

# Tippy Gnu

Go West or Go  
Weird



**GO WEST**  
*OR*  
*GO WEIRD*

**Strange Stories of the West**  
*& Weird*

**Tippy**  
*Gnu*

**Go West or Go Weird.** Strange Stories of the West & Weird. Tippy Gnu, author.  
Editions: 2010, 2020



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**Books by Tippy Gnu**

# Introduction: Which Way to Go?

**M**ost of my short stories have fallen under one of two genres. They're either Westerns, or they take the reader on a journey through the strange and Weird. This never occurred to me until I decided to gather my best (in my opinion) short stories together, and publish them in a book.

So what's the connection? Certainly there must be something going on in my head, that attracts me to these two themes. What's the common denominator? Why do I usually go West or go Weird, when I confabulate a story? I had to cogitate for awhile, to figure this out.

I think it boils down to my love for freedom. The West offers wide-open spaces. And an independent spirit fills the uncrowded voids of the West. There's much adventure to be had, and when you're independent you're on your own to explore as much as you want in whatever way that you want.

It couldn't actually be due to the wide-open spaces in my head, could it?

The West connects to the Weird through that same freedom. To be truly free, you must overcome your fears enough to explore the dark side of the human heart and mind. Those places where you usually dare not tread. You must enter these Stygian realms, to acquaint yourself with the demons that lurk there. That's the only way to conquer them. Stories of the Weird can help us do that.

It couldn't really be because I'm a weirdo, could it?

Adventure is to be had in both realms. You can go West, or you can go Weird. Either way, all you must do is spread your wings and fly into freedom. In other words, just open your mind, suspend your disbelief, and

trust that the wind of my words will sustain your flight. And if they do, they will carry you from one adventure to another, as you soar from tale to tale across the pages of this book.

With each story comes a backstory. I preface every one of my yarns with a recollection of how I cooked up the tale. I hope this will enrich your experience, by giving you some idea of what the hell was going on in my head when I composed my prose.

This book is in two parts. Part Won takes you West, and Part Too makes you Weird. It matters not which part you read first. And so the decision is now yours. Which part will you turn to?

Will you go West, or will you go Weird?

**Part Won:**  
**GO WEST**

# Story 1:

## The Golden Outhouse

### Backstory

**W**hen I was 29, and fresh out of the military, I bought a 3-acre parcel in a remote area of the Mojave desert. I wanted to get back to nature, live off the land, and most importantly, put up my lazy feet and rest for awhile.

I built an underground log cabin. And without a building permit. Building underground helped insulate this cabin from the weather. It also helped me maintain a low profile, out-of-sight from the county building inspector.

But I needed a place to shit, and I couldn't very well build an underground outhouse. Underground is where the shit goes, not the ass. That's Outhouse Engineering 101. So my problem was, how to build an above-ground outhouse that would go unnoticed, whenever the building inspector made one of his routine drive-bys.

I resolved this problem by buying an old, rusty water tank, for about \$50. It was round, about eight feet high and six feet in diameter, with a peaked roof that looked like an upside-down funnel. The seller warned me that it leaked, and that the bottom was rusting out. Which may have been how I talked him down to \$50.

I took that water tank home and cut a square hole through its ferruginous bottom. That's where the toilet would go. I also cut a door-sized rectangle out of the side. I riveted a piano hinge to one of its long sides, and then reattached the piece of metal to the water tank by riveting



the piano hinge to the tank. That provided a curved door that blended with the tank when closed.

The Mojave desert is dotted with derelict water tanks on abandoned jackrabbit homesteads. So my old, decrepit tank was just one of many. It looked like an ordinary, normal fixture of the landscape. No one could have dreamed of its true purpose, unless they were standing just a few feet away and noticed its strange door.

So I was able to live two years in my cabin, while never being cited by the county for having an illegal privy.

One night I traipsed to my “water closet” to do my business. I opened the door and shined my flashlight down the hole, and was greeted by a glorious sight. And that sight inspired me to write this short story. I don’t want to give anything away, so I’ll fill you in on the details later.

