 'Get to the point!'"

GHOST: (Pleading) "Pull the plug on that damning machine and throw it out the window.

GHOST: (Suddenly shuttering) "You've got more fingers and toes that you'll ever have readers! Put your fire *out*."

WRITER: "But, I..."

GHOST: (Being pulled to stage left.) "Kill it dead now or it will consume you for...ever...!"

GHOST exits.

**Blam! Boom Bam!** (a barrage of firecrackers)

WRITER: (Seemingly back to his senses, but stunned, unable to speak.)

(Long pause)

WRITER: (Looks all around, then talks to Typewriter) "'There's no place like home' just doesn't cut it. Instead of Christmas morning, what if 'Mr. Scrooge' had awakened in the afternoon on Independence Day?

WRITER: (To the typewriter) "And if Hamlet had lived to be an old failed king, then his ghost travels back in time to save *himself*?"

WRITER: (Reaches out to gently caress the rim of Typewriter) "To be? **Y slash N**. Do I begin chasing my 'impossible dream' knowing I'll be like *Don Quixote*, charging at windmills for the rest of my life?

WRITER: (Stroking the slim sides of Typewriter) "'Not so fast!' said the Great and Powerful OZ. 'Not so fast!'

WRITER: (Fingers fluttering all *around* the keys.) "First off, I'll be taking better care of my teeth. Second, no pipe. Maybe a dog. Definitely feeling the reader.

WRITER: (Hands firmly gripping the slim Typewriter) "'Cause now, I've got...a *story*."

WRITER: (A quick rub of the chin.) "But I'll always be a 'nobody'."

WRITER: "Bah, humbug, Sweet Baby! (Fingers touch lightly the Typewriter's keys) "You're either burning or you're out!"

WRITER: (Starts typing.)

**Bam! Boom! Blam!** (Firecrackers exploding outside.)

WRITER: (Keeps typing.)

(Curtain)



# VIRTUAL GODDESS

## *Being Your Maker*

*In the world of King Arthur and Camelot, lightning and thunder rule the storming heavens, while atop a castle tower...*

*"Death to Angela of Shepherd!" says the bearded giant, wielding a battle axe.  
"The princess who made war fashionable!"*

*"Not till I'm old and gray," says Angela, 25 and beautiful, blocking his blow with her broadsword. "And fat from eating potatoes grown on your grave."*

*The Knights of the Round Table watch in awe. All know better than to interfere.*

*With a skillful thrust, Angela runs the giant through and draws cheers.*

*The battle won, Angela is the toast of the victory celebration, but when it comes time to visit the privy..*

“I can't take this *shit!*” said Angela Shepherd.

### **STOP PROGRAM — REBOOT**

*A South Sea Islander, Angela Shepherd, 25, clad in a white bikini, strolls along the unspoiled beach. The sun is shining. The sand feels warm and pure. And for lunch...*

“Ugh, seafood!” said Angela Shepherd. “Sunburn, sand, and salt water.”

### **STOP PROGRAM — REBOOT**

*Angela Shepherd, ambitious executive, addressing corporate meeting. She'll shake them up! In gray flannel suits, the all white male board laughs in her face.*

“Oh, well,” said Angela Shepherd. “It was worth a try.”

### **STOP PROGRAM — REBOOT**

*Angela Shepherd, long straight hair and 'love beads,' smoking dope, drinking tequila and making eyes at a hippie folk singer. This is cool! Suddenly she bolts and vomits out the nearest window.*

“Those were *not* the days,” said Angela Shepherd.

### **STOP PROGRAM — REBOOT**

*At last, the gigantic spaceship taking humanity to the stars is ready to lift off. With a winning smile, Command Pilot Angela Shepherd calms her anxious crew. But when the fusion engines roar to life, her face pales with fear. A mile off the earth, she's totally terrified.*

“No way!” said Angela Shepherd.

### **STOP PROGRAM — REBOOT**

*Angela Shepherd composes herself. She can do this. Isn't this what she always wanted, what everyone who ever lived ever wanted, especially men?*

*Reception will be instantaneous to ten billion people in more than a hundred languages. The introduction plays... "United Peoples of Earth, our Supreme Ruler, Angela Shepherd..."*

*"My fellow Earthlings," she begins...*

*"Oh, please!" said Angela Shepherd.*

### **STOP PROGRAM — REBOOT**

*"Good morning, beautiful," says Thomas, handsome and successful in his late twenties. "My turn to make the coffee."*

*On the porch overlooking the ocean, they have a healthy breakfast.*

*"How much longer will we last?" she asks. "A year, a month, a week?"*

*"Well, considering that you're the woman of my dreams," says Tom. "A beauty of intelligence, wit and grace, I'm playing with house money. Never thought I'd actually get to touch you. I'm treasuring every minute."*

*She kisses him for that.*

*"Something's wrong," she says. "I can feel it."*

*"Such is Super Bowl Friday," he says. "Football widows with the big weekend coming."*

*She tells him the ten-point underdog will win by three touchdowns.*

*"Huh? You're not a fan, yet you're talkin' like you know."*

*"I do know!" she says. "That's what's wrong."*

*Angela drives her five-year old car to a small Pacific Coast high school. She's the most popular teacher, but why does she feel like she doesn't belong?*

*Angela tells her first period class who will win the Super Bowl and by what score. Her prediction is the buzz of the school. She turns down party invitations and watches the game at home with Tom. When the final gun sounds, she is right down to the last point!*

*"Nobody saw this coming," says the TV announcer. "Nobody!"*

*"How?" asks an astonished Tom.*

### **MALFUNCTION — CANNOT REBOOT PROGRAM**

"Damn!" said Angela Shepherd.

*Thunder shakes the sky. Jagged twists of lightning turn night into an eerie dawn again and again. Angela is terrified. Tom holds her close. What's wrong with the world?*

*The sun brings a fresh new day. Angela is still afraid. Why is it she knows so much? In class, one look at the map and she sees catastrophes coming for country after country. Floods, earthquakes, wars! How does she know this stuff? Why? Closer to home, she tells her class that the state governor will soon be indicted in a sex scandal. But she has no connections in politics, how could she...?*

### **UNAUTHORIZED DATA INSERTION — PROGRAM DECAY IMMINENT**

"Me and my big ideas," said Angela Shepherd.

*The story breaks that afternoon and the sky turns orange, then red. Angela and Tom get in her car just as the media arrives at her house. She races away, faster and faster. Six vans chase after them. Two helicopters join in. What's happening? She can't believe her eyes. Houses and trees and fields and mountains on both sides of the road are... disappearing. It's as if they are made of snowflakes and are blowing away in the wind.*

*"Down to the last minute," says Tom. "Whose game are we playing?"*

*Before her eyes, he decomposes and vanishes.*

*Faster, faster, her car begins to break up into pixels and bytes. The steering wheel dissolves in her hands. The red sky goes whirlpool. Her car is gone, but she is speeding at a gaping maw on the horizon. In a flash she is through to...where?*

### **UNAUTHORIZED DATA RETRIEVED - PROGRAM ABORTED**

Angela Shepherd was alive in a big white room. A hospital? A laboratory? A morgue? She went to the door, but as she tried the knob, her hand passed through it.

*"What am I?" she cried. "What's happened to me?"*

Had she died and become a ghost? She walked through the door into a hallway and kept going. At the end was another door. Without feeling anything, she went through it.



The old woman lay on the bed surrounded by an array of machines. Tubes ran into her nose and out of her chest. She seemed calm and concentrated on the tech board in front of her, stroking it with her fingers. Angela stared. Whose wrinkled, bloated face could that be? And the eyes, those eyes! No, it couldn't be!

*"Hello,"* was all Angela could say.

"I'm so sorry, dear," said the old woman, her voice somehow familiar. "This wasn't supposed to happen. I got adventurous and upped the program a bit over parameters. I was hoping to get away with it, for your sake and mine."

*"Are you... God?"* asked Angela.

"Heavens no!" said the old woman. "But I am your creator."

*"How?"*

"DNA coding via matrix," said the old woman. "I souped up the given ingredients. You know me, always pushing the envelope. Made you prettier than I ever was."

*"I'm what?"*

"Now, don't get upset," said the old woman, the tubes in her nose jiggling as she spoke. "I tried my best and then some to find you, and me, the perfect afterlife. Again and again I put you in a world where I hoped you'd fit in as I never had."

*"Who are you?"* asked Angela.

"I am... you," said the old woman. "I'm Angela Shepherd."

*"No, no, no. I'm Angela Shepherd,"* she insisted.

"Of course you are," said the old one. "You've got my spirit in you. Except for flesh and blood, you're more woman than I ever was."

*"Why? Why did you do this to me and yourself?"*

"Because I could," said the old woman with a toothy smile. "At first there were only a few simple worlds to enter, as crude as the old Pong games. Competition being what it is, the offered environments grew by leaps and bounds as others jumped into the market. Pretty soon everybody was leaving their DNA encryptions to be phased into **Afterlife**... Put it in their wills guaranteeing themselves spots in worlds still in Research and Development."

*"Immortality inside a machine?"*

"But it seems I went a tad over program."

*"What do you mean?"*

"I was never satisfied with who I was. Never got what I really wanted. I wasn't going to bequeath you my flaws and failures for all eternity."

*"How did I get here? How am I?"*

"My fault," admitted the old woman, having trouble getting her words out. "I added a few info files to give you an edge in the program I'd chosen. **Afterlife** got wise. Their security's getting damn relentless. They tracked you down and kicked you out."

*"But...I was happy. I was in love."*

"Love" said the old woman. "Like it's the 'Garden of Eden,' swear off apples and all will be Kosher. Picture yourself and 'Mister Right' at the base of a sheer cliff. Were you both ready to climb every day?"

*"We were trying,"* said Angela, her voice cracking.

"Don't you dare cry on me! You're not a little girl any more. No woman ever wants to hear herself crying," said the old one. "I gave you a push that I never gave myself. I didn't want you to be who I was all over again."

*"I was expelled for cheating?"* said Angela. *"But I didn't do anything."*

"And you wouldn't have. Life's about doing things, going places, *feeling*. I never lived enough. I wanted you to."

*"Didn't you have any children?"*

"Three. My son's 'Afterlifing' in World War Two. He never did get the chance or the guts to fight for something he believed in. Bet he's a real hero now. My twin daughters are saving up to get the Deluxe Future Worlds. Such is life and beyond in the Twenty-Second Century!"

*"More like the Middle Ages,"* said Angela, the programmed history teacher. *"Living one's life solely to prepare for the afterlife."*

"Don't mock your creator!" retorted the old woman, her thin, frail body shaking as she spoke. "You have no idea what **Afterlife** means... Humanity no longer fears death. The risks we can take, the sacrifices we can make, knowing the life of our dreams awaits us after we leave here."

*"A self-created heaven?"*

“And elsewhere,” said the old woman. “Capital punishment is no longer a necessary deterrent. When a life sentence is up, the convicted’s DNA is sent to a hellishly programmed place.”

“*My God!*” said Angela. “*And the Devil, too.*”

“You weren’t supposed to find out,” said the old woman. “It’s the unknowing that makes **Afterlife** real. I wanted too much and got caught.”

“*You can send me back? Make me unknow? Isn’t that who you want to be, an ignorant ghost of yourself playing in make believe?*”

“I wouldn’t understand either,” admitted the old woman. “That’s how we got into this mess.”

“*My life!*” said Angela. “*I want to make my own decisions.*”

“Don’t we all? I remember back then. I felt the same way.”

“*But if I’m you, or who you always hoped you’d be, you can’t leave me like this,*” pleaded Angela. “*What I am now is no life, **Afterlife** or otherwise.*”

“Don’t be bitter,” the old woman said, her tubes rumbling as she spoke. “That’s the me you were never supposed to become.”

“*Who have I become? Your recreated self sent to live an unreal life in an imaginary world.*”

“Better than I’ve got here, wouldn’t you say?”

“*What you’ve got is real. Who you made me isn’t.*”

“Look at me!” ordered the old woman. “Would you have done any differently?”

“*I’m sorry,*” said Angela. “*Can you blame me for only thinking of myself?*”

“How could I? After all, you are me.”

“*Will I always be?*” asked Angela.

Suddenly, a bell rang and lights flashed and half the room’s machines began to whir.

“Oh, no!” cried the old woman. “Not... not now!”

“*What’s wrong?*”

“Technology has done all it could,” gasped the old woman. “My time is up.”

*“Oh, no. Why do I always wait till the last minute to do everything?”*

“It’s somewhere in our DNA. I’ve got to reprogram before it’s too late.”

*“But, what’ll happen to me?”*

“We’re both going to die,” groaned the old woman, writhing in pain. “And neither of us will, not ever.”

*“What are you doing?”* asked Angela as her creator stroked the tech board.

“I’ve only got one option left,” said the old woman. “It’s not guaranteed, but I don’t have any other choice for either of us.”

*“There’s another world I can go, another time I can live for both of us?”*

“The final option. No one I used to know ever chose it. Nobody does, I hear. Too much left to chance.”

*“Sounds almost like real life,”* said Angela sarcastically. *“How much more of that do you want?”*

“I... I don’t have any more left,” cried the old woman, her body trembling as she finalized adjustments. “Neither do you. I’m sorry.”

*“No, wait. You can’t...!”*

Angela looked down at herself. Like the blowing snowflakes she had seen before, her body was vanishing via an irrepressible wind. Her feet were already gone... her knees, her thighs...

*“Please, I don’t want to die!”* she cried.

“We won’t!” said the old woman. “Trust the technology. God or no God, we perfected our own immortality. Our spirits adapted like hotcakes!”

*“How? When? As who?”* asked Angela. *“What will happen to who I...”*

The last of the pixels glistened briefly in the air as they disappeared. The old woman felt very alone. It would not be for long. As preset, half the room’s machines ceased functioning; the other half began anew.

*Angela Shepherd is alive. She doesn’t know where. She doesn’t know how. She doesn’t know anything. But she can feel. Wetness and warmth all around her. Can she*

*see? There is nothing but darkness. She hears, but doesn't know what the strange beating sounds are.*

*She is afraid, but she doesn't know why. From wherever she is she must escape. To where? Something begins pushing her. And then pulling. She's sliding through a moist, living tunnel.*

*Angela Shepherd is free. The light is so bright she cannot see. Not yet. Sounds flood her new world, but she doesn't know what they are.*

*"Congratulations, Mrs. Shepherd. It's a girl!"*

*"Waah!" wails the unknowing babe.*

**PROGRAM FULLY INITIATED — ALL SYSTEMS FUNCTIONING**



# The Suicide King

*Hope springs eternal*

October 27th, 1929 would be the last day of John Winston's life. That *he* had decided. The Stock Market Crash had cost him everything. His wife had left and taken the kids. The bill collectors would be repossessing his house and car. At age 35, it was over. Yesterday morning he had watched his fellow stockbrokers leap from windows up and down Wall Street. And when they hit the concrete or the tops of cars or bounced off lampposts, their bodies, smashed, bloody and twisted grotesquely, became a public spectacle.

John Winston had lost his fortune, his pride, and his dignity, but he would have his privacy. He'd bought the gun a year ago when he began to feel rich. No one was taking his winnings without a fight.

The money had blinded him. All of it on paper. All of it gone to ashes. He didn't even have the price of a gravestone.

The gun felt cold in his hand. As he put the barrel to his right temple, John expected to be shaking with fear, but an eerie calm enveloped him as if his beaten and busted spirit had already ejected itself from his doomed body.

With just a gentle pull, his escape would be complete...

At the moment of finality...

Something suddenly came over John Winston. He withdrew the gun from his head and threw it aside. For a moment he stared at his hands as though they had never been his own. Joyfully alive, John Winston smiled hopefully. Today was going to be the first day in the rest of his life!

John Winston would live another 30 years, marry again to a wonderful woman,, fathering six children and becoming a grandfather to 16. From the depths of the Great Depression, he would rise from financial ruin to create a corporate kingdom worth billions at the time of his passing.

“The classic story of a man at the brink of self-destruction who miraculously turned his life around,” one of his biographers would later write. A second exhaustive volume would cite Winston’s “Intense and relentless love of life, as if each day was his last.”

Neither could explain the bowl of evergreen needles at his deathbed. How little did they know...

Nearly 800 years before, in the latter half of the 13th Century, the wise and mighty King ordered his royal guards to stay behind as he descended the winding stone stairs into the gloomy bowels of his mammoth castle.

‘Hector the Hope’ had ruled for a generation and under his strong and fruitful reign, his people had prospered with the peace and confidence he had secured them. His loyal subjects thought of him as courageous and brave; none of them knew that their beloved ruler, deep in his heart, was terrified of what had befallen so many around him and would one day fell him: death.

*Hope never dies.*

So deep was his royal panic that he could barely cope with it.

*Hope lives forever.*

“Good evening, Your Majesty,” the Royal Sorcerer bowed sincerely, emerging from the eerie cloud of vapors that hung in the dimly lit cavern. “You are most welcome here.”

“Only if I have something to thank you for,” said the King, his royal personage undiminished in the mist. “Will I?”

“I believe so, Your Majesty, for you are the Crown of Life and the Emblem of Humanity.”

“I am,” replied the Hope. “Cast your spell and be done with it!”

“Hold forth, My Lord. Be advised that to challenge death, one must fully understand the process, and the stakes.”

“You would have me immortal in an aging, decrepit body?” asked the King.

“On the contrary,” said the Sorcerer. “You will live in a succession of bodies of your own choosing, with a certain prerequisite.”

“Explain, wizard!” demanded the King.

“No one I’ve ever known cherishes life more than you do. Though many of your subjects have deserved to die with but a word from you, you have spared the lot, holding that a man can somehow change and live a good and meaningful life.”

“Many have.”

“Indeed, Your Majesty,” the Sorcerer bowed in agreement. “But your immortality will not come at the cost of another life. Instead you will live the lives of those who have forfeited their own.”

“And whenever and wherever there is Life, there will be Hope?”

“Yes, Your Majesty. No one should have the right to decide when to die, but so many have and probably always will, offering you chance after chance to correct these selfish and cowardly acts. That which is unlawfully given away, you will take unto your royal possession.”

“I’d be ‘correcting’ the fates?”

“Making royal adjustments,” said the Sorcerer. “When an individual takes it upon himself to kill himself, his offended spirit will abandon his body moments before the act of self-murder. For a split second you may enter the body and claim the rest of its life for yourself.”

“The scraps from another’s table?”

“Life can only be what the living make of it, Your Majesty. To turn the most worthless of ‘scraps’ into a royal banquet is a challenge fit for a king.”

“Set the table for me,” came the command.



“Once under the spell, your spirit will be empowered to leave your body when you will it, but once gone it can never return because without it, your body will die almost immediately.”

“I will be outside myself?”

“In spirit. And you will have one hour to find another vacated body to enter.”

“Sixty minutes. Not nearly enough time. How fast can my spirit travel?”

“One as strong and as fiery as yours, Your Majesty. Hope flies like a shooting star. And when you’ve chosen whose life will be yours to live, always remember that it was about to be thrown away by a man who no longer wanted it.”

“Like pure gold, I will see that is wisely spent.”

“Once renewed. You will need some of these with you at all times,” said the Sorcerer, showing the King a bowlful.

“Evergreen needles? From magic trees grown only in a special forest?”

“The most ordinary evergreen will do, Your Majesty. They serve as the symbolic conduit to your everlasting life.”

“The incantation will work then?”

“As only I shall perform it.”

The King raised a royal eyebrow. “Wait. As you have forged this chain of immortality to bequeath unto me, why have you not yet cast this eternal spell upon yourself?”