For the time being, I hope you’ll enjoy this Wild West tale about an unscrupulous villain, an old gold miner, and a very intriguing outhouse.

## **The Golden Outhouse**

**P**hilander Crook rode straight into a big white mess. On purpose. But only because the fear blowing and drifting in his heart was thicker than the blizzard blowing all around him.

It was really coming down in the Sierras. And he knew things would probably get worse. Winter storms in these mountains that killed the Donners don't just sprinkle a few inches of powder and mosey on out. No, they set up a work camp in the sky, then shovel down a few feet of the cursed crystals upon the minions hunkering down below. To add to the few dozen feet that might already be there.

Soon it could be nigh on impossible for the fearful Philander to make progress.

A tongue-lashing of wind whipped up the hair on the back of his head and made it levitate. The whistling ice put goose bumps on his raw neck. He shivered like a mine blast, and felt every bone rattle. He fumbled at his coat collar with numb fingertips and frozen-stiff knuckles. Try to get that up higher. Higher, and stop that wind. Stop that killing cold.

Philander glanced around back into the wind, toward the west. Should he rein the horse around and take his chances? Could the enemy shadowing his back be less deadly than the enemy burying his front?

No. They'd be expecting that. And they'd be waiting with loaded rifles. The men who worked for his father-in-law were well-paid, and well worth every ounce of the gold the patriarch had put into their pockets.

And there was not a poltroon amongst them. No they were loyal, professional and courageous killers. So there would be at least one waiting in Sacramento where he had left them. The rest would be on his trail.

But he hoped they had fallen for his ruse and headed down to Los Angeles. That's where he'd made it seem like he was headed.

A few miles south of Sacramento he'd turned off the trail on a rocky place, where his tracks wouldn't show up to give him away. Then he had headed straight into suicide. Straight for the Sierra Nevada mountains.

By the next morning he was in the foothills of the Sierras, aiming for Carson Pass. From there he planned to head north for Virginia City, then catch a stagecoach for Salt Lake City. His final destination would be Denver City.

He doubted the old man would send any men to Denver. So there he would be safe while things cooled off on the coast for a few years.

As his horse slogged through the snow past a half-dead, gnarled, twisted, parasite-infested oak tree, he was reminded of his wife. And he inwardly cringed at the mental image this festering tree conjured up. For Lucinda was just as ugly as any of its half-dead branches, peeling bark, or rotting roots.

Her hair was greasy black. Looked like an old saloon mop that someone had dipped in lard before mopping out a coal bin. Her nose was as protuberant as a palomino's proboscis. Nostrils just as wide. Strands of black nosehair hung over her upper lip, half-covering her black, greasy mustache. Actually, her hair was brown—on the rare occasions she took to wash it.

She had a pimply chin, that was usually sopping wet with the oleaginous complexion of her skin. Two droplets of oil perennially dangled from the point of this volcanic mandibular apex, gradually collecting enough oozing grease to slowly dribble to the ground.

She might have made up for some for her natural ugliness through developing habits of hygiene. But Lucinda was a slob. Her only habit of hygiene was to clean herself up once a year for Fourth of July festivities. But then she'd declare her independence from bathwater for the twelve months that would ensue, and allow filth and grease to cake up on her skin and within all the little nooks and crannies of her body.

This made her the ugliest, amongst ugly women in Oregon. Or possibly anywhere.

No male, foolish or wise, would debate that. In fact if there was anything all men residing within the newly established state of Oregon could agree upon, it would be that Lucinda Bruckles had staked out a vast claim upon the word "ugly." And she was its rightful owner.

But she wasn't the only one in her family with a vast claim. Lucinda Bruckles was the daughter of Ardmoore Bruckles—who was one of the greatest lumber magnates in all the state. Ardmoore Bruckles was a rich man. And a powerful man. And a very feared man.

Ardmoore had taught all his habits of hygiene to his daughter. Which weren't much, because he himself also maintained a mucky year-round filth, caked upon his own complexion.

And he was filthy in character also. In fact, the dirtiness of his body served as an asset to him. For it reflected his reputation of a mean, unscrupulous bully. Which is exactly how he wanted others to see him.

That's how he had come by his success in logging. He had terrorized and intimidated most of his competition right out of business. Ardmoore was deadly. He was a man most intelligent men were afraid of. And most stupid men too. He was egomaniacal, martinetish, and wielded authority like a grizzly bear wields a swat.

He squashed anyone who made him angry.

But then came Philander. Philander Crook was willing to chance that anger. He thought it might be worth it.

But Philander was young. And immature. And very greedy.

So when he met the Princess of Ugly—Lucinda Bruckles—and found out who her father was, his heart did an immediate swoon-dive. Or at least, that's how he acted.

His script was that of a man enamored. He made a show like it was love at first sight. And he played like he was deeply fascinated by her. Like he

just had to get to know her better. He made all the moves of a bedeviling adolescent who was competing for his first belle's attentions and affections. Even though there really was no competition.

And Lucinda fell for his charms like horseshit falls from an equine's ass. Her heart fairly plopped steaming right before Philander's feet. But it was easy to charm the likes of Lucinda. She was just so scrofulous that it was rare for any man to show any affection toward the desperate young debutante.

So Lucinda felt flattered by Philander's feigned attentions. And her heaving heart within her pinguid little heaving breast launched into the heavens and soared up to the stars, then burst with euphoria.

Ardmoore was even more euphoric. In fact he was beside himself with ecstasy. So far, no man in the entire American West had yet to show any interest in this female product of his loins. But now there was a man who seemed to be in love with her. To actually be in love with his walking grease-stain of a pigsty daughter!

And a handsome man at that.

Philander made sure that the engagement was of short duration. Lucinda was just so repulsively filthy and ugly, as well as so lacking in the finer mannerisms of most wealthy ladies of the day, that Philander didn't think he could bear to keep up the dissimulation of romance for very long. He had to marry her quick.

So, after just four months (four lifetimes for Philander), a wedding took place in the finest church of Portland. Philander and Lucinda became attached together in marriage. Or perhaps it was the slimy grime of her body that attached them together, when they hugged upon the altar.

And Ardmoore Bruckles did what Philander had dearly hoped. That fine, magnanimous father-in-law gifted his daughter with a dowry more astronomical than all the pimples that had ever popped upon her blemished chin. He greased her palms with a package of packets containing 5,000 dollars in bundled up banknotes.

It was money that Philander coveted.

There was a honeymoon planned, to Tillamook Bay. The newlyweds were going to travel to the coast and spend some time together by the sea. And they were going to travel alone, by surrey. Kind of a novel approach

to honeymooning, but most thought it would be very romantic. And no one was suspicious.

They should have been. It was Philander's idea.

The night of their wedding they camped together in the mountains, partway through their journey to Tillamook. They pitched a tent beneath a pine tree, and rolled out a bed inside. A bed for them to spend the night together, to consummate their marriage. It was a sacrifice Philander was reluctantly willing to make.

But the next morning Lucinda woke up in the tent, and she was all alone. Her husband was gone. Philander had deserted her from her bed.

It took her two days and two million tears before she was able to traipse back to Portland and alert her doting dad. But by that time Philander was well down the trail, southward to California. And in his saddlebags was 5,000 dollars in beautiful green spending cash.

Sacramento was a fine looking town to Philander, so he decided to stay awhile and live it up. He checked into one of the most opulent hotels and began to frequent the restaurants of the affluent. And he started having a glorious good time.

But glorious good times have a way of coming to some glorious quick endings. And when Philander spotted three of Ardmoores Bruckles' henchmen in town, he knew that some kind of quick end to the good times was just about to arrive. So rather than die, he decided that he would pull the curtain down on Act One first.

Soon he had checked out of his hotel room and was aboard a fleet-footed horse out of town. He carried with him 4,716 dollars in remaining unspent dowry funds.

And now he was way up in the Sierra Nevada mountains, heading for the silver-mining boomtown of Virginia City. The wind was blowing, and the snow was falling, and all Philander could think of was that warm hotel room that he had left back in Sacramento.

But turning back would be suicidal. At least one of Ardmoores henchmen would be waiting. And he would be eager to enforce the law upon him. Of course, not the law of the land, but the law of the lumberman, Ardmoores Bruckles. A far more menacing and deadly law for any man to face.