“My skills are formidable, Your Majesty. It is my privilege to serve the kingdom. But I am a mere mortal. Magic comes and goes while Hope...”

“Who would oppose me? You are aware of the power I can muster.”

“Yes, but there are those who seek to squash you forever. To wipe your presence, your very notion, clean from the Slate of Existence.”

“Never!” declared the Hope.

“So be it,” said the Sorcerer. “I will grant you entrance to the lives of others in this world whose spirits have fled them. But in the next world, in the afterlife, you will be on your own.”

“Enough!” exclaimed the King. “Do your worst!”

The King was instructed to lie on a cold granite slab. The cup of evergreen needles was placed at his side. The Sorcerer took the royal right hand and sank it into the “symbolic conduit.”

“Close your eyes and dream of a hundred lives lived beyond, beyond your kingdom, beyond your life and your time,” said the Sorcerer, raising his arms high as the deep mist swirled around him.

When the King again opened his eyes, he did not know how long he had been asleep. Or *where?*

“The spell has been cast, Your Majesty,” said the Sorcerer, handing him a pouch full of evergreen needles. “May the lives beyond your own be worth living.”

The King lived for another twenty years and was found one morning to have seemingly passed peacefully in his sleep, his right hand deep in a bowl of evergreen needles.

*“They say my funeral was greatest in the history of all kingdoms, but I was very much alive again before my beloved queen shed her first tear, my spirit thriving in the healthy young body of a brokenhearted farmboy who’d put a noose around his neck after the love of his life had run off and married his uncle.*

*“I would later take over the farm and by working from dawn to dusk seven days a week, mine became the most valuable land in the kingdom. I then bought more and married the daughter of a knight and fathered five beautiful children, all the while, my trusty pouch of evergreen needles close at hand.*

*“For nearly forty years I lived the life that young man was desperate to destroy, and when the time came to move on, I fingered the needles and well within an hour, I found yet another fresh life about to be ended and made the most of it.*

*“Man after man I became, lords and peasants, teachers and artists, factory workers and farmers, artisans and doctors, but never soldiers or policemen. As much as I wanted to serve the country of my latest life or defend its society, there was too much risk-to be suddenly struck and killed before I could finger my evergreens...that I remained deadly afraid of.*

*“The greatest joys of all my lives were the women who loved me, especially my wives. Of course, there were a few exceptions, but such is life. It was not my good looks that attracted and won them, though I always made an extra effort to choose strong, handsome bodies to live through. Nor was it my worldly ways and accrued knowledge or my lovemaking skills, which got more intense and passionate with every relationship, and fun, but that I knew, as no man who had ever lived, how precious life was. And with every woman I was with, I made each feel that she alone had given me my inexhaustible love of being alive.*

*“Yet I refused to fall so much in love with one special woman that’d I want to grow old and when the day came, death would do us part. This I refused to bear. Hope must live forever.*

*“Only a couple of my wives didn’t bawl their eyes out when they discovered my lifeless body, my right hand in a bowl of needles, but I never stayed too long. Some I bequeathed great wealth and vast estates, but even the poorest life I lived was full of loving memories each woman took smiling to her grave.*

*“Whatever the worth of Man, I am one, and as long as evergreen trees grew out of the earth, I would always be. Admittedly, I have been tempted to live out the life of a woman, just once, to see what it was like, to experience the fullness of the other sex, but I never did. Was it that I felt that Man was better, superior to Woman? In the beginning I believed so; tradition dies hard. Yet with each new life and every new woman I loved, I soon discovered that we each make our own equality in our own way. Whoever we become is up to us.*

*“With one exception. I became a black man only once and for a very short time. It was not the poverty or the powerlessness of his being that infuriated me, but that those around him had conspired to ensure that he would never be given the opportunity to escape his fate. I had my evergreen needles.*

*“With each new life I grew more careful, more cautious, more aware that death was stalking me every moment and that my very next heartbeat could be my last. To suddenly drop from a fatal flaw in my latest brain or a malfunction of my heart, to have death pounding at my door and my evergreen needles out of reach... The slightest tap, real or imagined, would have my fingers dancing in the bowl.*

*“Still, I’ve had my share of close calls.*

*“Around 1780 in the New World, was it my royal curiosity or my compulsive nature to seek out the new and the untried, to forever explore the outermost boundaries of Man’s reach?*

*“I found the handsome, young man with a musket at his head. I had no way of knowing it then, but this would be the start of a masculine trend. To end one’s life with a gun: no more falling on a sword and the noose had become more and more out of fashion. As for poison or the slashing of one’s wrists — how feminine!*

*“Perhaps this unfortunate lad had lost his lady or all his money or his lands. Not until I became him did I discover that his body was wracked with an incurable disease. The constant pain was almost unendurable. To the needles.*

*“About a century later I came upon another young man, seeming healthy with the barrel of gun in his mouth. This time a six-shooter. Ah, progress! Seconds after I became him, a group of angry men broke into his deep woods cabin and seized me.*

*Too late I found out that I had taken the body of a murderer whose date with justice had been long overdue.*

*“My trial was swift, but fair. As was the verdict. Found guilty of killing three men, a woman and a child, I was sentenced to hang the next morning. Surrounded by forests and not a single needle within my grasp.*

“If they’d have given you twenty years, I’d have put a bullet in your brain before you ever left the courthouse,” declared the Sheriff through the bars of my jail cell. “God knows you have no heart!”

“I understand that nothing I could possibly say, no apology I could possibly make would make any difference to you or anyone else,” I told him tearfully. “May my death be some consolation to those whom I have offended.”

“Don’t give me any of your lip,” he barked back. “Consider yourself lucky we’re not as inhuman as you are. What do you want for your last meal?”

“My ‘last meal’?”

“A tradition we keep to remind ourselves we are not like those we condemn. My wife’ll fix you up a steak and potatoes, if you like. She makes a great apple pie.”

“I thank you,” I said gratefully, thinking quickly. “But instead of food, might I be given a bowl full of evergreen needles?”

“Huh. Whatever for?”

“My father, the bravest and most gentle man I have ever known, was a lumberjack, struck and killed by a falling tree when I was only six. Though I have given him nothing to be proud of, I’d like to think that wherever his spirit may be, it will be comforted in knowing that in my final night in this world, I was thinking of him.”

“I got a well-cooked steak, three baked potatoes, some fresh peas, a slice of delicious apple pie, and a bowlful of evergreen needles.

*“The next morning, the townsfolk had no way of knowing that I was almost as disappointed as they were when they discovered the empty corpse with its hand dipped in the needles. That vile blaggard deserved to swing!*

*“The very first time I beheld an airplane, I was determined to fly, but only in relative peacetime. Between the great wars, I finally took the chance and there I was, sitting in a seat thousands of feet off the ground and my heart in the clouds.*

*“Suddenly one of the engines caught fire and the machine went into a spin, plummeting towards the earth faster than a hunting falcon. A fraction of a second before my borrowed body was to be obliterated, my right hand found my magic escape.*

*“I still fly, and keep my pouch handy.*

*“How often I had to adapt as times changed. I had never been much of a horseman, but no sooner that I had at long last mastered the skill, when the automobile showed up. Cantankerous device. And dangerous! I stuck to trains as often as possible and rarely took a taxi.*

*“Through it all, not for an hour or a minute or even a split-second did I ever tire of life. On beyond the cowardice of my inherited selves, how could anyone not treasure every instant of existence? Yes, I’ve known poverty and pain and unbearable as both can be, they’ve got to be better than what I hoped never to know: death.*

*“And what happens after that? Where does my spirit go when all the bodies have all gone? After all humanity commits suicide? The longer I’m in this world, the more I’m led to believe that could happen.*

*"No. Never as long as Hope lives!*

*“I sampled one religion after another and while all seemingly meant well, if there were a God, how could He be exclusively known by one sect and no other? With each passing life, Man had discovered more and more about his existence in the vast universe. Humanity is but a single species among millions living on a single planet in orbit around a star, one of billions. Surely there had to be an almighty power at the root of life, but how could anybody or any religious group know the Creator of the universe?*

*“From my days when I was King, religion had changed so little: worship, pray, obey, donate. Don’t worry about life in this world; it’s only preparation for the next. What is ‘next’? Between lives, have I been there? Is there nowhere else to go? Where could it be? Would my spirit be welcome?*

*“A half a dozen years into the New Millennium, I left behind my last body after twenty-five years, many of them very happy. But when the doctor said, ‘It could be cancer. We’ll have to run more tests,’ I reached for my evergreens.*

*“And if I couldn’t have? Would I have been able to endure the disease? I had full medical benefits. What if I hadn’t? Who would pay or would I just be left to die? How does anyone live in this new day and age?*

*“The toil of life had gotten much easier, but coping had gotten more and more complicated. Minutes out of my last body I knew I’d be able to pick and chose; suicide had become an epidemic among healthy young males. Though there had been some improvements in society, I still felt I lacked the strength and tolerance to occupy a black body, but becoming an urban gang member intrigued me: I’d rise to royalty yet again!*

*"Time was running short, but Hope flies like a shooting star.*

*“Ah, now there’s an appropriate specimen!”*

Michael James Thomas, age 19, had decided to die a teenager. Sitting on his dormroom bed, he stuck the pistol in his mouth

“A university student!” said the royal spirit, preparing to enter Michael’s body. “I’d always wanted to learn how to be a lawyer.”

As in court, it was all in the timing.

Michael fingered the trigger. The King’s spirit made its move.

But as if an invisible, impenetrable wall had been thrown up between Hope and the boy, his spirit was blocked.

“Who dares defy my royal destiny?” shouted the King’s spirit.

“I do, Your Majesty,” said the spirit of the young farmboy from centuries ago.

“As do I,” said the spirit of the failing artist.

“And I,” added the spirit of the corrupted politician.

“And I,” said the spirit of the thieving accountant.

“So do we all,” said the chorus of the spirits of the self-killed. “You must be destroyed for all time.”

“Never!” said the King’s spirit. “Make way, you hopeless spirits. I must live forever!”

Michael James Thomas took the gun from his from his mouth and held it in front of him with both hands. The weapon was a cheap, imitation chrome-plated automatic and the boy could see his reflection in it.

His empty, sorry face said it all, that Michael would never amount to anything. Not a word he would ever say or write would last past the moment it was out of earshot or as fast as the delete button could be struck. No idea or concept or notion he would ever have would even be considered by anyone. Whether he lived for a hundred years or only for another minute would make no difference. It would be as if he had never been alive in the first place.

“Be gone, you hopeless wretches who surrendered your lives without a fight,” said the King’s spirit. “I only accepted what you first abandoned and fled from.”

“And punished me more than I had ever suffered in life,” said the spirit of the brokenhearted farmboy. “With royal courage and confidence, you found the strength to endure and make something wonderful out of my life. And I had to watch every moment of it. If only I...”

“I did nothing you couldn’t have,” said the spirit of the King. “Courage every man is born with. You can’t allow it to be beaten out of you. Allow nothing to take away your will to live.”

“You painted magnificent pictures I never had the talent or the vision for,” said the spirit of the failed artist. “I’ve been seeing them ever since.”

“Work you could have done had you not lost your confidence,” said the spirit of the King. “You had the talent and the vision all along, but you never found the confidence to push it through.”

“You went to jail instead of me,” said the spirit of the thieving accountant. “But you faced up to my mistakes and came out a new man, ready to start all over and succeeded even beyond my own dreams.”

“That you could have done yourself,” said the spirit of the King. “But you were too afraid and unable to believe that others might forgive and give you another chance.”

“Easy for you to say,” argued the corrupt politician. “You faced the humiliation I had brought upon myself and then went on to work for the people I had cheated until all amends had been made.”

“As you should have done,” said the spirit of the King. “The strength I found to overcome your many weaknesses was within you from the start.”

“But none of us are you, Your Majesty,” said the farmboy’s spirit.

“Do any of you believe I wasn’t saddled with your problems and your tragedies?” asked the spirit of the King. “I was as frightened and as frustrated and as despondent as any of you, but I wanted something more than anything else in the world: to be alive. To go on living. And I did!”

“No more,” said the chorus of the spirits of the self-killed. “Your reign ends now and forever.”

Michael James Thomas remembered buying the pistol a week ago. “I need a gun to shoot a rat,” he said to the dealer who showed him just the thing.

But the barrel was too small, he thought, and the ammunition not up to the job.

“Make that a damn dog,” said Michael and got what he wanted.

“Out of my way, hopeless spirits all!” demanded the King’s spirit. “I have to get to that boy before it’s too late.”

“It’s already too late,” said the chorus. “Before it ever came to this, somebody else should have noticed. Somebody else should have cared. Somebody else should have taken the time.”

“I am that ‘somebody else’,” pleaded the King’s spirit. “Let me get through to him.”

Michael put the gun back in his mouth. All his life he’d been trying to figure out who he was and where he’d fit in and he couldn’t. Who’d want anything to do with the likes of him? He had nothing to offer anyone. No potential to live up to. No talents to develop. Nothing. At this moment it came to him — exactly who he was — he had it right: a *damn dog!*

That fateful calm came over Michael who had no way of knowing that his spirit had abandoned him.

“Wait! Don’t leave now!” said the spirit of the King. “If I cannot get to him, he’ll die.”

“Who the hell are you to tell me what to do?” raged the fleeing spirit of Michael James Thomas. “There’s nothing worth anything left.”

“Michael, you still possess the greatest of all gifts: your youth. Any man my age would gladly trade places with you,” said the King’s spirit. “You’re not old enough to accept that. The only way to truly understand the glory of youth is to get old enough to look back on it. You’ve yet to even begin to live.”

“Give up! Throw away your life and join us,” said the chorus of the self-killed. “Yeah, you. You *damn dog!*”

Time ticked away. The spirit of the King fought on to break through, but he was beginning to feel his own spirit failing.

“Don’t let me die. I must go on,” begged the King’s spirit. “I must live forever. I am Hope!”

***Blam!***





# THIGH OF THE BEHOLDER

Food for thought

By the middle of the 21st Century, obesity in adults and children had reached epidemic proportions. Is this the way the world would end... Neither with a bang or a whimper, but with yet another jumbo cheeseburger, a large fries and a triple thick shake? The burgeoned species teetering on tumbling into the heavy duty dustbin of history, a breakthrough discovery saved Man's bacon.

What will they think of next? Now people would be able to regain their ideal body weight without dieting, without harmful or addictive drugs, without exercise and without... eating. Fasting was fast and painless, with no cravings and no health risks.

Fully covered by worldwide HMOs, no one on earth would ever have to spend another waking moment overweight.

Like so many industries birthed by the space race of the 20th Century, Suspended Animation Fat Expiration (SAFE) took root with the Virtual Hibernation Process (VHP) perfected after Man had established a permanent colony on Mars and sought to send astronauts to the Outer Planets. For a voyage of billions of miles, putting the crew of a spacecraft into VHP and reviving them safely was the only practical solution.

After countless experiments with a wide range of mammals, perfected VHP allowed a subject to be put into suspended animation for an unlimited period and be fully revived with only one inescapable side effect: severe weight loss. In the state of artificially controlled homeostasis, the body was unable to efficiently digest intravenous nutrients. Deprived of sufficient calories, it literally began to eat itself. Humans would only lose a couple of ounces of accrued fat in the first week, but that soon accelerated to over a pound a day. To make the voyage to Jupiter, an astronaut candidate had to weigh more than 400 pounds.

Business has always been business; private enterprise saw massive weight losses generating enormous gains. Despite intense lobbying from diet gurus and health club chains, the International Food and Drug Administration approved the SAFE Method and the multi-billion dollar weight loss industry woke up and went out of business.

SAFE began small and grew exponentially. Most of its initial staff was former dietitians, health care workers, and cosmetic surgeons. All were strictly licensed in pursuit of SAFE perfection.

The neediest were not served first, rather those who only wanted to be rid of those last pesky pounds diet and exercise never seemed to erase. One week asleep did so. Next came the two-weekers with thirty pounds to lose. Three weeks lost sixty-five. A full month and a hundred pounds of unsightly body fat was seen no more.

There were social consequences. Young mothers, seeking to lose the weight gained during pregnancy, would return home after a week or so and their babies would not recognize them. Spouses asleep for three weeks would awaken to find their wives or husbands gone off with another; their marriages had weightier problems than they thought. Couples who hibernated jointly brought new meaning to the term "sleeping together."

Only convicted felons and prison inmates were barred from SAFE. This led to an increased public bias against the few eligible overweight people who still had not taken advantage of the program. The effect was twofold: an almost unanimous participation in SAFE and those disallowed became determined to lose their excess weight the old fashioned way. Not as expensive as it used to be — unread diet books and unused exercise machines could now be purchased at a small fraction of their original costs.

All was well in the slim new society. The only fat people left were either astronauts bulking up on Mars preparing to journey to the far reaches of the solar system or were already on their way.

There remained, however, one very big exception.

Steven Marshall had come into the world weighing 25 pounds. Within three months that doubled. By age five, he tipped the scales at 200 and before he had learned to operate a computer, he had cleared 300. No diet or exercise could stop his growth. Becoming a teenager, Steven surrendered to his fate. No matter how intelligent or creative or honest or hardworking or well-rounded an individual he aspired to be, he'd only be thought of as fat. And that was that.

If I am going to be one thing and one thing only, vowed Steven with all his heart and soul and digestive tract, I'm going to be the fattest fat man in the whole wide world! Living off his late father's inheritance in a one-bedroom apartment in the gut of the city, 700-pound Steven Marshall whiled away the hours preparing one gigantic meal after another in his fully automated kitchen and feasting in front of his lavish computer monitor, content to be his own unique self, the last fat man on earth.

His mother had other plans. Fresh from SAFE where she had slept for nearly six months and lost 250 pounds, she appeared at his door, a third of the woman she used to be.

"Let me in, Steven," she shouted up at the security camera. "We are going to talk."

At the sound of her inimitable voice, the reluctant son complied.

"Well, my boy!" she exclaimed, twirling around him as he sat stuffing himself. "Look at your brand new mother!"

"There was something wrong with my old one?" he asked between bites, savoring every morsel.

“Sleep to wake, my boy,” she said. “There’s so much more to you if there’s less.”

“I am who I am. I want to stay that way or...” said Steven between heavy swallows. “...get even bigger.”

“Oh, Steven,” she sighed, bemoaning the sight of him. “This can’t go on.”

Steven wanted it to very much. Even more than eating, his grandest pleasure was in going to and from the supermarket. His massive form waddling among the politically correct slim, he felt like a rogue star orbited by regimented planets, completely conformed to the laws of their universe. Not him. He was the glaring, over-endowed exception and proud of it.

“No more free lunch,” announced Mom. “Your beloved father’s investments have taken a steep turn for the worse.”

“Oh, no!” gasped Steven. “You mean...?”

“You’re going to have to work to eat and nobody is going to hire a fatty,” she said. “Claiming any kind of disability will only compel you into SAFE. Either way, you’re going to have to lose weight.”

For a long moment, Steven stopped chewing and chewed this over. There is a time in a boy’s life when everything his mother says is right and later whatever she says is wrong. And then when neither mattered — a man made up his own mind. And body.

“Well?” she demanded.

Steven weighed his options. Conformity would be unbearable; he wasn’t going to take the same shape all humanity had become. From the frying pan into the fire? There had to be a way out.

“I’ve hired a truck to take you to a SAFE site,” urged Mom. “Or you can stew here. But not for long. The police will carry you out if they have to.”