Up and into the white-bedecked Sierras his horse plodded. Knifing through the snow, through the wind, through the shivering cold.

And the white stuff was getting deeper. At first there were just a few inches covering the trail. But then there were six inches. Then a foot. And it was drifting even deeper in some spots.

Philander's horse was having a harder and harder time of it. Sometimes it would stumble over rocks and branches beneath the snow, that it could not see. Several times already his mount had fallen to its knees and had to struggle back to its feet.

Darkness was coming. It would be a long night. Perhaps the last night. Philander shook the despairing thought from his head. No, he would make it, he vowed. All he needed was a place to hole up. His eyes began to search for a cave or an overhang to camp, out of the blizzard.

The trail got darker and filled with tenebrous shadows. And the shadows made it even harder for the floundering equine to navigate down the trail. Philander felt a shock wave of panic pound his midsection. But he quickly fought it back. He would not panic—he could not panic. Or he would die. There had to be a place to hole up. He had to keep searching.

Then he came around a bend in the trail and saw something that looked better than the gates of heaven to a lonely lost soul. It was a cabin. A cabin with lantern light gleaming through a window. A cabin with life in it. A promise of a warm place to spend the night and, hopefully, of a warm meal, too.

A senescent man opened the door of the cabin and glowered at him. "Who are you, and what the hell do you want?!" he yelled.

Philander Crook felt desperately cold. Too cold and numb to yank his revolver out and use it on the man. So he had to talk his way into the cabin.

"I'm jus' a friendly stranger passin' through, old man," he smiled through freezing lips that almost made him wince with pain. "I don' mean no harm. I jus' need a place to spen' the night 'till this storm passes through. I'll pay you for your trouble."

The old man looked at the horse, glanced at the bulging saddlebags, then steadied his eyes on Philander. He finally smiled. Slightly.

"Well, light and set. You don't have to pay me nothin'. Go tie your horse up and come on inside." The old man turned around, then turned back. He

pointed a propelling finger at Philander and said, "But there's one rule you have to follow here. I don't want you usin' my outhouse. I don't let no strangers use my outhouse. You'll have to use the bushes out there."

It seemed kind of weird, but Philander wasn't going to question it. He was just grateful to have a nice warm place to get into. He'd use the bushes anytime, as long as he could sleep under a roof.

He tied his horse and did, indeed, use a bush before going inside. Maladroit, fumbling work when all your extremities are half frost-bit. But Philander was able to accomplish this necessary task of nature without too many inappropriate places on his clothes being soiled.

The old man was waiting for him when he came in. He was sitting at a table with a bottle of whiskey and two glasses. An empty chair invited the worn traveler to rest, at the other side of the table. He poured a shot of whiskey in a glass and placed it in front of the chair. "Siddown an' drink up," he smiled like a cherub. "This stuff'll warm you up right quick."

Philander walked on over, and the old man stretched his hand out. "I'm Hargrove Hinsterman—gold miner. All the folks 'round here just call me Grover."

"I'm John Smith," Philander shook hands, "travelin' up to Virginia City." Philander could care less that the old man was a gold miner. The gold strike had petered out pretty bad in California, and most of the few small-time miners who still had claims were just barely scraping by. By the looks of the tiny little cabin, it seemed like this miner was no exception when it came to penury. It was just a tiny little dugout in the side of a hill, with three walls of dirt and one wall of pole logs.

And there wasn't much furniture in the cabin. Just a rusty little woodstove, a wood frame bed, a table and two chairs, and a few slabwood shelves and cupboards.

Philander scowled at his destitute surroundings. This place seemed unfit for a rich man like himself. He vowed to move on just as soon as the storm quit and traveling got easy again. Philander deserved the favors of a city hotel room, not the hardships of a rickety little miner's cabin.

"John Smith, John Smith," said the old man. "Say, you wouldn't happen to be related to that feller who was saved by Pocahontas?"

The old man tilted back in his chair and cackled. "All right," he said, "you don't have to tell me what your real name is. But I'd choose a better

fake alias than John Smith. These hills are full of all kinds of bad varmints by name of John Smith. Someone may mistake you for one of 'em."

The old man chuckled, but Philander wouldn't join in the humor. Philander was fatigued, and all he wanted to do was go to bed. But the senior citizen wouldn't pay any attention to his yawns and other hints of somnolence. He wanted to open his mouth and talk, and this was the first person he'd seen in a month of Tuesdays. So he started to yak at him.

And he talked and he yakked, and he gabbed and he chatted. Philander was squirming in his chair, literally aching to just get up and unroll his bedroll and stretch out on the floor for some deep, fatigue-killing slumber. But the old man would have none of it. He made Philander sit there and listen to his garrulous monologue about life in the mountains, the art of panning gold, beautiful women of his past, where he was born, his life story, where he wanted to retire after he struck it rich, and other such stale, sentimental ribaldry.

About the stroke of every ten minutes the old man would pour a shot of whiskey for himself, and offer one to Philander too. But Philander usually declined. He liked to keep his wits about him when he was carrying 4,716 dollars in cash in his saddlebags. It was no time for imbibing.

The loquacious stories continued into the night, while the old man got drunker and drunker and Philander got sicker and tireder. Crook hoped Hargrove would soon pass out from drunkenness, but all that happened was his speech just got more and more slurred, and his stories got more and more preposterous.

There was a pause when the old man went outside to answer one of nature's calls. After a few minutes of droopy-eyed waiting, a lantern lit up inside his head. Philander seized the opportunity and decided to go outside, himself, and fetch his bedroll off his horse. He hoped it would give the geezer a definite hint. But as he walked out the cabin door he noticed something strange. He caught sight of his host just stepping out of the bushes. And he was fastening his belt buckle.

That was peculiar, since his outhouse was right there in plain sight in the front yard. But Philander pretended not to notice. Instead he went back inside without his bedroll and sat down at the table. He remembered how he had been warned not use the outhouse himself. So what was it about that outhouse, that not even the owner would use it? He decided the



geriatric might be drunk enough to pry it out of him. Curious things sometimes hide huge rewards, so he figured it might be worth a try.

When the old man sat back down, Philander casually brought up the subject of the outhouse. He smiled sideways at him, chuckled, and said, "Well, I hope you didn't freeze to the seat."

Hargrove looked perplexed. Then he said, "Well, no, ah, heh, heh, oh yeah! No—ah been dringkin' du muj red-eye t'freeze. Ha! Ha!"

Philander pointed at the whiskey bottle. "How does a poor old gold miner like you afford all that whiskey, anyway?"

The miner concentrated on the bottle. "Thiz?! Shood, ah don' min' thiz. Pennies! T'aint nothin'. Ah gods da dringk cuz yure mah guest!" He snapped his head up, gazed at Philander, laughed, then crookedly hoisted the bottle up and drank straight out of it.

Then he started talking about butterflies and dogs and prostitutes and rainy days and anything else that came up to his inebriated mind.

Philander yawned again, deciding it would be best to make another attempt at going to bed.

But then the old man stopped talking, and looked Philander straight in the eye with a face that, for an eyewink, looked sober as an owl. Then he breathed a low alcoholic whisper and said with a surreptitious but still slurred voice, "Lemme tell ya a story, John Smit'. A goddamned drue story. Druer'n fried chicken on a church bicnic. Ah swear d'God it's d'druth."

Philander leaned forward. Could this be the secret to the outhouse? He would listen. He would find out.

The old man pointed his finger at the cabin wall on the far end. "Raughd ouside dere is m'river. *Mah* river! Ah stagked a claim on id an' buildt dis cabin las' Spring. Ah panned d'river, after dad. *Mah* river! An' ah god color. Jis' a liddle bid, but id was color. A few months an' a few hunnerd dollers an' ah was magin' a good livin'." The old man pointed again. "But raughd oud dere un'er a bangk of dirdt ah god some color lahk no miner has god color in all miner hist'ry. Ah mean, ah god color!"

Philander's eyes were gaping green, and he was leaning forward into the old man's pointing finger. He was suddenly wide awake with an alert interest in all the miner was saying.