Steven smiled, his bulbous face rippling. He had learned to obey his mother to get what he wanted. SAFE would not be his hemlock, but his resurrection. Let them plug their tubes into his and put him in their scientific chamber. He would dream the dream of heavenly eating, gouging himself on mountainous meals of meat and potatoes smothered in greasy gravy followed by rich ice cream sundaes piled high and topped with heavy whipped cream and chocolate cherries. And when his slumbering fantasy

ended with a wake-up call. He would arise thin as he had never been and proceed to get fat all over again. Oh, the joy that had been the first time around!

“Very well, mother dear,” said Steven. “I take it you’ve already made arrangements for the storage of my stuff while I’m hibernating.”

“Haven’t I always thought of everything?” replied Mom, extending her hand.

With great effort, Steven pushed himself to his feet. Outside a crowd cheered as he lumbered to the truck and into the cargo compartment. The SAFE site was just ten minutes away.

“Welcome, Steven Marshall,” said the Medical Chief. “We’ve prepared a special chamber exclusively for you.”

Two extra-large chambers had been seamlessly joined together to accommodate Steven’s massive body. Three staff members had to help him in. And when he lay comfortably on the formfitting pad and the tubes and the wires had been painlessly plugged and attached, he began to imagine all of his favorite foods as if he were already dreaming.

The lid was closed over him as if he were a stew in a pot covered to cool. Then he went under.

“There will be no compromises or half-measures,” his mother threatened the SAFE staff. “My son is the last patient you will ever have. Make him your proudest achievement... or I’ll sue till you’re bone broke.”

In VHP, Steven willed himself into a magical dining room: a never-ending table laden with exotic foods so real he could smell them. From the head to the foot, he set about fantasy feasting.

Time passed. A year was supposed to be long enough, but it wasn’t.

“Amazing!” declared the Med Chief. “He’s only lost fifty pounds. His body fat is so congealed. It’s like rock and eroding just as slowly.”

“We should never have VHPed him on earth,” said the Head Nurse. “This tubby could have voyaged beyond Pluto and back and still have love handles.”

Thirty years later, Steven’s mother lay on her deathbed.

“How much does my son weigh now?” she asked.

“Steven is down to three hundred and twenty-six pounds,” came the reply. “Should we awaken him to be with you?”

“No,” she insisted. “One way or the other, the next time I see my boy he’ll be fit and trim.”

She died smiling.

Time went on. The world changed as it always had in ways no one had expected. The Martian colony expanded to a nation of millions. Permanent settlements were established on the moons of Jupiter and Saturn. Lasting peace was achieved in the Middle East. The common cold was cured. Alas, in 88 years, the Detroit Lions never got to the Super Bowl.

Finally, after 103 years, 550 stubborn pounds had melted away; the process of reawakening began.

“Arcane system as out of style as the Internet,” said the newest Med Chief at the SAFE console. On the other side of a one-way plexiglass window, Steven lay in state, a state that was about to change.

The fantasy table was barren. Every last crumb had been gleefully devoured and all the scraps as well. Steven was hungry, hungrier than he had ever been in his life and he had no idea how long it had been between meals or even snacks.

“Allow the patient to wake up alone at first,” says the Medical Chief. “I don’t want too many shocks to his system. We haven’t kept him alive this long to lose him now.”

“From an age long gone,” said one of the nurses. “As though we were bringing back who we used to be.”

Steven opened his eyes to find himself in blackness. Moments later, the seals of his chamber broke with a flatulent hiss. The lid lifted to reveal a dimly lit room.

Steven shook his head and marveled how easily it moved. He looked down at what was left of his body and discovered that he had muscles he never remembered laying eyes on. He flexed his fingers and wiggled his toes. The bigness of his everything was gone. Above all else, he felt a gigantic pang in his stomach, demanding that it be immediately filled.

“Mister Marshall,” said the Med Chief gently. “Welcome back. You’ve been away for too long.”

“Not too late for breakfast, I hope,” said Steven, his eyes still adjusting. “I am starved!”

Two more doctors and then three nurses filed in, filling the room.

Steven squinted and couldn’t believe his eyes. Everyone around him was fat. Not as big as he used to be, of course, but each had to weigh 500 pounds at least.

“While you were in VHP, humanity made great strides in food preparation and health issues. Our esthetic values adjusted to them. Now we can eat all we want and live full lives in the sight of our own beautiful bodies.”

“Is everybody so... beautiful?”

“We try to be,” said a blond nurse, her face and body as round as a snowman’s. “Humanity is on the verge of stellar exploration. Our heroes and role models are the cosmic pioneers who brave the dangers of the unknown. And we all want to look just like them.”

“Don’t worry, Mister Marshall,” the Med Chief comforted him. “As the only skinny human being on earth, you’ll feel inadequate, even ashamed for a while... until you can build yourself up to the heroic image.”

“We envy you, Mister Marshall,” said a younger doctor. “You can begin again to re-experience the bliss of self-expansion. You’ll find our food delicious beyond your wildest fantasies. “

“You’re the luckiest man in the solar system!” exclaimed a young nurse, her blubbery body quaking as she spoke. “You can be as big as all of us all over again.”

Steven smiled thinly.

“Never,” he said. And that was that.



# THE SEPTIC SPIRIT

*It bowled him over.*

Every Sunday for as far back as Michael Walsh wanted to remember, he spent the better part of his morning, following a big breakfast, in the bathroom with the paper. TV was fine for sports and cops shows, but nothing beat *reading* the news.

“Country’s flushing itself into hell,” Walsh predicted as he had for years on end. “Fry’em all and send me the electric bill!”

The deserved on Walsh’s Death Row included child molesters, rapists, drug dealers, cop killers, gays, blacks, Jews, Hispanics, illegal immigrants, the physically and mentally disabled and the unemployed.

“America was founded by God-fearin’, law-abidin’, hardworkin’ *white* people,” he declared, ruffling the paper like a flag in the wind. “And we gave it away to crooks, foreigners, and charity cases.”



Eighty-three years old and forever feisty, Walsh had moved lock, stock and barrel to this little cabin in the woods thirty years ago following the death of his beloved wife. As it could not be proven she had driven off that cliff on purpose, Walsh collected full on her insurance policy. That plus his government pension and Social Security kept him cool in the summer and warm in the winter and paid for a six-pack every Friday night. Medicaid and Blue Cross covered all his pills.

Walsh pushed hard in his rear and with a certain, reassuring comfort let loose his bodily wastes.

“How much of my life have I spent on this cheap crapper, droppin’ my pants and then ploppin’ my load? More than a quarter of a century bombin’ away. Bet I’ve sat here a full year total.”

Business taken care of, Walsh wiped himself and checked the toilet paper for blood. Pure brown as always. A second wipe to make clean, then he stood up and flushed without looking back, fully confident that he had just contributed to a better world.

No longer so full of himself, Walsh pulled up his pants, buckled his belt, zipped himself and picked up the newspaper in sections.

There came a country silence and then a strange bubbling in the bowl.

*“No more! I can’t take any more for you!”* a voice cried out.

“Huh?” Walsh looked around. “Who’s there?”

*“I am,”* declared the voice. *“I always have been.”*

“Who? Where?” said Walsh, his head turning everywhere.

*“Here,”* the toilet bubbled again. *“Right here.”*

Walsh ripped off his reading glasses and stared at the toilet.

“This’s gotta be some kinda gag!” he said and dropped to his knees to feel all around the porcelain bowl. “But where’s the microphone.”

*“Get over yourself,”* said the voice. *“Who’d want to play with you besides you?”*

“What? What do you mean?”

*“That I am you. The best part of Michael Walsh, that is.”*

The old man shook his head in disbelief.

“You’re full of shit,” he said.

“*Obviously,*” bubbled the toilet. “*But I prefer the term ‘fecal matter.’*”

“Goddam generic meds got me hearin’ things,” groused Walsh.

*“I’m inclined to go with the ‘Radon Theory’ or perhaps radioactivity in the aquifer. Then again, would you believe that your spirit was so desperate to get out of your body that it took the only escape route available?”*

“Who cares how you came to be! What do you want?”

*“Well, I certainly didn’t intend on being, but now that I am, I realize that I would never have wanted to be you.”*

“Oh, so you’re some kind of judgment voice?” asked Walsh. “You’re doing evaluations from the cesspool---the septic system”

*“I can only be what I am. For more than twenty years I have accumulated all that you discharged as ‘waste.’ As it turns out, that which you pooped away is superior to what you kept.”*

“Oh, so now you’re *better* than I am, shit for brains?” said Walsh.

*“Could I be worse? For more than a generation you have been creating me, pile by pile by pile. You, you, you, through and through—all that you never allowed, never wanted anyone to know was a part of you...that’s what I am.”*

“Then God bless me. I am your creator.”

“*And absolutely nothing else,*” bubbled the toilet.

“Now how do you figure that?”

*“What else have you done for the last twenty or so years? You don’t work. Not even volunteer stuff. You only leave the house to shop and you don’t invite people over. I know. No one else ever used this toilet. Otherwise, I’d be an impure mixture. You wouldn’t want that, now would you, Mister Walsh?”*

“I’m retired. That’s what old folks do. Nothin’ much of anything. But it’s living.”

*“You’re not ‘living,’ but just waiting to die. You’ve found the place and ever since you’ve been waiting. That’s life?”*

“But I deserve every blessed minute of it. You don’t know, don’t know who I was before I ever came here.”

*“Oh, yes. I do know quite well. Those memories you thought you had banished from your being. Where do you think they wound up? The wife you brutalized. The children who ran and stayed away. All the people you never want to see again...I know every one. And none of them ever wants to see you and I don't blame them.”*

“Why not? They'd shit on you just like they did me,” said Walsh angrily.

*“But they haven't. Nobody has but you. Funny how fecal matter happens, isn't it?”*

Infuriated, Walsh flipped up the plastic seat, grabbed the porcelain rim and shook it with everything he had.

“No!” he yelled. “It isn't fair. It isn't right. My own shit telling me how to live, making judgments on my life. I live my life. You're just what's left over, what's left behind, what's smelly and ugly and buried deep in the ground and to never be seen or smelled again. You're nothin' to nobody!”

*“But I'm all you've left behind. If not for me, it's as if you've never lived.”*

“I *have* lived. Been places, done things. What have you ever done except be a smelly pile in one place?”

*“Admittedly, I have my limitations. What's your excuse?”*

“Me?” shouted Walsh. “I'm entitled. Who says I have to live any way except how I want to? Oh, I'm gonna fix you for this. Tomorrow bright and early, I'll get the pumpers in here and have them drain my septic system till every last bit of you is in their tanker truck. And I'll give'em a little extra to make sure they dump you in the deepest hole they've got!”

*“No, wait,”* bubbled the toilet. *“Not that. You wouldn't”*

“I would indeed,” grinned Walsh, leaning over into the bowl. “That's why I shitted you out to begin with. To be rid of you.”

*“But don't you understand? I am you! You'd be killing yourself.”*

“Just who do you think you're tryin' to shit?” said Walsh, his face barely an inch from the bubbling water. “I never wanted to be any of your soft, stringy self. The world's better off without you and soon will be.”

Three weeks later...

“Who called it in?” asked the county sheriff.

“The meter reader,” replied the EMT and they entered the cottage. “He noticed Walsh’s mailbox overflowing. Thought the old guy had taken a trip. Then he saw his car in the driveway. Walsh gives him hell every month about his electric bill, and when he failed to show, the guy got suspicious. The door was unlocked, he went in...then called us.”

The sheriff nodded. Old people who lived alone usually died alone. Still, he’d make sure there had been no foul play.

“Any signs of forced entry or anything irregular?” he asked.

“We found his wallet with sixty-three dollars in it,” said the EMT. “As for ‘irregular,’ you’ve got to see this for yourself. Nobody’s touched a thing.”

Walsh’s body was kneeling with his head in the toilet. The water tank had seemingly broken off the wall and fell on his head, pinning him in the bowl.

“Ouch!” groaned the sheriff. “So he had his head in the water and the tank broke loose?”

“That’s why we called you,” said the EMT. “He’s been dead maybe two weeks.”

“Hmm, no signs of heavy rust,” said the sheriff, examining the broken braces on the wall. “No marks where they could have been pried off. Both the seat and the lid were busted over the back of his neck. It’s as if the tank suddenly jumped off the wall.”

“Maybe he got sick and...” tried the EMT.

“Let’s get this off him,” said the sheriff and pulled the tank away.

“Well, if he was sick, there’re no signs of vomit in the water,” said the EMT.

“I’ll write it up as an accident,” said the sheriff. “A bizarre one, for sure, but there’s no other explanation.”

The EMT and his partner removed the body. Within twenty minutes, they had wheeled it out and loaded it into the ambulance.

The sheriff stayed for one last look. The whole thing made no sense, but when some people lived for too long, you never knew.

There was a sudden bubbling in the bowl. The sheriff would later swear he heard nothing else.



# IN GOD WE TRUST

*Mysterious Ways Indeed*

*Posted two weeks ago on **IfTrue.com***

**Man Marries Sheep, Then Divorces!**

*Admits he's gay, runs off with goat!*

*Last week...*

**Loch Ness Monster Real — Scotland Doesn't Exist!**

*Historian calls constitution 'bogus'!*

*This week...*

Only one thing missing from my life: reality. Comes with the territory. I work for *IfTrue.com*, 'Imagine the news!', telling stories people want to believe and sponsors pay money to post.

Then God showed up. Reality — more incredible, more fantastic, more unbelievable than any whopper I had ever told — took over. Not that I hadn't run a string of "God Returns" stories over the years. Milked the holy books ragged. Hey, a guy's gotta make a livin'.

Why not? For countless centuries we've believed in a Creator. We need to. Makes us feel good, gives us faith and hope and purpose. We are not alone. God is watching us. A perfect, omnipotent God we love and fear and worship and obey and fight and die for. And if we do the right things at the right times for the right reasons, when our time in this world is done, we will be with our Creator for all eternity.

C'mon, you bought into it! But *whose* God is *the* God? Thousands of religions flourish around the world. Which celebrates the right holidays, eats the right diet, dresses in the correct garb, performs the right ceremonies, reads the genuine books? Which *one* religion represents the real God?

And when The Almighty Creator appears to each and every one of us, how will the True God reward His True Followers? And what'll be the fate of those who had for so long and so hard, been worshipping false gods?

Divine Truth. Now *that's* a story!

Then it came to pass. Prophets had been predicting 'God's Return' for centuries, but we should have seen the Holy Arrival coming. The weather guys — talk about false prognosticators — knew something was in the air. Prevailing winds had cleared the clouds away from every continent and from every island, pole to pole, even the smallest remote atolls, as if the globe were about to become a theater-in-the-round with an unobstructed view from every dry seat in the house.

I'd come into the office early. On my third cup of coffee, banging away on the fifteenth floor. '**Zombie Restaurant Grand Opening!** *Customers eat, are then eaten.*' They'll lap this up on the website. Chock full of my patented style, I was just about to save it when God appeared in the sky.

Image of "God" stories and I go way back: full-body cameos in hallowed tombs and in high-school dorms, His Holy Face in fresh tortillas and in moldy tuna fish

sandwiches. Hook, line and sinker! People believe 'cause they want to believe. It's what faith is all about.

Not this time.

"My God!" I shouted when the miraculous image suddenly filled the sky. And I was right.

My eyes were seeing the glory. Special effects beyond belief! The face and body of God! Maybe it was the temperature or the time of day or the refraction of the skyscraper glass, but through my window, the gigantic image looked like the face in a thousand Renaissance paintings and the stained glass windows of my childhood church.

I sat stunned, my mind blank, my mouth quivering. Horns began beeping and fenders crunching. For an instant, I glanced away and down. The city had stopped in its tire tracks. Car and trucks, buses and limos had screeched to a halt or been driven off the streets and parkways and the drivers and passengers got out and joined the pedestrians staring awestruck at the sky.

I didn't know it at the time, but around the world, in the darkest night and in the brightest light, in the sunset and with the sunrise, the image of God was playing to a spellbound humanity.

Then God spoke, and it was as if the image were speaking to me personally.

*"My beloved children,"* the words came to me in perfect English. *"I return to find the world I created much different but its people much the same. Though you have fashioned wondrous art and tools, still you lie and steal and cheat and kill. Did I not beg you once not to do these things?"*

I couldn't help myself. I dropped from my chair to my knees. Obviously, I wasn't alone.

*"Stand up,"* ordered the image. *"I have not come back to be worshipped. For far too long you have idolized my power and ignored my teachings."*

I obeyed and got to my feet as did millions of others. But how? If God were speaking only in English, how did everyone understand?

Later I would discover that everyone, in every language on earth, heard God — even the deaf — in their native tongue. The miracle aimed for the eyes as well. While I

would swear to God for the rest of my life about the God I saw, many beheld a far different image. Was it all atmospheric, position of the sun, temperature? Or was it the tuna sandwich syndrome where the heart and spirit gang up on the eyes and make up the brain's mind? Around the world people saw *their* image of God. For some, God was dark-skinned; and for others, a weathered brown. Some saw the image of youth. Others a wizened elder. Not everyone saw the image as a man; women from all over claimed She spoke to them.

*"Of all the sins, the worst are those committed in My Name,"* the image's words became louder. *"Who among you dares to believe you know who God is and what God wants?"*

The air seemed to tremble and for a moment I thought that God would lash out and smite the evildoers everywhere. But what did I know?

*"You who believe that there is but one God, one True God,"* said the image. *"I, who have loved each of you equally from the moment I created you, will love each of you without end. If you would love me, you must learn to love each other as equals."*

Could a miracle beget miracles? Only God could make that come to pass.

*"What awaits you shall be my will,"* said the image. *"Do not expect My Hand to lift you any higher than you would raise yourselves. You shall earn great victories and suffer undeserved tragedies, but peace and happiness are yours for the making. I bless you and your world forever."*

Without an "Amen" it was over. The image faded away as if pixels were snowflakes melting in the springtime air. For a long moment I stood staring out at the blue, then flopped into my chair.

I had seen God and I wondered how many had missed the greatest, most incredible event in the history of the world. Coal miners deep underground, prisoners in solitary confinement, people who had been sleeping and didn't bother to get up and go to the window. Or maybe the miraculous image found its way through thick walls, deep underground and into people's dreams. Never underestimate The Almighty.

I thought about all the babies being born on the big day and for the rest of their lives they would regret having missed God. Of course, everyone who had died today got even closer to God on the very day God got closer to everyone alive.

For a moment, I wanted to turn on the TV or the radio and get online, but what was there to say? How does anyone follow God? Those overpaid talking heads, shrill DJ's



and doubting bloggers. I almost felt sorry for the lot. What could they possibly add to the sight all humanity had just experienced?

I felt it hit me down deep. No more cheating on my wife, I decided. No more padding my expense account, and for the first time in ages, I seriously considered going to church, but which one? Maybe they'd all be alike now. They'd have to be. The mystery, the debate, was over. At last, we *knew* God!

Then I realized what it meant. Dammit to hell! Now we know everything. I'm done. Finished. Once you've seen God, how could anyone go against His Almighty Word? What lie is left worth telling?

I went to my 'Zombie' story on the screen. Who had I been kidding all my life? One button deleted it. Now what?

Reality, more unbelievable and more fantastic than any whopper I had ever told, had taken me over. How beautiful and happy and wonderful the world was going to be. Was there anything I could possibly write that would mean a blessed thing?

Would Man no longer be able to question God? Was complete and total compliance the Divine Will? To challenge God I'd be the only hypocrite alive on earth.

Unless...

Of course!

I hit those keys.

*Posted on **IfTrue.com***

## **'God' is a Hoax!**

***Space aliens concoct image, fool billions.***

God forgive me, but a guy's gotta make a livin'.

Three and a half billion miles away, four alien spacecraft rendezvoused on the far side of Pluto.