"Color!!" yelled the old man. He poured himself another shot of whiskey and quickly threw it down his throat. "Color," he gasped through

the last droplets of falling red liquid. Then in a painstaking monologue he described it with reverence. "Id was thigk as a blizzard a bullets. Id t'was gold. All gold. Ah jis' dipped m'pan in d'river boddom, sweeshed a leedle—an a cloud a gold dus' floadin' 'roun in dere. Ah god an ounce a gold adatime. A whole by-God ounce. Ah dipped an' sweeshed, an' dipped an sweeshed. Didit fer a weegk. God a hunnerd poun's a by-God gold dus' in'a weegk. A hunnerd poun's a pure gold! Know wuz tha's wurth? Forchins! A forchin a forchins! Ah was richer'n all mah frien's on d'river dad weegk. 'N all mah inimies, doo."

The old man got silent and placid all of a sudden, so Philander shot in a good question. "Well, what did you do with all that gold?"

The old drunk snickered. "You won' bahlieve id. Bud you asgked! So ah'll tell ya." He paused and cogitated. Then he rubbed his forehead and said, "Ah wanded da dake'id d'Sagramendo 'n deposidit in'a bank. Mage it safe ferm robbers. Bud ah was worried 'boud robbers on da drail, doo. So ah didided ah'd bagke da gold ub inda loaves a bread an' dake id inda down dad'away.

"So ah bagked da bread. Mixed gold dus' in da flour an' bagked da bread.

"Bud ah din'd figger on da Donklin' Gang."

Hargrove pounded a finalizing fist on the table and stared at Philander as if that was the end of the tale.

"Who's the Donkling Gang?" Philander asked. For once, he wanted to keep the old man talking. This was sounding like it could be true. And if it was there could be a treasure nearby. A treasure of gold just waiting for Philander.

"Das raughd, you ain' from here," the old man said. He hunched his head between his shoulders, craned his neck at Philander, and proclaimed, "Da Donklin' Gang is'a bunja dieves 'n robbers. Dey wanded a hide-oud blace, so dey rode on ub an' said 'Well, we usin' yo' cabin now.' Dere was ten uv'em. Ah had da agree.

"Din dey saw m'bread, an' dey was a-a-a-l-l-l a'hungry. Dey made me cud d'bread ubp an' serve id du 'em. Ah din'd dell'em wud dey was eadin', bud dey all said id t'was da riches' dastin' bread dey evah ade. Bud if dey only knew jis' how rich id t'was." The old man chuckled, then began to sob

drunkenly. "Dey ade all mah gold!" He put his hands over his face and cried some more.

Philander leaned back in his chair and thought about the ridiculous story he had just heard. He didn't know whether to believe it or not, but the damned dotard sure seemed to be sincere when he told it. Then a thought struck him. So he asked, "Well, why didn't you just shoot 'em all and cut the gold out of their bellies?"

The drunk opened up his wrinkled hands and looked out between them at Philander. Then he guffawed so hard he teetered backward and almost fell out of his chair. He said, "Thad was d'Donklin Gang, boy! Ah'm jis' one man. How do ah go an shood d'Donklin Gang?"

He got a straight look on his face then, and said, "Bud ah god mah gold bagk. Oh, yeah. Alluvid. Ah goddid raughd bagk. Y'see, da whole month dey stayed here dey all used mah outhouse. Alluvem. Ah god mah gold bagk."

The old man swayed up out of his chair with a grunt in his breath and a look of victory on his face. Philander looked up at him, his mouth gaping open. He steadied himself with hands fumbling on the table, and leaned over, peering straight down Philander's throat. "Ah god mah gold bagk," he said, with a supreme drunken smirk on his face. "Ah god alluvid. All hunnerd poun's uvid. Id's all raughd down dere in d'boddom a mah outhouse. So you dell me, Misduh John Smit'. Now how d'hell do ah gid all dadt gold bagk outd?"

The old drunk collapsed face first on the table with a whump and a rattle. He was floodgate drunk, and all that sudden exertion of standing up made him pass out. He began to sleep as sound as a dead pine tree.