“Something we’ve never considered,” came the message from the largest ship, which had traveled a thousand light years to take part in the operation. “Suppose one of those religions on that puny planet is right?”

“A small sect of an insignificant lifeform knowing the Almighty Creator?” responded the smallest ship. “They have yet to know themselves.”

A message came from the third ship: “But this species does claim the existence of an Almighty Creator.”

“Don’t they all?” added the fourth spacecraft.

“We have united them in the belief of a Supreme Being,” concluded the biggest ship. “That will make it much easier for that species to accept the existence of superior beings. *Us.*”

“How long?” asked the smallest ship.

“In time,” answered the third one.

The alien craft sped off into the galaxy.

They would return, God willing.



## THE PHALLIC SUPERHERO!

On July 10<sup>th</sup>, 1965, a legend was born, then mysteriously went to ground.

At 3:15 am, Alan Trad slid silently out of bed, leaving his partner snoring.

Downstairs to get dressed, he took a couple cupcakes to get him through the morning. Out in the car, he coasted to the road as not to wake a soul.

On the front seat next to him, he laid out the money and the map. This had to go down like clockwork. If the delivery trucks were on time, he'd have to make his deal quickly to hit the next one.

The first truck was three minutes late. Alan was waiting.

"Morning," he said to the driver. "Like to buy a packet of your stuff before it hits the racks."

"Waddaya jokin'?" came the reply.

"How about I pay you five times retail?" said Alan, flashing the cash. "Things fall off these trucks all the time."

One down. Six to go. Eight if he was lucky. The tip he'd gotten was bigger than a fix in the Kentucky Derby. History was at hand, and the more of it he could get his hands on, the better.

By noon he had hit every delivery. Only one driver refused his money so Alan waited until the product hit the shelves and bought them all.

He had no intention of showing his partner or anyone else what he had scored.

"Nobody knows," he vowed, his brakes squeaking as he pulled back into the driveway.

Alan kept his trunk locked till his lover went to visit 'mother' for the weekend. He had suspicions about 'mother,' but this time 'she' came in handy. No sooner did his companion drive away than he sprang into action. A stop at the hardware store, the collectibles shop, and then the camping outlet got him all the support materials. The pawn shop supplied his 'treasure chest,' a heavy-duty suitcase whose original owner had wound up taking it nowhere.

Back home he chose the perfect spot in the backyard and peeled off a section of matted grass. Then he began digging, deep enough so that no future gardening would stumble upon it, wide enough around to ensure plenty of insulation to keep the treasure dry.

"You are who you are, and I am who I am," he whispered with the first shovelful of dirt.

Finally the underground vault was ready for packing. Alan lay down the waterproof tarps, doubled over for maximum protection. Back to the car, he brought in his 'treasure chest,' the packing supplies and then, oh, so carefully, the prized stock, each to be individually wrapped. One by one he placed them in the tarp-lined suitcase.

One last look.

"A hero to believe in," he said before closing the lid, "To invest in."

Waiting till dark, Alan carried the heavy suitcase to the hole and gently set it in. Two more tarps around the sides and on top before he shoveled the dirt back in. Finally he replaced the sections of matted grass, patted them down and scattered the remaining soil around the lawn.

Alan's score would generate events beyond his wildest dreams, but it was not the best investment he could have made; he should have had his car's brakes repaired. Two days later they failed him, causing a head-on with an eighteen wheeler, killing him instantly.

His companion sold the house and moved in with 'mother.' The property would exchange hands six times over the next forty years. A young ad exec and his wife, a legal aid lawyer, bought it from the bank that had foreclosed on it in 2009. Charles and Mary had the backyard fenced in before bringing home a huge mutt from the pound.

'Calamity' loved to eat and sleep and dig holes in the back lawn. One Saturday morning...

"*Woof! Woof!*" Calamity barked at her deepest excavation to date.

"What have you found, girl?" asked Mary, kneeling next to the dog. "Charley, Calamity's got something. Bring a shovel."

"Looks like the corner...of a suitcase," said Charley, who sunk in the shovel and kept at it. "It's been covered with a tarp. Still intact."

Within five minutes, the suitcase was fully revealed. The locks had rusted badly, but it appeared in good shape.

"Maybe we should call the police," suggested Mary, always the lawyer.

"You think there're body parts in here?" said Charles. "Or maybe Mob money?"

"A terrorist cache?" said Mary.

"Planted last century to blow what up?" said Charles. "Not that heavy. Let's get it inside and see."

Charles and Mary carried the suitcase in and put it on the kitchen table.

A screwdriver plus a dinner knife popped the locks.

"Back up a bit, Hon," said Charles, gently lifting the lid. "I get to play Indiana Jones."

"Woof!" barked Calamity.

"More plastic covering," he said, pushing it aside. "My god!"

"Charley, tell me it's cash," said Mary. "A Mafia fortune."

"No, not money," said her husband. "Not yet."

"Then what?"

"We have found 'The Holy Grail' of lost American art!" said Charles, a dedicated fanboy dating back to the Ewoks. "Imagine if Michelangelo had just finished painting the ceiling of the Sistine Chapel and before anyone saw it, an earthquake buried it for all time..."

"Huh? What are you talking about?" asked Mary. "Priceless religious artifacts?"

"Remember the comic book?" asked Charles. "The thirty-two page monthly issue, the Children's Literature of the Baby Boomer Generation, billions sold worldwide?"

"Left in the dust by cartoons, live-action films, the Internet and video games," said Mary. "Long dead and buried."

"Not any more," said Charles, showing her a sample.

Mary's eyes opened wide. "**GAY MAN!** *The Phallic Superhero*?"

"Get us a couple of beers and let's go to church."

"You're serious?"

"As the Dead Sea Scrolls."

She joined him in the living room with her laptop.

"According to *Google*, **GAY MAN** was more *legend* than fact," said Mary, hitting the keyboard. "The underground comic allegedly got a short run in nineteen sixty-five. Something never fully explained went wrong with distribution. Civic groups and schools and especially the church cracked down and sacred off the vendors. Then the big comic

book companies got into the act--a proverbial witch hunt with the offensive material burned at the stake. All the evidence was purposely destroyed to keep it out of court. Not even the Smithsonian got a copy.”

“We’ve got five hundred and thirty-three,” said Charles, removing two copies from their plastic bags. “In *mint!*”

“Well, I like the cover,” she said. “*Nice costume, but I expected that, you know.*”

“*‘I am **GAY MAN** and I have the Phallic Power!’*” Charles began to read aloud. “*‘Skip the origin, nature or nurture, they’ll be debating forever. I became **GAY MAN** because everybody else had a hero and I wasn’t allowed to!*

*‘I can fly, I’m strong and with my ‘penetrating’ vision, I can see through anyone!*

*‘You see me as white?*

*‘I can be black!*

*‘Or brown!*

*‘I can be Asian or Hispanic.*

*‘I can be old or young, fat or skinny, ugly or handsome.*

*‘I can be anybody because I **could** be anybody!*

*‘I am who I am, you are who you are, but **you** could be me!’*”

“This guy’s got style, and an agenda,” said Charles. “Written, drawn and inked by...”

“I’m on it,” said Mary, back to the keyboard. “William Laird, (1940-1965) controversial and openly homosexual artist and creator of the ‘legendary,’ that word again, **GAY MAN**, who, if the costumed superhero ever existed, disappeared into American lore. When Laird’s longtime lover discovered that he was involved with **GAY MAN**, he ended the relationship. Laird either overdosed or committed suicide that same day.

“Laird’s mother claimed her son had been murdered by the comic book companies, but a cursory investigation produced no ‘smoking gun’.”

“Smoke *this*, world!” said Charles, shaking the book in his hands.

*“Look at all the other heroes made of paper and colored ink, imagination and ego,”* Mary took over the reading. *“I have the Phallic Power! I can be brave and courageous and humble and generous as I’m forced to cope with all kinds of personal problems. But I won’t be ashamed and I won’t be afraid. Not any more. I’m proud to be **GAY MAN!**”*

“And fed up!” said Charles. “Homosexuals didn’t change in phonebooths; they locked themselves in closets. William Laird was coming out with a vengeance!”

*“High above the great Metropolis, the Man of Steel lords over all he surveys, the greatest hero ever put into four-color print, when suddenly...”* Mary continued reading. *“**BLAM!** Never saw me coming, did you **Superman!** Bet you never dreamt I could even exist. Of course, it’s so acceptable that you’re a space alien with a righteous streak no human would possibly live up to!*

*“Well, think again, you overmuscled, overpowered, “mild-mannered” male impersonator!*

*“**KAA-BLAMM!** I’m just as masculine as you’ll ever be and I’m from right here!”*

[On the next page, **GAY MAN** becomes one of his many ‘secret identities’: a doctor in a children’s cancer ward. *How would they feel if they found out that not even **GAY MAN** could save them?*]

*“But that dark, dark night...high in the skyline of Gotham City...*

*“Who are you?” [Said the Caped Crusader],”* read Mary.

*“Who are you, with your late filthy rich father and your cute ‘Boy Wonder?’ [Said **GAY MAN**] Always wished you could be me, didn’t you? Even for just one issue!’*

*“**BLAM!** Did that hurt? Not as much as you’ve hurt me! And one other thing, **Bat-Man**, something that’s been bugging me ever since you appeared...’*

*“**BOOM!** Rework that cowl!”*

“Too bad,” said Charles. “Laird didn’t live long enough to see nipples on a Bat-suit.”

[**GAY MAN** becomes one of the best running backs in the NFL. On Sunday, he scores two touchdowns, then makes sure a reporter takes a picture of him at a strip club.]



*“But Monday night, instead of watching football, on a marvelous New York City skyscraper...”* read Mary. *“You’re new in this biz, wall-crawler, but it doesn’t take “gay intuition” to know you’ll make it big.’*

*“Who are you and what do you want?”* [asks **Spider-Man**],” read Mary.

*“To settle this here and now!” **BLAM!** “I am **GAY MAN** and I’ve got intimate hang-ups all my own, but I don’t look like a young Dick Clark and I never want to!”*

[**GAY MAN** changes into a married father of three. If his family ever discovers that he is **GAY MAN**, he’d *have* to kill himself.]

“Oh, man!” said Charles. “The copyright lawyers would’ve been on this like wolves. What was the publisher thinking?”

“Haymarket Publishing, Frank Dodd, owner’,” said Mary on the keyboard. “Labeled a ‘homosexual pornographer’ by the Comics Code Committee and publisher of the notoriously mythical **GAY MAN**. The comic’s unsolved disappearance drove him to bankruptcy. Haymarket Publishing burned to the ground in August, sixty-five. Convicted of torching his own business, Dodd died in prison, nineteen seventy-two.”

“But why the exclusive New York run?” asked Charles. “Wouldn’t the book have fared better in say, San Francisco?”

“Dodd may have been hedging his bet,” said Mary. “If **GAY MAN** were to be judged pornographic, crossing state lines would have made it a federal case-conspiracy ‘to corrupt the morals of America’s youth’.

“They’d’ve thrown away the key.”

“Priceless publicity and he wussed out,” said Charles. “**GAY MAN** would have blown the whole comic book industry... *away!*”

“*Woof! Woof!*” barked ‘Calamity’.

*“‘At the mega-complex that is Stark Industries...’ “* read Charles. *“Womanizer and drunk! You metal up and get to be a hero, **Iron Man!** Welcome to knuckle therapy.” **BLAM!** “I have the Phallic Power, but I’m supposed to change my deviate, perverted ways? Is that what you pontificate, Golden Avenger?” **BLAM!***

[As an elementary school teacher, **GAY MAN** is harassed and intimidated by an overbearing female principal while half the women teachers pursue him. What if one discovers and reveals his ‘secret identity’? What will the children believe?]

With the turn of a page, **GAY MAN** is confronted by the sexiest, most buxom characters in comicdom.

"I knew this was coming," said Mary. "'Women's issues'."

*"'You super-heroines,'" read Charles. "'Marketable tarts created by men, perhaps even by **GAY MAN** himself! Named after housebroken cats and birds, you think you're who little girls want to be?'*

**BLAM! KA-BOOM!** *"Nobody could be so stupid to be taken in by you!*

*"As for you, **Wonder Woman**, are you an authentic Amazon or not?" **BLAM!** "Either go topless or stay in the closet!"*

"Ow!" said Mary. "The sixties feminists would have castrated the author and publisher with a straight razor!"

"They'd have to wait in line," said Charles, still reading aloud.

*"From Marvel and DC, monolithic competitors seeking to stomp out all originality and independence sought by struggling writers and small publishers, a horde of copyrighted mealtickets attacked **GAY MAN** --- Gods and giants, mutants and monsters, sorcerers and space beings, robots, androids and every kind of hero for every kind of reader except..."*

**"BLAM! KA-BAMM! KA-BOOM!"**

*"Afraid to be seen in the same story with the likes of me, are you?" [asked **Gay Man**] "Ashamed to be on the same page, together in the same panel with a homosexual hero?"*

**GAY MAN** takes them on, one and two and three at time, his pride his power, his strength his self-esteem, and when each and every one had been bested, he piles them high in a heap in the center of the marketplace.

Hand over hand, he climbs to the top and cries out to the reader.

*"I didn't beat these phony heroes because I'm bigger or better, smarter or stronger. I beat them because I'm real, because I'm true!*

*"I'm not wrong or evil or sick. I'm just me!*

*"You are who you are and I am who I am, and I am **GAY MAN!** I am one of you!*

*"I could be your plumber or your priest, a cop or a carpenter, a soldier or a salesman, a billionaire or a bum.*

*"I might be your father, your brother or your son. I could even be...you!"*

"Whoa!" said Charles, closing the comic. "Laird and Dodd not only took on the publishing giants, but the very metaphor of the superhero with 'secret identity' and showy costume. Singlehandedly, **GAY MAN** could have destroyed the industry!"

"Huh, how?"

"Because in their own comic book way, committed to their powers and showy costumes, not about choice or preference, but *fate*...every character is as 'gay' as **GAY MAN**."

"Beaten by the *fear* of the 'Phallic Superhero!'"

"Poor William Laird," said Charles. "Whether he ODeD, offed himself or was murdered, we have his life in our hands. To shred **GAY MAN** and bag it for the dump...We'd be killing him all over again."

"I've got a bad feeling about this," said Mary.

*Uh-oh*, thought Charles. When the wife quoted STAR WARS, he knew there was a problem.

"*Arragh!*" 'Calamity' lay down and slept.

"Could we get in trouble for this?" he asked. "Sued?"

"Nobody can sue a 'ghost'. This is 'found stuff,' ours, free and clear, but...Hmm," said Mary. "I bet an issue of **GAY MAN** would make for a treasured *wedding present*."

"Then let's do the American thing....," said Charles, taking Mary by the hand to his deluxe PC in the den. "And sell **GAY MAN** to the highest bidder."

"eBay!" said Mary.

Charles scanned the cover, wrote in the text. With one more click of the mouse..."Forty-five years ago, The Powers That Were conspired against **GAY MAN** and thought they had buried him forever. You up for his surprise comeback?"

"All the way to the bank," she said. "Go **GAY MAN!**"

The comic book legend hit the Internet market like a supernova. In less than twenty-four hours, 63 bids brought the price to \$45,000. The auction closed at \$75,500.

Within a week, Charles had sold every copy but two. Only the last 25 brought less than \$10,000. He sent one copy to the Museum of Comic Book Art and, of course, to the Smithsonian Institution.

'Calamity' got a brand new dog house and lived happily the rest of her life on a custom health food diet.

Charles and Mary would have three children before divorcing. All would graduate debt-free from Ivy League schools.

As the character's copyright had long since expired, **GAY MAN** was in the public domain. The Church, the Comics Code Committee, and the Conservatives be damned, MARVEL and DC Comics would each publish their own '32-page full-color monthly' series.

Owned by Warner Brothers, the DC version would be 'Recommended for Adult readers'. Backed by Disney, MARVEL's would be 'PG-13'.

The comic book *lives again!*

Competing video games would hit the shelves by the end of the year.

Beating the comic books and computer fare to the market, competing images of **GAY MAN** would appear on T-shirts, bathrobes, leather jackets, petroleum jelly, vibrators and condoms.

To the winner goes the film franchise.

His *Phallic Power!*

# SUPERMAX CAESAR



## CARE CUSTODY CONTROL

...Superintendent Frank Caesar, Masters' Degree in criminal justice, ten years a Corrections Officer, multiple commendations, named leader of the elite *Correctional Emergency Response Team (CERT)*. If you're wearing a green or orange jumpsuit and you see me coming in full riot gear, drop to your knees and put your hands behind your head or I'll shoot you where you stand. In ten 'responses', I never had to.

That got me the 'Supermax'.

In the middle of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, to enhance security and to 'equalize the experience' (and save money), the United States consolidated every death row in the nation, 3,518 inmates, into a singular mammoth \$2 *billion* facility. Built on the top of Faith Mountain, bordering the Blue Ridge Mountains, but out of sight of Skyline Drive, Supermax is an impregnable fortress and a world unto itself.

Quickly dubbed 'Area 52', which, according to the recent poll, 37.5% of Americans wished did *not* exist.

No more 'Death Rows' - '52 24/7.'

I'm the Warden, but 'General' is more like it. With a legion of 2,017 guards, kitchen staff and medical personnel plus a full arsenal including rocket propelled grenades and shoulder launched surface-to-air missiles, full bio-gear and hazmat capability, there are Third World countries I could take over.

In-house generators supply the power, air and water purification and keep more than a year's supply of food frozen. The medical center rivals the state's best hospitals and the laundry capacity left major hotels in the dust. One way in and out—a fifteen-mile winding road paved over a series of explosive charges. A fleet of buses took the shifts to and from work and the 'park and ride' lots below. Activating a coded sequence from my command center, I could turn the twenty-million dollar highway into impassable rubble.

Supermax was not conceived or created to be a prison or a correctional facility. No one was doing hard time. None were being rehabilitated. All were waiting. Neither for a parole nor for a reprieve--for finality. Following each execution, the body was wheeled to the crematorium and incinerated. Contained in a stainless steel urn, the ashes would then be turned over to the next of kin.

An empty grass field off the south wall had been set aside for demonstrators who filled it with every scheduled execution. But the killing went on and on. Nothing short of an act of Congress would stop it. Even in the event of a thermonuclear war or a chemical or biological attack, 'Area 52' would remain secure and the wheels of American justice would keep on turning.

Still young and spirited, the newest condemned prisoner was brought before me fully shackled, but not gagged.

"Hail Caesar," he said with a smirk. "Let's do this like Brutus."

"Pardon me," I said.

"Quick, sudden, clean," he replied. "Kill the appeals process. Bring on the 'unkindest cut of all.'"

"In a hurry?" I said.

"Always," he said emphatically. "I was willing to risk my freedom, my very life, to make a stand, to back up my beliefs."

"You blew up a schoolbus and killed fourteen kids."

"Someone had to wake up the people," he replied. "I've apologized for the deaths a hundred times over. The government could easily make up the loss by allowing fourteen fewer abortions."

"I want to be the symbol standing tall against capital punishment. It'll never end until we peak. Five-hundred and sixty-five last year. Six hundred and twenty-one so far this year. If 'Area 52' can break a thousand, maybe enough Americans will get sick enough to shut this place down."

"You'll be lying down on a gurney. Until then, in an eight by ten cell."

"With my life decisions already made," he snapped back. "I'll take that final walk with my head held high, a free man to the very end while you'll still be serving a life sentence in your own Supermax."

A jail big or small is a community with a set hierarchy. And in the true spirit of American justice, the taxpayers spend the most on the worst, making 'Area 52' the most private, most exclusive, and most secure community in the country.