Philander shook his head. He didn't know what to believe, but the story sounded so different from anything he'd ever heard before, he decided that it just might be true. He decided that it just might be worth looking into. A hundred pounds of gold dust. Now that right there was quite a temptation.

There was a lantern on a shelf, so Philander decided he would check the story out right then. The drunk was so intoxicated and so sound asleep that there was no chance he would wake up and catch him.

He lit the lantern and exited out of the cabin. The outhouse was only a dozen steps away. The door was unlocked and swung easily open.

Philander stepped inside, holding the flickering yellow flame in front of him.

He held the lantern over his head and peered down the commode hole. But there were too many mingling shadows, and he could not see well. So he unstrapped his belt from his waist and wrapped a leather loop around the lantern handle. Then he lowered the lantern down the hole, feeding it into position with his hands on the other end of the belt. Now he poked his head down the hole for another view.

This time he could see it well.

And it was scintillating.

The gold dust was down there, gleaming and glistening and sparkling up at him, like a host of smiling angels.

It was covered with dust! Gold dust all over the bottom of this outhouse! It looked like a miniature night sky, with millions of glistening golden points of astral light reflecting off the yellow flame of the lantern.

It was a dream-fortune in gold! Lusty, levitating, luscious gold!

Gold! The icon of the civilizations! Gold! The philter of the females! Gold! That sweat-inducing, prosperity-producing, humanity-reducing mineral of the moguls! Gold! Enamoring gold! Hypertensiating gold! Tempting gold! Sin-seducing gold!

Gold!

And all in the bottom of a drunken miner's outhouse.

And all thoroughly mixed with human excrement.

Philander caught a sour whiff from the bottom of the hole, wrinkled his nose, and almost retched.

He quickly whipped his head out of the hole and lifted the lantern out with him. He couldn't take that kind of smell. But it was gold! A hundred pounds of gold! There must be some way, he mused, to get it out.

His mind started rambling. How could he get all that gold out? But he couldn't make any ingenious ideas come to him.

Well, he was tired. So he reasoned the best thing to do was to sleep on it. In the morning perhaps some fresh thoughts would come to mind.

He glanced back down the hole and made a vow. He made a vow to recover every last glistening dusty speck of gold that was down there. He would recover it and become a prosperous man. Far, far more prosperous than he was even now. He would make his fortune in gold off the bottom

of an outhouse. And then he would begin living in opulence. But first he would sleep, then wait for any ideas to come to him in the morning, when his mental powers would be fresh.

The old man hadn't budged a single muscle. He was still where he lay on the table the night before. And he was hard fast asleep, snoring louder than a hurricane.

Philander Crook stood up and got dressed. He rolled up his bedroll, then sat on the miner's bed (which he had used, since his host had already decided on the table) and pondered.

An idea had come to him in the middle of the night. He had spent the rest of the night kind of half-awake, half-asleep, mulling over this idea.

In the freshness of the morning the idea still made sense, so he decided he'd give it a try. He knew that the old man wouldn't want to give up his gold, but he also knew that he couldn't murder him. There were probably too many miner friends of his living in the area, and they wouldn't take kindly to one of their friends coming up missing under suspicious circumstances.

And it wasn't a matter of just shooting Hargrove surreptitiously, then fleeing with the loot. He would first have to spend considerable time extracting and separating the loot from the excrement in the outhouse hole. This would give the miner's friends plenty of time to organize a necktie party, with Philander as the guest of honor. So murder was succinctly out of the question.

But Philander did have an inspiration he thought would work. He picked up his saddlebags—that he had been keeping next to him in bed—and opened them up. He then dumped all of his 4,716 dollars in remaining dowry money on top of the bed. Then he waited.

It was late in the morning when the somnifereporous old man finally stopped snoring and woke up. He was a bit slow crawling off the table, and looked a bit confused about his choice of a bed. He put the palm of a hand to his forehead and rubbed hard. Trying to relieve the pressure. And speaking of relief, he walked outside without even noticing Philander on his bed, and sought out a prospective bush.