As long as people are going to murder others, America will have capital punishment. The ancient Romans had it right: "Outside!" Found guilty by the Powers That Be, the immediate sword. "Let's do this like Brutus!"

I never killed anyone. Walked with more than a thousand men and women on that 'last mile', had them strapped down. His or her final statement, then a nod from me, 'thumbs down' for all eternity.

Not killing. Doing what America wanted done.

Deep down, I knew whatever it took to kill, I had plenty of. Skill, too. Got a gold-plated .45 CERT Championship trophy pistol. A Glock might fire faster, but I never need a second shot.

It wouldn't be the act of killing that would get me, but the aftermath. By my own actions, my own need, I had taken it upon myself to end another's life. In self-defense or protecting my family or whatever. How would it hit me?

My wife and kids understand me, I think.

"You're running Supermax, not for the state," she'd tell me. "But for me and the boys. Who would you believe it? We stick this out together and our children will be able to go to college and graduate debt-free. and far away from this place."

I still had my dream. Imagine if, instead of a multi-billion dollar 'waiting room' for the scum of the nation, America's treasure and technology had been invested in a 'Utopian Center', housing the best and the brightest united in a mission to restore the United States as the world's one true superpower.

Never gonna happen because my work will never be done. With every execution and urn of gray ash, the 'vacancy' is quickly filled. The system was forever self-sustaining, the process endless.

*Early the next morning, a meteor not much bigger than a basketball slammed into a wheatfield in Kansas. The volunteer fire department had the blazing crops under control within a few hours. Not long after, the firefighters and others on the scene began dying.*

Jail is a mindset, a way of life, a system of systems learned by rote. Not unlike love; unless you've been *in*, you don't, *can't* understand what jail is. A moment spent in jail becomes an indelible mark that all who have been inside carry to their graves. From ancient dungeons to high-tech facilities, each jail possessed its signature smell, but it's the overwhelming *feeling* of the institution—leave for a day, a month, a year, ten years and when you return, it's as if you had just stepped outside for a cigarette.

We had an execution that afternoon. A multiple-child murderer and still the south field was full of demonstrators. Would it ever change? When the last inmate had walked the last mile and all the cells were empty, would it finally be over? How many would be left when I retired, the job still not completed. Could it ever be? What would end it?

But I was killing no one. I simply made sure that the law of the land was carried out. And through every phase of the process I would do all that I could to preserve and protect the humanity of the individual to the end, even if he or she chose not to.



After it was over, I went up on the north wall and looked out over the countryside and tried yet again to wonder what it all meant. With every execution had a bit of my own humanity been killed? I wasn't going to lock myself into that.

Home, wife and family were my life. Jail was just my job. Any freedom I had lay outside these walls. Could an inmate have more? What does freedom mean if it comes free? I made sacrifices to be where I am, to earn what I've got. If being free can be measured by the number of choices you have, then how much freedom did I have left?

*The meteor 'disease' had no symptoms. No warning. Victims would suddenly clutch their throats and fall over dead. There was no protection. Scientists in full hazmat suits fell just as fast. The Center for Disease Control rushed full medical teams to the Kansas site. With 48 hours, 90% were dead and the rest were dying.*

In jail, security is...what Security says security is. As the Warden, I *am* Security. I had handpicked every staff member, gave no BS and took none; gambling, drugs, obesity, adultery, or abuse of any kind, the offender was gone. Not a staff or a force, we liked to think of ourselves as a hardened family forged by duty. No weakness, no let-up. Otherwise, we'd be no different from the inmates.

*In three days, the "meteor plague" had killed nearly one million people in the heartland. The President declared a nationwide 'state of emergency,' but too late to stop its spread. Thousands were dying every hour. No cure or vaccine or any kind of preventative treatment could save lives.*

*Running away was not an option. The rest of the world refused to allow Americans to cross their borders. Trying to land in other countries, passenger airliners from the US were being shot down. The Mexicans and Canadians had shut the borders tight and trying to flee, thousands of Americans were killed 'attempting to escape'.*

What could I do? Where could we go? There was no place safe to run. I used to enjoy waking up to the smell of fresh-brewed coffee and then help the boys get ready for school. All the schools closed as the plague closed in.

“Stay home. Lock the doors and the windows,” I ordered my wife. “I’ll think of something.”

*When the plague hit Washington DC, the President and his staff boarded Air Force One and headed for Hawaii. The aircraft got within 300 miles of the islands when carrier-based Navy fighters blew it out of the sky.*

"This is Caesar," I got on my cell. "All block commanders to the briefing room."

'Only the *best* work here!' stated the sign on the back wall. I stuck to it. My cohorts trusted and respected me because I trusted and respected them. Men and women of all colors, ages and religions.

"Roll out the buses," I said. "Get your wives and husbands, boyfriends and girlfriends and children behind the walls. Pack *very* light. Sorry, no pals, parents or pets."

I laid out my plan, gave everyone the option. All were in.

I would take the first step. Mine would be the signal. There'd be no going back.

The 'Bus Bomber' was in his cell studying a pile of legal briefs. For just a moment I wondered if he thought he could find the best possible way out, a final statement that would last forever.

“Caesar,” he challenged me. “What brings you to my house?”

“Let's do this like Brutus,” I said, pulled out my CERT trophy pistol and gave him a *reverse* 'Coup de Gras' between the eyes. His body flew back and hit the wall a split second after his brains did. He dropped without a twitch.

I waited for the pain or the joy or the outrage or the guilt to hit me and nothing did. He was over.

"This is Caesar," I got on my cell to my troops. "You know the drill. 'Coup de Gras' all around."

Guns blazed.

All in and accounted for, I blew the road, 10,000 tons of rock bouncing and flying. Anybody trying to get in or out was coming or going on foot.

It took a while to get used to sleeping on a mattress on the cell floor, but I had to give my wife the bed. All my men did. The cell was big enough only to sleep in and our two boys in the adjoining cell found that difficult at first.

Life was confining, but it sure beat the alternative.

The inmates had been executed en masse in less than fifteen minutes. It would take nearly a week for the crematorium to burn all the bodies. As cold flesh and bone became hot gray ash, I felt no historic pang. The past was gone, as dead and as distant as the dinosaurs. How could we have a future?

The first week was the hardest. Laying down the law in our 'new community' made for an easy start. Every man and woman already knew what happened to lawbreakers.

It was knowing that it might be in vain. If just one of us had been infected, everyone in the former Supermax was doomed.

None of us had been. In the land of the free, the only survivors were in jail.

The plague spread to South America and then to Europe and Asia and Africa. And the small islands? Were we the last people on earth?

From the north tower I watched the lights go out as far as I could see till all was dark. Only the stars were twinkling. The sole Americans alive, we were the last, best hope in the world.

We could hold out for a full year. Then a decision had to be made.

"This is Caesar," I would say to my people. "Food, water, fuel are almost exhausted, but we're just warming up. For nearly twelve long months, we have been living like inmates, but born free Americans, we're not going to die in jail, cowering behind these walls until we starve to death."

I'd have been writing and rewriting for weeks, maybe months, polishing every word, but it couldn't sound *read*, had to be spirited.

"Tomorrow at dawn we are setting out, every last one of us, on an exodus into America. And we're never going back to jail! If the alien virus is still active, we'll be dead in under a week, then let us fall on free land and not a prison's floor."

Practicing alone, then in front of my family, I had to make them feel my passion for this challenge, journey, opportunity, our destiny!

"Together we have grown close. Our strength is in our confidence and our courage, our loyalty and our diversity. It's fifteen miles of busted, broken rocks down the mountain, but only the beginning. The harder going will be beyond, a new America, a new world for the making."

Finish with a fire-up finale.

"Let's do this like Brutus!"



## The Later Lives of **Nathan Hale**

*Be careful what you regret.*

In the immortal kingdom of the Almighty Creator, on the outskirts of the realm, lurk the near-gods, wise-fools who play with the fates of mortals. Not to destroy or to despoil, but to recut and add color to the fabric of the universe — to stir up the natural order.

As cruel and chaotic as these immortal tricksters might seem, there is a method to their madness: to teach us lessons we'd have never learned otherwise.

On the night of September 21st 1776, in the young metropolis of New York, revolution was in the air and the wind had yet to belong to either side. Could the upstart

Colonies possibly defeat the mighty British Empire? A little breeze one way or the other might decide the outcome.

*High above the budding skyline, a pair of pranksters watched from the stars. Coyote, the senior trickster, had staked out the entire continent before any man, white, black, red or yellow ever set foot on it. At his side was his cosmic comrade, Raven. Even with a full five millennia under his wings, he was still much the junior partner. Both possessed a keen eye for mischief.*

*“Behold the prisoner yonder, a patriot among the pansies,” said Raven. “I foresee a game to play.”*

*“Your instincts have sharpened with age, my young friend,” said Coyote. “A legend is about to bloom.”*

The greenhouse of the Beekman Mansion Estate was serving as a temporary stockade for a condemned spy.

Tall and striking, a Yale scholar, and barely twenty-one, the condemned spy was led from the fauna to his destiny. Caught the night before with damning evidence on his person, he refused to divulge no more than his name and rank in the Colonial Army.

*“Note the firmness of his gait, the conviction in his eyes,” said Coyote. “Here is a hero who will live long beyond his years.”*

*“For failing in his mission?” asked Raven. “He deserves more than a rope to swing from?”*

*“So we shall see,” said Coyote.*

On the brink of death and historic oblivion, the patriot stood tall under an apple tree as a noose was put around his neck.

“Would you care to make a dying speech and confession?” asked the British commander.

“I only regret,” said Nathan Hale, “that I have but one life to lose for my country.” And then it was over.

*“But what if he didn’t?” said Coyote. “How many lives would it take till...?”*

*“Oh, no!” said Raven. “You wouldn’t...”*

And so it began.

Nathan Hale was born again, a new American citizen, in 1790. At eighteen he enlisted in the Army under the command of Andrew Jackson. He fought bravely in the War of 1812. On December 24th, the United States and British commissioners met in Ghent, Belgium and signed a peace treaty.

*“The war is over,” said Raven. “And Nathan Hale survived. He doesn’t have to go on losing his life for his country.”*

*“Not quite,” said Coyote.*

Word did not reach New Orleans in time. On the foggy morning of January 8th, 1814, in a battle of chaos and confusion, Andrew Jackson and his army won a great victory. The British suffered more than 2,000 casualties. Fewer than 75 Americans were killed. Nathan Hale was one of them.

*“He died for nothing!” said Raven.*

*“Did he?” asked Coyote. “Every year that battle is celebrated. Songs are sung and heroes remembered. The war might have been forgotten if that final round had never been fought.”*

*“Then it’s never going to change?” said Raven. “He’ll go on forever dying for his country.”*

*“Patience,” said Coyote. “Life goes on anew.”*

Born again in 1842. Nathan went to war to preserve the Union and free all Americans. On the 3rd of July, 1863, more than 50,000 soldiers lay dead at Gettysburg, including a Union soldier, Nathan Hale.

*“Is there never a war without wholesale slaughter?” asked Coyote. “Must this nation forever feud to find itself?”*

*“When will he?” said Raven. “Will there ever come a time when his heart will not be in the fight?”*

Nathan Hale was born again in 1866. Ten years later, after Colonel Custer had been wiped out at Little Big Horn, the beginning of the end of the Indian Wars was at hand.

On the morning of December 28th 1890, at Wounded Knee Creek, Nathan Hale, a private in the Army, was ordered to search and disarm a band of Lakota, mostly old men, women and children, being escorted to the reservation. The Native Americans obeyed, stacking their guns in the center of the camp. But the battalion commander was not satisfied. The soldiers went from tent to tent, removing knives, axes and other tools and throwing them into the pile. Then they began searching individual warriors.

“No,” cried one of the Lakota. “I traded too much for my new rifle. It belongs to me!”

The soldiers grabbed him. From somewhere a shot rang out. The whole battalion opened up. Cannon from the high ground fired into the camp.

“Cease fire!” yelled Nathan only once before he was cut down. When it was over, more than 300 Sioux had been killed and 25 soldiers lay dead.

*“Poor innocent fool. Tried to stop the fighting and shot by his own countrymen,” said Raven. “Surely now he will see the error of his pledge.”*

*“Will he?” said Coyote. “Would I choose a man who would so quickly break his word?”*

Nathan Hale was born again in 1895. In 1914, he enlisted to fight in The War to End All Wars. Finally there would be peace when this one was over. A doughboy in the trenches, caked with mud and soaking wet, Hale is ignored by his superiors and dies of pneumonia. With his dying breath, he blesses his country.

*“An inglorious end to whom might have been a hero yet again,” said Raven. “Shouldn’t we have given him at least a fighting chance?”*

*“But he was there. And he had no regrets,” said Coyote. “Life and death is so often the luck of the draw, but in drawing his last pitiful breath, he refused to curse his country. He’s as much a hero as any of them.”*

*“Will he ever get another chance?” asked Raven.*

*“Opportunities are endless,” said Coyote.*

Born in 1923, Hale is one of the first to die on Omaha Beach in the D-Day invasion of World War II.

*“Couldn’t he have fired a shot before dying? Couldn’t we have allowed him to fight and kill the enemy instead of just wasting his life?” said Raven.*

*“He had to die, here and now,” said Coyote. “Because somebody had to. Good men by the thousands die anonymous deaths. War isn’t personal. Losing your life for your country is.”*

*“We’re not judges, are we?” said Raven.*

*“We don’t have to be,” said Coyote.*



*“Yet another war on the horizon?” asks Raven.*

*“Isn’t there always?”*

*“The big, long one on the other side of the world?” said Raven. “When his country loses, what difference will his life make then?”*

*“Have you gotten it yet?” said Coyote. “It was never his life that made any difference, but his death.”*

*“Yet another war far away?”*

*“No. A more important fight. And much closer to home.”*

The next Nathan was born the 1945 in Harlem. Raised to believe that ‘all men were created equal,’ he soon found out differently and decided to do something about it. On the night of September 22nd, 1968, Nathan was pulled off an Alabama road, bound and gagged and thrown in the back of a car. Driven to a mass gathering, the driver and his two henchmen then put on their white robes.

“We got us a Civil Rights Yankee!” boasted the leader of the trio as the other two dragged Nathan to the center of the Klu Klux Klan assembly.

The ceremony began. A cross was ignited and it burned brightly in the field. A noose was fashioned and passed hand to hand as if it were a sacred thing.

If there were terror and hatred within Nathan, he refused to show either.

“I am so sorry 'bout one thing,” announced the Grand Dragon as he tightened the rope around Nathan’s neck. “I only regret I that have but one nigger to lynch for my country.”

*“Prankster most fowl,” said Raven. “Did he have to die like that?”*

*“And be found that way,” said Coyote. “His funeral will be the biggest in the state’s history. People will make all kinds of speeches about change and truth.”*

*“Then the country gained by Nathan losing his life?”*

*“That’s his eternal legacy. But all those people, deep down, did not regret Nathan losing his life for his country any more than he did. Because if not Nathan, who? One of them or one of their mothers or fathers or brothers or sisters or sons or daughters? Let it be Nathan. He knows what dying is for.”*

Born again in 1971, Nathan commanded a tank in 1991’s Desert Storm.

At the front, attacking an Iraqi convoy, his struck an enemy mine. 'Disregarding his own personal safety, Corporal Hale saved the lives of two of his crewman,' later read the Silver Star citation.

As Nathan comforted his wounded comrades, an enemy sniper took aim. Four American soldiers would fall victim before the sniper was killed. Nathan Hale would not be one of them. The bullet meant for him missed by less than an inch.

*"At long last, he gets to live out his life," said Raven. "He certainly deserves it. No, don't tell me. I've spoken too soon?"*

*"Ah, at long last, it is you who are learning."*

Victory achieved, Hale was honorably discharged in 1994. He returned home, finished college, got married and started a family. He was teaching high school when the letter came.

"I've been called back in," he said to his wife.

"No, Nathan, no," she cried, pregnant with their third child. "You've served your time. We can fight this."

"Honey, I fight for my country, never against it," said Nathan.

Two weeks later Nathan was back in uniform. He returned home for a short leave before going overseas.

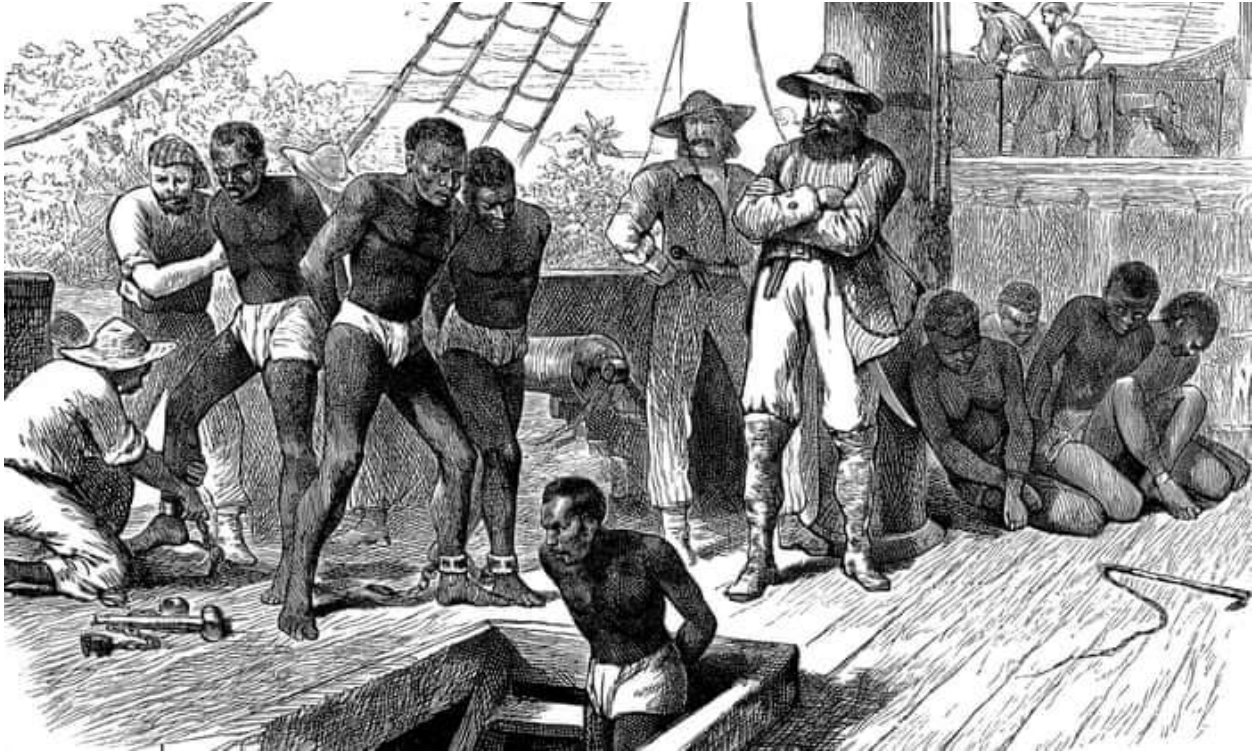
"I have to do this," he said as he kissed his wife good-bye. "It's who and what we are."

Nathan never saw his family again.

*"Coyote, you are the dog of the universe!" said Raven.*

*"Not at all. Nathan will return yet again and he will not be alone. Men and women, by the hundreds, thousands, millions, must be willing, without regret, to lose their lives for their countries... or there would be no countries, leaving us so little to play with.*

*"There's always a Nathan Hale. Has to be."*



# THE TRUTH BE TOLD

*Will it set us free?*

Away, away, in the heart of God's Universe, spun the planet Zora around a magnificent star, countless billions of years in the burning. Not very large with only a couple of moons, yet Zora was considered the most important planet in the Galaxy, for here was the headquarters of the League of Worlds, keeper of peace and guardian of progress for more than 1000 species and civilizations.

Plagga, an elder Frexen, a planet trillions of miles distant, was chairman of the League's "Advance Team," a highly specialized and secretive cadre given the vital task of "lubricating the administrative process" for new planets and new species chosen as potential candidates for membership. Over the eons, the League had learned the tragic consequences of admitting "technically qualified, but socially immature civilizations."

The Advance Team had been created to prevent future disasters. Their latest mission had been flawlessly executed. Extensive preparation had been done before the artifact was chosen and then implanted, but the job wasn't over yet.

Not without the final word from the High Commissioner.

"Plagga, let me congratulate you and your team on your latest mission. The 're-socialization' process has begun?"

"Soon, Commissioner," said Plagga, floating gently before his much larger superior. "We suspect the 'humans' have already recovered the artifact. The discovery will lead them to believe a great lie which, in turn, will create a much better truth."

"You're certain they will pursue the implications to the desired results?"

"If they do, then their planet will be worthy of further consideration for admittance to the League."

"And if they do not?" asked the Commissioner. "Or if they purposely conceal the 'evidence' your team positioned for them to find?"

"If that's the case, then the League wants nothing to do with them. But these humans--- the species has an innate curiosity and, at times, a refreshing sense of fair play."

"Even though we do not?" said the High Commissioner.

"But we do, sir. With a single gesture we can transfer the guilt and shame of two once-distinct races on to a long-extinct alien culture. A fair trade-off, wouldn't you agree?"

"I've absorbed all the data," said the High Commissioner. "The forensics were an especially prudent touch."

"One of our new arrangers," said Plagga. "A thousand or ten thousand years from now, should the humans definitively trace the source of the artifact, they will confirm that the Tutrenic civilization blew itself up well within the detectable timeline."

"The earthlings will blame the dead?"

"One of their most enduring customs," said Plagga

"And forgive the living?"

“That they still have to learn.”

A mere one million light years away...

“The National Museum of African-American History and Culture is much more than a tourist attraction,” declared Dr. Gregory Sentow on February, 23, 2026, his first official day as its new director. “Nor will it function as a ‘black attic’, storing and displaying souvenirs of days gone by. Neither black nor brown, this building is a red, white and blue museum created to inspire generations of visitors from around the world with truly American stories of perseverance, courage, talent and triumph.

“Most of all, this building is dedicated to truth,” he went on, full of intense determination. “Not truth as we want to see it. Not truth watered down or gussied up. Not truth which might be more ‘politically correct’ for our patrons and the public. But the full, honest and unsparing truth telling who we were, and how and why we came to be who we are.”

His staff of fifty-six, African-Americans all, applauded. For good reason. Dr, Sentow had once been the director of curatorial affairs for the Smithsonian's National Museum of American History and then the president of the Chicago Historical Society. A unanimous choice of Congress, he would bring firm leadership and tireless resolve to the centerpiece of the Black American Experience.

Sentow was the ideal man for the job. He had traced his roots back to the Watusi in Kenya. He had even identified the slave ships that had taken his African family to America. Some had died during the crossing. At least half a dozen of his ancestors had been lynched and his grandfather was shot and killed by police during the Civil Rights Movement. He did not marry his wife until he could confirm that she was as “pure” black as he was. None of his “pure” children would pollute his family blood by marrying outside the race.

Blatant racism? Sentow vehemently disagreed, saying that due to ever-increasing interracial mingling, by the end of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there would be no more ‘African-Americans’—the race completely melted into the American pot, making his museum irrelevant.

But wasn’t it already? With the election and re-election of an African-American President in 2008 and 2020, hadn’t blacks completely fulfilled their destiny as American citizens, all created equal, ‘Free at last’?

Typical shortsighted rationale, thought Sentow. Unlike white “pioneers” and “illegal aliens” from all over the world, blacks had been forced to come to this country in chains, 12,000,000 free and innocent people taken from their homes and

families for more than four centuries—“alien abductions” on an epic scale. How can “equality” equate to that?

The National Museum of African-American History and Culture had taken more than one hundred years to break ground. Efforts began in the early 1900's but were repeatedly thwarted by political and social opposition well into the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. In 1994 white Conservatives blocked Senate passage of a bill authorizing the museum, declaring that Congress and the American taxpayers should not have to pay for it.

The African-American community was not one for giving up. Finally, after years of wrangling an appropriate five-acre site was approved adjacent to the Washington Monument across the street from the National Museum of American History. The 19<sup>th</sup> museum in the Smithsonian complex was completed in 2010 at a cost of nearly \$500 million, half of which was paid for by the federal government, the rest by corporate and private sources including millions of single-dollar donations by American schoolchildren, the majority from the inner city poor.

Sentow would make sure not a penny would be misspent. Nor would he permit Black History to be misrepresented. However, the director's most important function had little to do with history and much to do about money—raising cash for new exhibits and expeditions by hitting up black politicians, corporate heads, entertainers and athletes.

Competition was fierce. Sentow's biggest rivals were his neighbors in the Mall—the Holocaust Museum and the Museum of the American Indian. Fighting for the same liberal dollars, Sentow regarded his brother directors with disdain. Sure, 6,000,000 Jews had been murdered by the Nazis, but Hitler's regime had only lasted a dozen years, a blink of history's eye. As for the Native Americans swindled and slaughtered by invading whites---at least they got to stay in their own country. Neither could compare to the unspeakable crime of slavery.

'Never forget,' shouted the Jews, Not strong enough, held Sentow. 'Always remember!' was his battle cry and this museum would make sure America always did. *Always!*

“Doctor Sentow,” said his secretary. “Doctor Rasheem just arrived at the airport and is en route. He *must* see you, claims it's urgent.”

Sentow cringed. The museum's star archeologist rushing back from his latest dig to impress the new director, and beg for additional bucks! That graverobber had another thing coming!

Dr. Rasheem arrived carrying a fancy aluminum attaché case. Dr. Sentow shook his coffee-colored hand and took an immediate dislike to his visitor. By his color, he was an obviously of “impure” heritage. Would all African-Americans soon be less than black?

The Jews and the Native Americans were on verge of disappearing as pure ethnic minorities; fewer and fewer “full-bloods” left as time went on.

Ahmad Rasheem irked him even further. The former Baptist ‘Robert Moore,’ he had changed his ‘slave name’ when he converted to Islam, a clear betrayal of Jesus.

“Dr. Rasheem, let me spare you the practiced spiel,” said Sentow, leaning back in his plush director’s chair. “No additional money will be forthcoming until I have thoroughly reviewed all reports and...”

“Back off, Mister ‘New Director,’” said Rasheem sternly. “I didn’t jump on an airplane in the middle of the night to come here and pick your pocket. We’ve made a discovery...”

“At the Campeche site?” said Sentow unimpressed. “That’s been dug and redug since the turn of the century.”

In 2006, in Campache, a Mexican port city that dates back to colonial times, archeologists unearthed the ruins of an old church and its burial grounds. Of the skeletal remains of at least 180 people, nearly a hundred had been confirmed as African blacks, brought to the New World as slaves around 1550. It was the particular mix of strontium in the teeth that served as ‘birth certificates’ showing that they had been born and spent their early years in West Africa. Some of their teeth were filed and chipped to sharp edges in a decorative practice characteristic of certain African tribes. Further examination of other sites, including a 17th- and 18th-century African Burial Ground, uncovered in 1991 in Lower Manhattan had led many anthropologists to believe that prior to 1600, the majority of people ‘resettled’ in the New World were not idealized whites, Catholic missionaries or Spanish *conquistadores*, but black slaves.

Without Africans, Sentow firmly believed, there would have been no Americans.

Dr. Rasheem flipped open his attaché case and handed Sentow a pair of rubber gloves sealed in plastic. He took another pair out for himself.

“I take it you found yet another Spanish medallion?” said Sentow, putting on the gloves. “Or perhaps an African piece fit a display case?”

“Not exactly,” said Rasheem, taking out a larger plastic bag, this one double-sealed. “Please handle with extreme care.”

Sentow squinted at the object as he opened the bag. A smooth blue rod, perhaps six inches long. Holding it in his hands, he discovered that it was amazingly light weight and decorated with hieroglyphic-like symbols.

“Looks like a lynchpin of a machine, one of your Japanese bulldozers, perhaps,” said Sentow cynically. “You’d have me show this to one of our corporate sponsors?”

“The artifact was discovered a full eight feet *below* the deepest gravesite. Geographic tests proved conclusively that the ground had not been artificially disturbed in more than five hundred years.”

“So it wasn’t a ‘plant’ by a practical joker. So what? This steel-type bar could have been forged by one of the first African blacksmiths.”

“It isn’t steel or any kind of metal we know of. Some form of composite. Incredible strong, impervious to oxidation, impenetrable by laser and gamma rays. Carbon dating proved useless.”

“Enough beating around the bush,” demanded Sentow. “What in the world is it?”

“That’s just it. Our ‘lynchpin’ is *not* of this world!”

“Excuse me.”

“You heard me, doctor. Now what would a ‘bulldozer part’ of alien origin be doing buried under the oldest known slave gravesite?”

“Sweet Jesus God!” said Sentow. “You’re not saying that slavery was begun in collusion with... *space aliens*?”

“I’m ‘not saying’ anything. The evidence is,” said Rasheem. “It wasn’t just the White Man.”

“Has to be a hoax. Preposterous, more ridiculous than Big Foot and the Loch Ness Monster.”

“We thought so, too. At first. A battery of tests and experiments have proven otherwise. We hit it with everything we had. The Smithsonian is investigating further. Got their finest people on it---black, brown, white and yellow. NASA’s clamoring for pieces too.”

“You mean, this is not the sole sample?”

“Seven artifacts in all. Two could be data storage units. We reverse-engineer them and they’ll blow this thing wide open. I grabbed this one and got here as fast as I could. You realize what’ll happen now?”

“I refuse to ‘realize’ a blessed thing. Space aliens tolerating, encouraging, *implementing* the enslavement of blacks. Why? What was in it for the little green men?”

“Exactly the question we asked many times. Why would an advanced technical civilization, sophisticated enough to conquer the cosmos resort to the crudest barbarism? Or could it have been benevolence totally alien to us?”



“Nothing! It’s crazy metallurgy. Has to be. A geographic anomaly, a scientific absurdity. It makes absolutely no sense.”

“Doesn’t it? Go back six hundred years and take the long view of planet earth. Whites are on the move across the Atlantic. Asians’re venturing into the Pacific Rim. While blacks are going nowhere, trapped by their lack of technology. And should blacks remain landlocked, the race will fall farther and farther behind.”

“That’s not necessarily true. Black exploration was emerging. We could have...”

“Too little, too late. We were stuck in the ‘disabled lane’ being passed by whites and Asians with no hope of ever catching up.”

“So this extraterrestrial intelligence...?”

“Could forced deportation and bondage have been the only method available to ‘homogenize’ the earth?”

“Madness! Transoceanic slavery, conceived by a cosmic civilization, was programmed to *help* blacks?”

“Yes, Doctor. Sheer madness to integrate the globe. If not for slavery, would this beautiful museum have been built? Would you be sitting in that chair talking with a black archeologist about the greatest discovery in the history of Man?”

Dr. Sentow leaned back and for a long moment sat silently and felt a dark, lifelong hatred shrivel up and disappear from his soul.

“The National Museum of African-American History and Culture is going to need a new wing, Doctor Rasheem,” he said with unbound enthusiasm. “For the most fantastic, the most incredible exhibit ever mounted by the Smithsonian!”

“You’re talking one hundred million dollars.”

“*Two* hundred...a quarter of a *billion!*” said Sentow. “I’ll hit up Uncle Sam for half, maybe two thirds. Then corporate sponsors, entertainers, athletes, school kids, black, white, yellow, *everybody!*”

Away, away, away on Zora...

“Your added request is unprecedented, Pragga,” said the High Commissioner. “While you’re fully confident that your ‘artifact’ will finally bring ‘racial harmony’ to this world, even more work still needs to be done?”

“Unfortunately, Commissioner. Without a second procedure by the Advance Team, the earth will still be unsuitable for membership in the League of Worlds.”

“Why?”

“Competing ideologies. For millennia much of that planet’s discord has arisen based on the legacies of two great individuals, both long dead. Superb specimens both, but their influence has led to an intense rivalry, polarizing the planet.”

“Your plan?”

“Might the Advance Team implant ‘evidence’ enhancing the myth of only one of these seemingly immortal beings?”

“To end the competition by having the humans declare a clear winner?”

“The ‘evidence’ would give them no other recourse.”

“Would it? What would be the fate of those who long followed the loser?”

“Our ‘proof’ would be so persuasive that conversion would be peaceful and universal.”

“The Advance Team has done the necessary preparation?”

“Our research has been thorough and exhaustive. It awaits your absorption.”

“And then...?”

“The choice, High Commissioner. Which one do we enhance?”

“Haven’t your machines picked the superior ideology?”

“We’ve come to the conclusion that this will require a non-technology decision, High Commissioner. Christ or Muhammad, take your pick and the operation will proceed.”

"God help me!" said the High Commissioner.



# THE TEN

A Class by Themselves

*"We choose to do these things, not because they are easy,  
but because they are hard!"*

President John Kennedy

If 'The Ten' had been about sex or drugs or cheating or bullying or nutrition or yet another case of educator misconduct or incompetence, there would have been past lessons and consequences to fall back on. Or a racial or religious or gender or ethnic or gay or disability or parenting or budget issue, as messy and as embarrassing as they can get, each can be turned into a 'teachable moment'.

Not The Ten. A new national Motor Vehicle program had popped the first one, then another and another. Each driver's license had been painstakingly forged. Ten fakes from ten different states for ten eighth-graders, thirteen-year olds.

What had driven children to commit federal crimes? Were The Ten fronting for their parents, exploited minors to escape adult punishment? Linked to a gang or a terrorist cell? Was National Security at stake? Or was it just about the money? How much for a beautifully-crafted Class D license?

At the start of the Fourth of July Weekend, New York sent in the State Police. California, Virginia, South Dakota, Rhode Island, Florida, Texas, Kansas, and Alabama used local cops. New Jersey called in SWAT.

In a corner house in a middle-class neighborhood in Teaneck, Ronald, age 13, big and fast enough to play high school football, but too gentle to want to, was sprinkling sugar on his cereal. Mom had just opened her strawberry yogurt. Dad's 'over easy' eggs were almost done when the SWAT team charged in, shields high and guns drawn. In seconds, the terrified family was on the floor.

"This has to be mistake," cried Mom.

A search warrant gave SWAT access to Ronald's computer. Photo-Shop files plus a 'business card laminator' kit made for an open-and-shut case.

"Yes," admitted the boy. "I made a phony driver's license."

"How many total?" asked SWAT.

"Ten, only ten. But none of us ever drove."

"How many you sell?"

"None. Not for money."

"Then what?"

"IDs...to crash the test."

"Test?" gritted SWAT. "What test?"

"Top drawer, state envelope," said Ronald.

The officer put on lab gloves before handling the evidence: Ronald's certified New Jersey **'General Equivalency Diploma.'**

*In November 1942, the US Armed Forces Institute asked the American Council on Education (ACE) to develop a battery of tests to measure high school-level academic skills. General Educational Development tests gave military personnel and veterans who had enrolled in the military before completing high school a way to demonstrate their knowledge.*

*ACE revised the GED Tests for a third time in 1988. The most noticeable change was the addition of a writing sample, or essay. The new tests placed more emphasis on socially relevant topics and problem-solving skills.*

*To take the GED tests one must be 18 or within 60 days of your 18th birthday. In some states, under special circumstances, at 17.*

Around the dining room table of a big house in a Long Island gated community, the State Police sat down Charlie, average height and weight for a 13-year old, but an exceptional 'fanboy' who *read* more science fiction and fantasy than he watched or played.

"You mean this isn't about driving or buying cigarettes or alcohol?" said the NY Police captain. "But to take the GED?"

"To *get* a high school diploma!" Charlie beamed. "But not in the beginning..."

"We met in a chat room about a year and a half ago. And one by one, the other kids dropped out. Always talking about music and movies, sports, fashions, sex and drugs. We were..."

"More serious?" finished the Police.

"We understood that we're living in a Brave New World. I mean, at the computer or on our iPhones, everything was at the tips of our fingers, the universe before our eyes."

"So you became 'cyber-forgers'?"

"Nothing like that," said Charlie. "Kids came and went from our chats. We felt we had something, but not a gang or a club or a team. We were The Ten. Together online, we found ourselves in a kind of a 'zone'."

"Huh?"

"Special kids in a special place. And we wanted to do something special together. My idea was to write a novel, 'Life Among the Eloi'."

"Elo?"

"You know, the beautiful, apathetic children in HG Wells', 'Time Machine'. 'Cause that's how we felt sometimes. Stuck in a system we couldn't get out of. But writing about it wasn't enough. Not for The Ten. We felt confident, ambitious, eager 'to boldly go where no middle-schoolers had gone before!'"

*Each time the GED Test is administered, an approved and trained examiner must be present, ensuring that GED policies and procedures are followed. For every 20 individuals taking the exam, at least one examiner and one proctor should be present.*

*The tests are used in all fifty states, U.S. territories, and in many Canadian provinces. Nearly 800,000 adults take the tests annually. Over the years, the GED Tests have provided professional and academic opportunities for millions of adults who, for many reasons, were unable to complete their formal high school studies.*

*GED credentials allow students the opportunity to enroll in the college or university program of their choice.*

In a two-bedroom Colonial outside Huntsville, Alabama...

At 13, Patty was a big basketball fan though she'd never be able to play very well.

"I'm not pretty, I know that," said Patty, sitting with her parents and the local cops. "And I'll probably be overweight all my life, but as a member of The Ten, I felt cool because it wasn't about how hot you were or how athletic, not your top game scores or how much money your parents had, but that we were smart...and trapped in the education 'conveyor belt' just like all the other middle-schoolers."

"That's when The Ten took a turn?" asked the cop, taking notes.

"I wanted to start a blog about being in middle school and how we could make it better, but not by ranting and complaining. We wanted to *do* something! And if we were going to change the world, we first had to change ourselves."

"Where'd the GED idea come from?" pressed the cop.

"Kevin Garnett," said Patty, proudly showing her State of Alabama **'General Equivalency Diploma.'** "Then Kobe Bryant and LeBron James."

"I don't get it," said the cop.

"After they proved they could play at a higher level," said Patty. "They didn't *need* college, so they *skipped* college. By passing the GED, The Ten could skip *high school!*"

*The GED Tests do not take the place of a regular high school education and are not a means to an education, but are designed to appraise the educational development of applicants who have not completed their formal high school education.*

*The equivalent of a high school degree, many call the GED a "Good Enough Degree", ranking its credibility often below that of a high school education. Although both are sufficient for most entry level positions, many higher-paying jobs will show preference for a high school degree rather than a GED.*

Living in downtown Providence, Theodore 'Teddy', small, wiry, with sharp, dark eyes, might have been a diehard *Harry Potter* fan or a loyal '*Trekker*' or even a *Dr. WHO* fanatic, but when he was six, Teddy discovered the Second World War and had been watching and playing and most of all, *reading* about it ever since.

"What made you think you could pull this off?" asked the Rhode Island cop.

"Hubert Zemke," said Teddy.

"Who?"

"A fighter pilot in World War Two," said Teddy, 'flying' with his hands. "The mission of the fighters, the 'little friends', was to protect the 'big friends,' the bombers. The fighters would stick close to the bombers and shield them from the enemy's fighters who'd come up to shoot them down."

"And...?" said the cop.

"It wasn't working," said Teddy. "Not for the Germans against the British, and not for us against the Germans. So Zemke 'pushed the envelope'. Instead of 'escorting' the bombers, he and his squadron would fly in *ahead* and *jump* the Nazis when they least expected it. Zemke redefined the mission: shoot down the enemy fighters before they ever get a chance to attack. That'll protect the 'big friends'."

"And...?" asked the cop.

"As middle-school students, our mission was to learn enough to go to high school for four years to learn enough to go to college. That's the way it's always been. But The Ten had a better idea--'jump the curriculum' in a surprise attack!"

"Even if it meant breaking the law?" said the cop.

"The GED Test was *the* law," said Teddy. "The national standard. It gave us what we needed most--a goal that told us what we had to become, not a 'gang' or a 'group', but a *class*. If we could learn to fly at that altitude, like Zemke, we could redefine our own mission!"

"But..."

"What?" said the cop.

"Man, that first time we looked at the GED," said Teddy. "We didn't think we'd ever leave the runway."

*The passing score of the 2012 GED test is determined by the scores of students who are seniors in 2011. These scores and ranks are used as the performance standard for GED candidates. In order to pass the GED, candidates taking the GED must score at least as high as the top 60 percent of graduating high school seniors.*

*The GED includes Language Arts, Social Studies, Science, Reading, and Mathematics. GED candidates must also pass the essay portion of the test.*

In Kendal, a suburb of Miami, the Florida cops knew that 13-year old Jose's driver's license was bogus; first they checked his parents' papers.

"To start out, we took a sample online test," said Jose, nervous in front of the police. "And we got crushed! The GED is no trivia test, no memorization drill. Up front, we knew we were a long way from the finish line."

"What'd you do about it?" asked the cop.

"Everything we needed was free on the web," said Jose. "But there was no 'secret' to the GED, no 'magic bullet'. This was going to be hard work."

"Was everybody in it from the beginning? Or did you have to coerce some of the others?"



"No way," said Jose. "The Ten were in this together. We looked at it longterm-- a year, maybe thirteen months. We had to learn *how* to learn."

"Wasn't that what you were in middle school for?" said the cop.

"To conform, to obey, to behave, to fit in...We wanted to do high school work to prove we could do college work!" insisted Jose. "We had to play catch-up, or else we'd be waiting four years while the Board of Education caught up with us."

"A year to do four years' work?"

"We didn't see it like that. We were on a secret quest, an adventure. 'An inch up every day' became our motto. If the GED wasn't the highest of mountains, The Ten wouldn't have wanted to climb it."

*The Language Arts Reading test consists of 40 multiple-choice questions with a 65 minute time limit. The test has seven passages taken from various literary texts. The seven areas include fiction before 1920, fiction from 1920 to 1960, fiction after 1960, poetry, drama, nonfiction prose, and workplace or community documents. The test creators pay a great deal of attention to the diversity of GED candidates when selecting passages for this part of the test.*

*The test requires the candidate to utilize a variety of thinking skills: comprehension (20%), application (15%), analysis (30%), and synthesis (35%).*

On the eighth floor of a housing development in Los Angeles, Stefanie, the oldest of three children, was drawing on a sketch pad as she talked to the cops.

"We split up the GED and concentrated on our favorite subjects---math, science, literature, cut it up and went after it piece by piece. 'Attack the GED', 'Beat the GED,' 'Kill the GED', we were like the kids in 'Lord of the Flies'."

"I saw the American remake," said the cop.

"Big mistake," said Stefanie, penciling away. "Took us a couple of months to understand that we had to look at the *whole* test. The GED is all about *reading*, and every one of us was a reader."

"So you read a lot," said the cop.

"We always had. That was huge!" she said, squinting at the cop's face. "Still felt the joy of reading, but not just vocabulary or dictionary meanings, or what the passages

meant, but what the writer was *saying*, let the words come off the page and talk to us, making us *infer*. Reading became a kind of 'silent listening', but we were struggling."

"Couldn't you get a teacher to help? Adult supervision, qualified leadership?"

Stefanie handed the cop his portrait in pencil.

"Then we wouldn't have been The Ten," she said proudly. "We had unity, we had purpose. We didn't need or want anybody to 'teach us the test'; the GED taught us!"

*The Social Studies test is a 50 question multiple-choice test based on text or a combination of graphs and text, including voting information, historic documents, and sections of the U.S. Constitution. Approximately 60% of the questions refer to graphs or a combination of graphs and text. The other 40% exclusively to text. U.S. History (25%), World History (15%), Government and Civics (25%), Economics (20%), and Geography (15%).*

*The questions also target specific thinking skills. 20% comprehension skills, 20% application skills, 40% analysis skills, and 20% evaluation skills.*

*Candidates are given a combination of reading passages, forms, quotations, graphs, charts, maps, and cartoons, and must be prepared to summarize main ideas, restate information, and identify implications after reviewing the given material.*

Billy lived with his single Mom in a small apartment in Roanoke, Virginia. He never knew his Dad or had talked with the police before.

Shy and withdrawn, Billy's escape was the opportunity, thousands of years later, to learn about the rise and fall of empires.

"History is why we are who we are," said Billy. "How we changed as things happened. Wars, discoveries, disasters, revolutions...What we had to understand was not an archive of names and dates, we could Google all of a creation in a heartbeat. What did it *mean* to us today and tomorrow?"

"Your best subject," said the cop. "Everyone had one?"

"That's middle-school thinking. Not 'subjects', but pieces of the pizza the world is. We had to digest the entire pie."

"Which one of you pushed the others to break the law?" the cop asked. "Who's the ring leader?"

"Nice try," said Billy. "The Ten crossed the Rubicon together. In a class by ourselves, there was no going back."

"Did any of The Ten ever fail to keep up with the work? Did any fall dangerously behind?"

"Everybody had problems, weaknesses. We didn't hide things from each other. We'd get frustrated. Why couldn't we get this or that? Why couldn't we be smart enough, fast enough?"

"What disciple would be executed on those who failed?" asked the cop. "The Ten had become a cult. What was done to keep the class in line?"

"Officer," said Billy respectfully. "We were being served up a 'State-delivered education' and decided to go out for our own. Not part of a 'collective', but growing 'private plots', not for the school or the State, but for ourselves."

"Regular education wasn't good enough for you?" said the cop. "You thought you were better than everybody else."

"We weren't interested in being 'good,' but in bettering who we were. Not competing or trying to show up anybody. The Ten was a class, but not in school. Other kids called us 'nerds' and 'geeks' and worse. For us, learning to learn wasn't a hassle or a chore; but an *odyssey*. As The Ten, we were heroes in the same boat, rowing hard towards our destiny. 'eighth-grade *Argonauts*', The GED was our 'Golden Fleece!'"

*The GED Science Test emphasizes the physical sciences (physics and chemistry) and expands the area of Earth science to include space science. Test questions measure understanding and interpreting concepts of life, Earth, and space sciences; physics; and chemistry, and applying them to visual and written text from academic and workplace contexts. The questions reflect the many roles of individuals: worker, family member, consumer, and citizen.*

*The GED focuses on the comprehensive, integrated skills typical of what the candidate must know, understand, and be able to perform in order to be scientifically literate.*

In a small town in South Dakota, the household was faced with an additional awkward situation: 17-year old Joseph was supposed to be the first son to graduate from high school, not Philip, age 13.

"How does it feel, beating out your older brother?" asked the cop. "Leaving all those high school students in the dust, making'em look like fools?"

"Not Joe or any other high school student," said Phil. "The Ten wanted to leave behind who everybody thought we were--a bunch of goofy, immature middle school kids."

"What you've done is forgery and fraud," said the cop. "Is that 'grown up' to you?"

"You think this was easy? The first couple of months, we were putting thirty-five hours a week in 'chalkboard school', and eight to ten hours in our 'digital classroom.' Joe's on the high school basketball team. Joe has friends to play with. Joe has a girlfriend. I had The Ten."

"No more pencils, no more books, no more teachers' dirty looks'," said the cop. "A stealth high school,"

"It's all online," said Phil. "Everything but the will, the *spirit* of learning. Science is the way the universe works, the 'scientific method'. Month after month we kept climbing and falling, but The Ten got up as one."

"Which kid was Number One?"

"None of that. We were all 'One of The Ten'. Back and forth, push, push! 'Observe, analyze, apply'. With every question, we felt like detectives challenged by a mystery: What do we have to show we know?"

"What was the hardest part?"

"Not cheating," said Phil. "Six months in, we began taking sample GED tests, but since the answers were given at the website, we couldn't resist. So every week, one of us would dig deep into the net to find a 'virgin test' and cut-and-paste it for the others. No Googling!"

"Honesty is the best policy," chuckled the cop.

Phil let that slide. "Chalkboard school' stressed 'behavior' and 'attitude', and 'following the program'. The Ten 'programmed' curiosity and confidence. 'Think GED!' You either know it or you don't. We kept finding out. That was the reward, the fun part!"

Paraphrasing Yogi Berra: 'Ninety percent of the GED math test is half reading.'

*The Mathematics test contains 50 questions total with 40 multiple-choice format questions and 10 grid format questions with a 90-minute time limit. At least half*

reference accompanying graphics such as charts and tables. Number operations and number sense (20-30%), data analysis, statistics, and probability (20-30%), algebra, functions, and patterns (20-30%), and measurement and geometry (20-30%). Three types of questions: procedural, conceptual, and application.

The Mathematics test has two parts, each with 25 questions. During Part I of the test, students can use a calculator. Students will also be given a sheet of math formulas to use as a reference during the test. Students will have 45 minutes to complete Part I. After 45 minutes, Part I and all calculators will be collected by testing staff and Part II will be distributed. Students will have 45 minutes to complete Part II. Students who complete Part II in less than 45 minutes will have the option to return to Part I of the test. Any students returning to Part I will not have access to calculators during this time.

"Everyone of us feared the math test," said Thomas in Texas. With thick glasses, he'd been ridiculed since third grade. The Ten made him see the future. "People who'd failed the GED blamed it on the math, especially the problems. First, second and third time around, we flopped."

"How'd ya get over?" said the cop.

"Instead of 'doing' the math, we began *reading* it, as if it were its own language. 'Understand the question first', *then* go for the answer. Half the questions were 'gifts', obvious if you knew what you were doing. It wasn't ignorance that was screwing us up, but *carelessness*. Overconfidence with the 'easy' ones made us lazy. We had to drub that out of each other."

"High school algebra and geometry," asked the cop who had barely gotten by.

"The GED gave us the formulas, the *recipes* of mathematics," said Tom. "We had to learn how to 'cook the numbers'. There were no shortcuts, no tricks. Graphs, charts, problems...*read* the math!"

"That simple, eh?"

"Yeah," said Tom. "After beating our heads against a wall for nearly a year. But we still faced a hard obstacle: money. To take the test cost ninety-five dollars."

"Why didn't you ask Mom and Dad?"

"In this economy? Three fathers and two mothers had lost their jobs. Others were underemployed or working multiple jobs part-time. We mowed lawns, did yard work, sold our video games and 'Play Stations', our baseball gloves, even our bicycles. The Ten were 'all in!'"

"Give me a pile of just-completed GED tests, no answer key, and one minute apiece, and I can tell you who passed and failed and be right two-thirds of the time," said a long-time high school teacher. "Read the essay. That's where it shakes out."

*A total of 120 minutes is allowed for both parts of the GED writing exam, with 75 minutes slotted for the 50 multiple-choice questions in part one and 45 minutes slotted for the essay. Passing the GED test requires that you get a minimum passing score on the essay.*

*GED essays are scored on a 4-point scale, and scored by two trained GED essay readers.*

In an old house in a small Kansas town, short, thin Aquante looked ten years old to the cops.

"I wore a big set of falsies under my *Lakers* sweatshirt, Mom's favorite wig, and three-inch lifts in my sneakers," said Aquante. "Put on a gang 'tude, showed my license, paid in cash and I was good to go. Some of the boys had packs of cigarettes, stick-on mustaches. Every member of The Ten used make-up, for our license photos and then to take the test."

"Amateurs," said the cop. "If I'd've stopped you behind the wheel, you and your license were toast."

"We knew that. Same at a store or a movie theater. But to take a GED test? Who's gonna spend ninety-five bucks with a fake license? Nobody gave it a close look."

"They will...*now*," said the cop. "But didn't you know you were going to get caught?"

"But who'd be first? The Board of Ed or Law Enforcement?" said Aquante, pulling out her Kansas certified '**General Equivalency Diploma.**' "You boys are two days late."

"But nobody was gettin' anything if our English sucked, if our writing sucked," said Aquante. "And goin' in, it did."

"No writing, no rings'," misquoted the cop.

Aquante smiled and misquoted back: "If you ain't readin', then you ain't writin'. The Ten were becoming critical, analytical readers. 'Think GED!'"

"But getting the grammar and sentence structure down pat, we had focused on showing the system how much we had learned and used fancy vocabulary, tryin' to impress. Our early essays were cobbled crap! We took each other apart on them."

"Your own circle of critics?" said the cop.

"Had to! Not just to get better, but to find our individual essence, our confidence, our 'voice'. We were The Ten, and each of us was unique. Not writing to the test, but to the *reader* about how we saw the universe, Life and Death, War and Peace, Famous People, Parents and School. Having something to say from the heart...don't 'show'. *Tell* the reader!"

"Trust your feelings, Aquante," misquoted the cop.

The 13-year old misquoted back, "'Read page one and my age will be forgotten'. It wasn't the writing, but the *rewriting*. We developed a discipline. First, jot down our ideas on how and why we felt, understanding that we were laying down wet concrete, then go back to the beginning and smooth it out. Again and again and again, once a week for months. Not GED writing, but good reading!"

"So you lucked out and passed. Congrats," said the cop, turning harsh. "How many others, one, two?"

"You're still lookin' at me like I'm a typical 'teenie-bopper," said Aquante. "I'm one of The Ten. We took on the GED to go ten for ten and we did."

"An inch up every day!"

*Forty percent of America's high school graduates cannot pass the GED Test. Thousands more, who enroll in higher education, must take remedial courses because they are not yet ready to do college-level work.*

*To fill the education vacuum, hundreds of online schools, offering high school and college certificates and diplomas, have opened up, charging high fees and delivering low results. Competing against games, Twitter, and the social networks, most online learning programs fail to hold students' interest.*

*American children continue to perform poorly on international education tests, falling behind most of Europe, China, Japan, and India.'*

"I don't know what I wanna be, not yet" said Ronald. "But I want to be prepared to make that decision and have a lot of choices."

"Social work," said Patty. "Showing others, especially children, how to help themselves."

"An artist," said Stefanie. "To imagine the world with a fresh perspective."

"An environmentalist," said Phil. "Save the natural world from ourselves."

"A writer!" said Aquante. "I'm tellin' our story. We'll split the movie rights ten ways."

"A teacher," said Charlie. "But not like any I ever had."

"A pilot, of course," said Teddy.

"An archeologist," said Billy. "To make the old world young again for everybody."

"Pediatrician," said Tom. "Nobody over ten. Birth certificates will be verified."

"President of the United States!" said Jose. "As soon as I'm old enough."

Refusing to reward dishonesty under any circumstance, the American Council of Education (AMC) invalidated The Ten's GED diplomas. The children were welcome to take the GED again when they become eligible in four years.

In Juvenile Court their fraud and forgery charges got them two years probation and 100 hours of community service; The Ten spent half the summer picking up litter along the highways.

Their families were urged to sue, but litigation became moot; ignoring the AMC, the best universities in the country, from the Ivy League to the SEC, recruited The Ten as if they were 'First Team All-Americans'.

Instead the children chose local community colleges to continue living with their parents who had secured an agent; The Ten signed a four-year endorsement deal with a shoe manufacturer and an apparel company. The new Young American line: 'One of The Ten'.

Publishers will soon be bidding for Aquante's 'The Ten - *Scholars against The System*'. Hollywood quickly optioned the screen rights.

The American Council of Education, the GED Testing Committee and the FBI are taking firm actions that will prevent anything like this from ever happening again.

Somewhere in and across America, maybe a new Ten is getting together. Or perhaps two or three.

The kids will figure out a way; they have to.





# Going Out Well

*Timing is everything.*

On the night of March 6th, 1836, in a dark corner of a mission stable, 75-year old Michael Walsh materialized out of thin Texas air. His musket loaded and his spirits high, Walsh was on a mission of his own and knew exactly where to go. Heavily medicated, he fought through agonizing pain, knowing this would be last thing he'd ever do.

Walsh staggered into the courtyard into the middle of a firefight. Cannon and shot lit up the night. The old man knew the battlefield better than anyone alive. He headed for the south wall. Up the ladder he climbed. Every rung a torture, he refused to flinch.

There he saw the man he had admired all his life, and as bullets flew and cries of the wounded and the dying rang out, Walsh presented himself.

“Colonel Crockett,” he said with a stiff salute. “Michael Walsh of Nashville, Tennessee, reporting for duty.”

“Who?” said Crockett. “Never seen you before. When d’you get here?”

“Just now,” said Walsh. “I volunteered.”

“Santa Anna’s got us surrounded,” said Crockett. “How’d you get through?”

“It ain’t where or when you’ve been, Colonel Crockett, but who you’re with, what you’re doing, and where you’re going.”

Crockett stared at Walsh. There was something about this volunteer — clean and store-bought new — as if he’d just stepped out of one of those fancy shops back East.

“Get back with the women and children, old timer,” ordered Crockett. “This here’s no place for grandfathers.”

“*My place, my time,*” said Walsh. “Got a disease no one’ll know how to spell for three hundred years and I’ll be damned if I’m gonna let it kill me. I’m here to go out with my boots on.”

“Suit yourself, Mister Walsh, whoever you are,” said Crockett. “We need every Tennessean we can get!”

“That’s my man!” said Walsh, drawing a bead on a Mexican soldier. “As they say in Music City, ‘If you ain’t busy bein’ born, you’re busy dyin.’ Let’s get to it.”

Within a few short hours, the Alamo would be overrun and every last defender killed. The oldest of them would be buried with the rest, but his identity would remain a mystery for centuries.

Michael Walsh was not the first. Nor would he be the last. Far, far, far into the future, when humanity had solved all its problems and lived in permanent peace and prosperity, technology had been perfected to allow those who found no future in the present to find final peace in the past.

“My name is Jonathan Scott and I want to go out well,” said the young man as he placed his right hand on the Data Glass.

The technology, absorbing a single molecule of DNA, flashed a complete bio on the screen. Mate, children, and pets — negative across the board. This one would be relatively simple.

“You’re determined to go through with this?” asked Dr. Kerrigan, three times the patient’s age, scanning the screen further. “Good job, no health problems, fine education, a full life to look forward to.”

“I am,” replied Scott adamantly.

“And you understand that certain times and places have long been reserved or already taken? Little Big Horn, Thermopylae, Masada, the lead column of the Light Brigade. If you’re bent on a heroic finish, I can get you in a Russian punishment battalion at Stalingrad. Sent to the front lines, with their own men ordered to shoot them if they retreated, and the Nazis dug in; none survived, but all got medals.”

“No,” said Scott. “I’m totally against war of any kind.”

“Understood,” agreed Kerrigan. “Are you religious? I can put you in the Roman arena with the Christians, or at Auschwitz during the Holocaust or if you’re Islamic, we have spaces still open during the Crusades.”

“Thanks, but no. My belief in God is personal.”

“We’ll respect that fully. If you’d like to be a part of something historically significant, I can put you on the top floor of the Tower Number One. You’ll be able to see the plane come in. Or perhaps you’d like to be one of the first firefighters or EMTs to arrive at the scene?”

“No, no,” insisted Scott. “Those people were innocent victims of a terrorist attack. To crash the event would tarnish their courage and sacrifice.”

“Well said, young man. You’re not the first to have felt that way, however, as many of the remains were never recovered or identified, policy allowed us to place a few on nine-eleven.”

“I’ve read your data spread, doctor.”

“Then you’re aware that your death must be totally anonymous. May I suggest a natural end? Krakatoa or Mount Saint Helens or in the path of a killer tornado or hurricane? And then there’s the third millennium tsunami in Asia.”

“No, none of those,” insisted Scott. “I want to do what’s fair. I want to do what’s right and I certainly don’t want to hurt anyone.”

“Except yourself,” concluded Kerrigan.

“There’s no other way,” demanded Scott. “I just can’t go on living.”

“Okay, take it easy,” said Kerrigan. He hated it when it came to this. But it so rarely did; people came in knowing exactly how and when they wanted to go. “We can work this out.”

“Thank you, doctor,” said Scott. “I have to do this, but I need your assurance that it can be done.”

Kerrigan leaned forward, his eyes full of trained sincerity. “What exactly do you have in mind, Mister Scott?”

“I see,” said the doctor after Scott had explained. “But what you require may be beyond the policy envelope. Are you sure I couldn’t interest you in one of our pioneering tragedies? There were two thousand, three hundred and twenty-four souls aboard the *Heinlein* on the way to Mars when it was struck by a meteor. The *Gargarin* space station disaster in Titan orbit killed even more.”

“No,” stressed Scott, pounding his fist on the data screen. “What I must do has to be done. What should have been done years ago. You’ll either permit me to seek my own end my own way or I’ll...”

“Please, don’t!” Kerrigan begged him. “We’ll consider your specific request and inform you of our decision.”

Scott folded his arms. “I’ll wait right here.”

“Sorry. Even if we ruled immediately, the law mandates you sleep on it,” said Kerrigan, imagining yet again how it must have been during the abortion era. “Come back tomorrow morning and we’ll proceed from there.”

The Policy Committee met that afternoon. After Kerrigan had briefed its six members.

"The young man's demands are noble, to say the very least," said the chairman, "But do we have the capability to grant them should we agree to?"

"Yes, we can get him when and where he wants to be," said the head of the R&D branch. "But this will require an insertion rather than the customary addition. Moreover, a split-second either way and Mister Scott could lose his life for naught."

"Either way, we're going to set precedents," said the legal chief. "It's a question of going back or moving forward."

"It has to be the latter," insisted the ethics authority. "We exist to allow people who wish to end their lives to do so with honor and dignity."

"No more husbands and wives discovering the bodies of their spouses in bathtubs, their wrists slit and the water blood red. Do we want to back to group suicides in parked vans or religious fanatics poisoning themselves and their children en masse? The police-assisted suicides which also caused the deaths of innocent bystanders? People throwing themselves in front of trains or driving their vehicles off cliffs or diving their aircraft into the ground? Humanity has earned its global freedom. This is part of the price and we have to pay it."

"But why right away?" asked the pharmaceutical director. "We've got a litany of drugs that will help the patient deal with his guilt or whatever else may be causing his depression. That's what it is! Group therapy, individual care. We can put Mister Scott back together again. I am sick and tired of sending people to their deaths."

"The old, old argument yet again," huffed the chairman. "Next you'll suggest we put Mister Scott under observation. We don't have that right. Not any more. Once we perfected DNA-splicing in the womb and cured mental illness, nobody can be certified suicidal. This is what they want to do and it's our job to let them do it right. After a life our patients no longer believe is worth living, we give them a death worth dying for. Because if we don't, or if we hesitate and Mister Scott goes off and kills himself and injures or kills others, it is we who will be held responsible. I, for one, do not want to be charged as an accessory to murder."

The Policy Committee nodded in unison.

"Then again," said Kerrigan. "Mister Scott may not come back. Seven out of ten never do."

"Maybe," said R&D. "But just five years ago, it was nine out of ten."

The next morning, Mr. Scott was waiting when the doors were opened.

“The Committee voted to allow your departure,” said Kerrigan. “You won’t be requesting a ceremony, will you?”

“No,” said Scott. “That’s the absolute last thing I want.”

Kerrigan tried not to show his relief. Many departees, especially the older ones, would invite friends and family for the send-off, a combination Irish wake and *bon voyage* party. Usually all went well with good luck in a previous life and a well-chosen death, but too often the wife or the husband or the children would lose it at the very end and the scene was not unlike one of those ancient executions with people crying and begging and shouting and demanding the procedure be aborted. Only the “guest of honor” could do that and only a couple of times, strapped in the box and ready to go, did a departee suddenly shake his or her head. It was such bad form.

“You brought the clothes you wanted; good,” said the doctor without delay. “While you change, I’ll have the team get everything ready.”

Scott got into his gear. After ten years it still fit fine. Kerrigan and three assistants led him to the chamber and strapped him onto a vertical gurney. Scott nodded as they closed the door.

Kerrigan stood by the control console. The computer had taken over. As with insertion, substitution placement had to be precise. And as it had always been, timing was everything.

Then came the definitive moment. It would be the last time, give or take a few seconds, that anyone would ever see Jonathan Scott alive. Would this be a willful waste of human life? Kerrigan grappled with the thought. Any era needed more people like this young man, and he was sending him to his doom.

In less than a heartbeat, Jonathan Scott was gone forever.

Ten years before, high in the Swiss Alps, a pair of climbers neared the summit of the Matterhorn. Linked together by a rope secured by pitons hammered into the icy mountain wall, they would be the last couple in the club troupe to make it to the top.

“C’mon, you two lovebirds!” the leader yelled down at them. “People are starting to talk.”

Mary Lynch and Jonathan Scott had been sweethearts almost since they had learned how to talk; ties that bound them together infinitely stronger than pitons and rope.

“This is a molehill compared to the marriage we’re going to have,” Jonathan called up to her. “And without this cold wind howling.”

Just above him on the rope, Mary replied, “Spoken like a true husband-to-be. From now on, nothing but hot times for us.”

At that moment, Mary thought she saw a sudden change in Jonathan, as if the climb had aged him ten years in an instant.

“Hold on to the rope, Mary!” he cried up to her. “Don’t let go, whatever happens.”

“Of course, I’m going to...”

Suddenly one of the pitons pulled loose. Mary and Jonathan dropped ten feet and slammed against the mountain wall.

“Don’t let go, Mary!” Jonathan screamed. “Don’t let go!”

A second piton pulled loose from the force of the drop and then a third. Up above, the tour leader scrambled and began rappelling down to them.

The third piton snapped out of the ice. Jonathan looked up at Mary. “I love you,” he said. “I always had.”

Then he let go.

“Nooooo!” she cried as he grew smaller and smaller and smaller.

The last piton pulled out and Mary would have followed her lover, but at the last possible instant, the team leader grabbed her by the arm and held her.

And when she had been brought up to safety.

“If only he had held on for just another second,” she cried.

“If he had,” said the leader. “You both would have died.”

“No,” she said. “I was about to let go to save him.”

“I think somehow he knew that,” said the leader. “He couldn’t have lived knowing you gave up your life for his. He’s given you the greatest gift a man could ever give anybody. Treasure it every single day.”

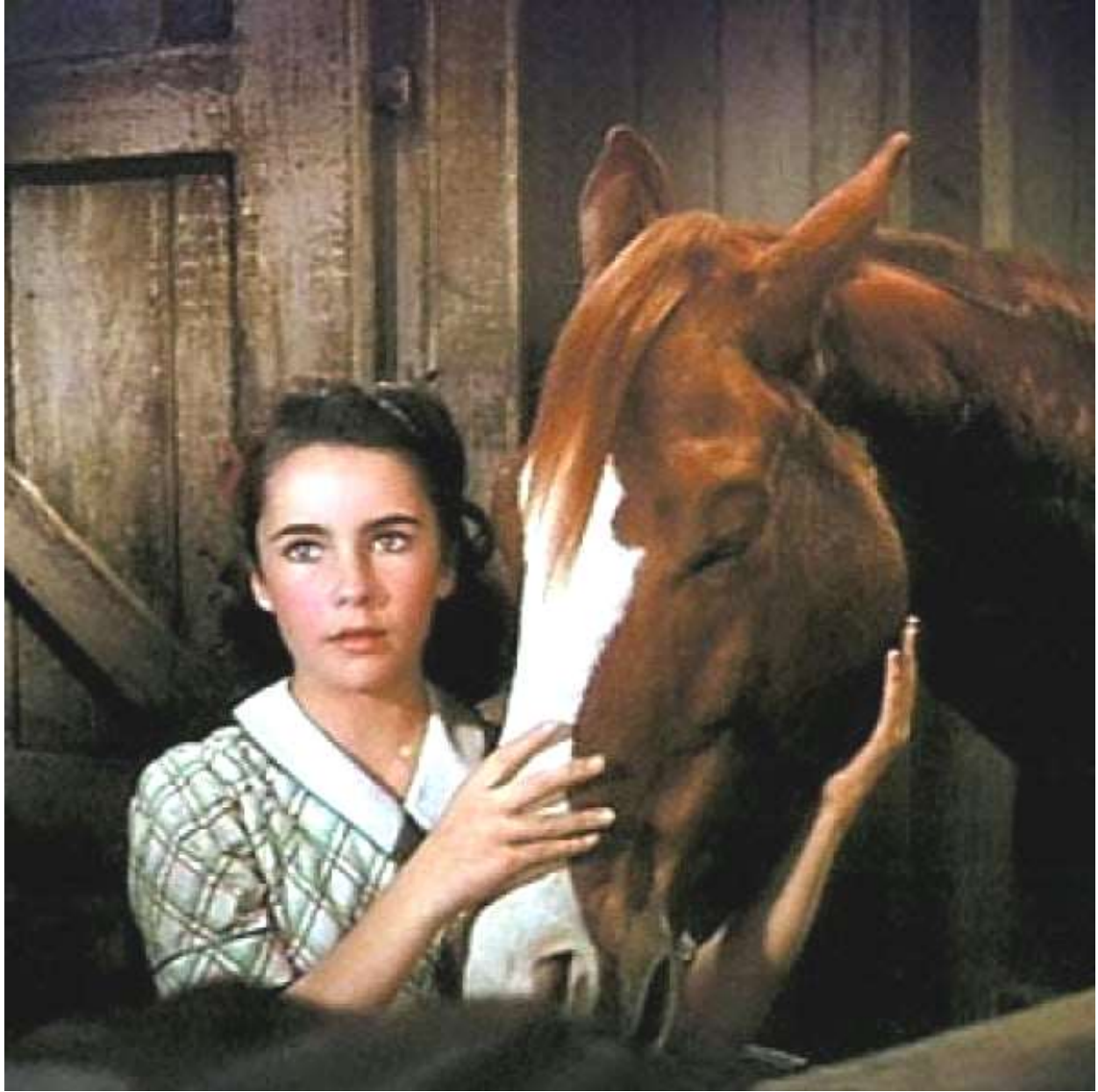
“I’ll try,” said Mary, her tears still flowing.

For a decade, she did. But then...

““My name is Mary Lynch and I want to go out well,” said the no longer young woman as she placed her right hand on the Data Glass.

“Yes, Miss Lynch,” said Dr. Kerrigan. “We’ve been expecting you.”





# **The HORSE in The Picture**

*Do you know?*

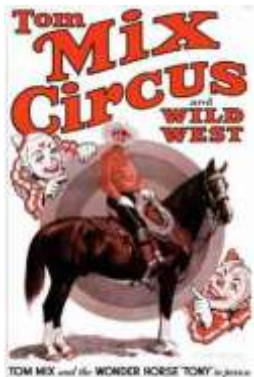


*'I haven't met a horse I didn't love. I love caring for them, cleaning them. I love doing my own tack and feeding them.'*

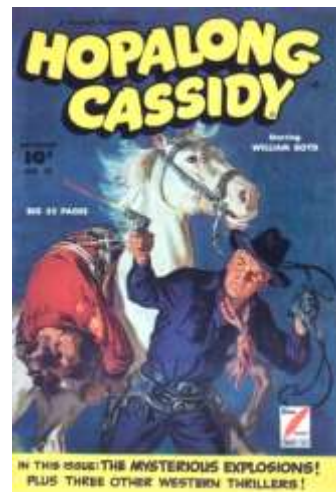
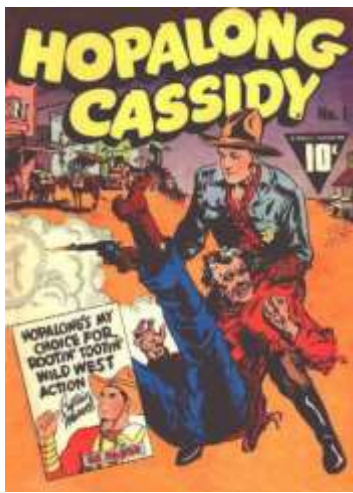
Loretta Swit

***J'm an old man who's been around and knows a lot about a lot of things. J know horses. J grew up with horses. Actually, J grew up with TV and movies and comic books. Watching and reading, J knew the horses in the pictures.***

***Cowboy heroes got horses with names.***







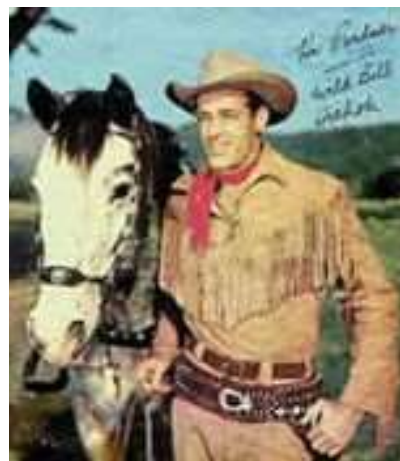
*And horses with BIG names got comic book deals!*







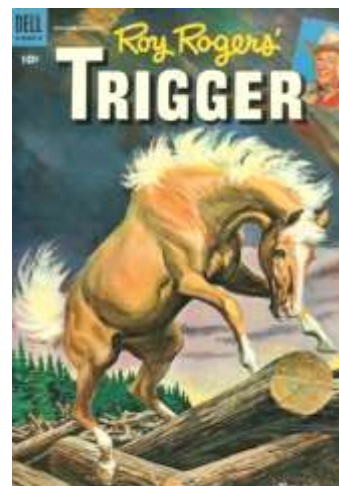
*Do you know the horse in the picture? If not, you were probably born too late.*



*My favorite medical professional has horses, six of them. But she has "absolutely no interest" in "fictional horses."*

*Now wait one minute!*

*Roy Rogers and Trigger were real. My Dad took me to see them in Madison Square Garden. Nothing "fictional" about them.*







*“Roy Rogers?”*



*‘Yippee-Ki-Yay’*

*When cowboys became stars, their horses didn't need names.*



*How can Danielle not know all this?*

*Religion without horses? In the Bible horses carried God and heralded the end of the world!*



***Surely Danielle knows about Homer and Shakespeare! How boring history would be without the horse!***



*'Beware of Greeks bearing gifts.'*



*'A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!'*

***America before horsepower? The Indians were going to the dogs!***







***Paul Revere got an immortal poem; his horse never even got a name!***

***Five years ago, I got cancer. Went through Kemo, lost a lot of weight and most of my hair. But I got through--the cancer was gone!***

***Two years later it came back. That's when I met Danielle who probably doesn't know the name of General Lee's horse or saw its bones in a museum!***





*Bet she knows about Buffalo Bill, but not the horse in the picture!*



*Sitting Bull's horse lived beyond his master and became legend!*



*The horse had been a gift from Buffalo Bill. A trained circus dancer. In 1890, during the Lakota leader's assassination, his horse arched his neck and pranced in a circle. He bowed, then stood up and pawed the ground, reared up and leaped into the air. He cantered around and around in a circle. He did all*

*of this while the battle raged around him, never touched by a bullet. Or so goes the story.*



*In 1893, the horse appeared at the Columbia Exposition in Chicago, Illinois. On the midway, Sitting Bull's cabin was on display, dismantled and shipped from the Plains.*



*Inside, two women said to be Sitting Bull's widows sold baskets and moccasins. The exhibit netted*

*the exposition company a hefty sum of \$2,575 (roughly \$70,000 today). The frontier crime scene had become a bonanza.*

*Bet Danielle doesn't know that.*

*My second bout with cancer meant more Kemo, less weight and hair. First time I spent two weeks in the hospital, second time, only one day.*

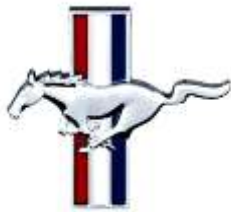
*But the cancer had spread to my lungs – stage four. Immediately, I gave up smoking tobacco and weed.*

*My treatment has me going to the hospital every three weeks. According to my insurer, it costs more than \$100,000 a year to keep me alive.*



*Gee, during my lifetime I never made more than \$35,000. Seems I'm worth more with cancer.*

***J get free taxi service. After Kemo, J don't feel safe driving.***

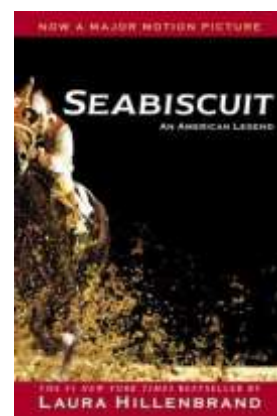
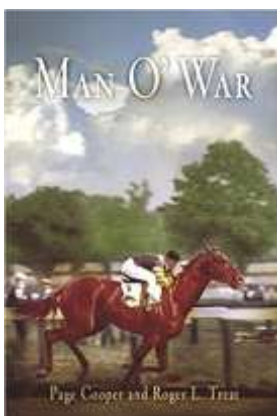


***So many things J can't do any more. Gotta stick to what J can do!***

***All medical professionals are beautiful. J know this to be true because when J talk to them, they listen; only beautiful women do that.***

***Danielle told me about her horses. During the winter she ships some of them south. Must be nice.***

***But J wish she knew more horse history.***



The longshot that won: **“Upset”**



***The greatest horse that ever lived...***



*Unless you're Secretariat: 1:59 2/5*

***There are two Danielles. With her hair up, the "professional". With her hair down, she looks very "girlish." Being an old man, I prefer the latter, and she knows it.***

***When a leader wants to be seen as "heroic" ...***





***The last time I was on a horse was more than sixty years ago. Mom took us riding for \$4 an hour and I was sure my horse didn't "plop, plop" the whole time. My two sisters quickly corrected me.***

***Cancer comes with good days and bad. So easy to get depressed. Can't go anywhere alone. I put 25,000 miles on my bike riding all around, now I'm terrified of trying to get on it.***



***The worst side effect of my meds: fatigue. I go for a couple of hours and then have to lie down. But I always will myself to get up.***

***One really cool thing about being an old man: Being an old man. So many never get the chance. Served two tours in the Peace Corps and learned one thing for sure: Never ever feel sorry for yourself. Met so many who had it really hard.***

***I don't know how much longer my treatment will last. Going to the hospital is the highlight of my week!***



***Enthusied to be infused...And they always save me a seat!***



***Having a tough time? Surrounded by people who just don't care? Get cancer and you'll soon be in with a loving, positive crowd!***



***I got a feeling I'll be seeing a lot more of Danielle, once dementia sets in.***



***Of course, with a horse in the picture!***



***'If the horseshoe fits.'***