But when he came back inside he saw Philander. And he saw the packets of banded cash piled next to him. He put his hands on his hips.

"Good morning," he said, but he had a perplexed look on his face.

Philander looked up and smiled. "Good morning, Grover," he said. There was expectation in his eyes.

The old man looked around the cabin, then back at the cash. He pointed his finger at it, then said, "What's this about, young man?"

Philander stood up and crossed his arms, tobacco-store Indian style. And his expression was just as woody. "This is an offer," he said, cocking his solemn head toward the money. "It's an offer for gold. All that gold you've got rotting in the bottom of your outhouse."

The old miner appeared startled. His eyes opened wide as a frightened frog's. He croaked, "How'd you- - -," then he saw the empty whiskey bottle lying on the floor next to the table. He looked back into Philander's gloating face. "Damned!" he yelled.

Then he proceeded to cuss himself up one side and down the other. He cussed his stupidity for getting drunk. He cussed whiskey. He cussed the sellers of whiskey. He calumniated the makers of whiskey. He cussed the idea of whiskey. Then he turned on Philander and yelled, "No! I'm not sellin' out all my gold to some young whippersnapper! Now you jist pack all that money back where it came from and get the hell out of here! You're not welcome here. You've got five minutes to leave, mister stranger—whatever you are."

Philander just smiled and brazenly said, "No, I'm not leaving. You don't want me to leave." Hargrove looked confounded. "You don't want me to leave, Grover, because if I do I'm going to tell every living, breathing human soul on this river about your outhouse full of gold. And they're going to descend upon your claim like grasshoppers in a garden. And if you don't have the stomach to take that gold out, they will. Believe me, Grover, they will. I might even tell the Donkling Gang."

The old man's face turned a dark, carnelian red at the mention of the Donkling Gang. He began to stutter. He began to stammer. He was over a barrel, and Philander knew it.

"I'll give you an hour, Grover. I'll give you an hour to think about it. But you better think hard. Long and hard. I've got 4,716 dollars in cash here, so you better consider that that's worth it. You've got an hour."

The old man bent his head down and slowly trudged out of the cabin. He had an hour to think, but already he knew he was defeated. He

disappeared into the woods, his head bent down, his hands in his pockets, and his spirit somewhere in the snow-covered ground below.

An hour later he relented and a deal was struck. He wrote a bill of sale for his claim, making it out to the stranger who called himself "John Smith." He reluctantly accepted the 4,716 dollars and stuffed it into his own saddlebags. Then he packed up a few of his personal belongings—some tools, some clothes, some food, and some odds and ends—and threw them onto a packhorse.

By mid-afternoon he was off. Abandoning his claim that he had worked so hard. Abandoning his cabin, that he had built himself. And abandoning his golden outhouse, that contained his life-dream's fortune. His shoulders were sagging. His head was bent low. And his horse and packhorse were taking slow, doleful steps—away. Farther and farther away, down the pine-shadowed trail.

But about five miles down the mountain his sad shoulders began to take on new spirit. His low-bent head began to rise and look alertly about. And a bit of suppressed laughter began to filter out from between his once-melancholy lips. And the laughter began to catch hold of him like sparks taking to punk. It started to come out in punctuated drumrolls. His whole body began to rock back and forth and shake like a Quaker with the Spirit.

He fell off his horse and lay helpless in the snow, laughing like a delirious maniac. For about ten minutes he was paralyzed with this seizure of hilarity. But finally he regained control of himself and climbed back onto the dismayed horse. He nudged it forward and continued down the trail, packhorse in tow, still twitching now and then from minor eruptions of the powerful mirth.

A few more miles down the trail he came by an abandoned old buckboard wagon. It was lying, collapsed from age and weather, off the edge of the path, abandoned long ago by some luckless pioneer. But its iron-rimmed wheels were still in place, and they were covered with a thick coating of orange rust.

The old man recognized a habit of his, that had made him plenty of good money in the past. He jumped off his horse and fetched an old tin can from the saddlebags of his packhorse. He pulled out a carving knife, then trudged through the snow, over to the broken buckboard. And for the

next half hour he spent his time patiently scraping the thick coat of rust off the iron-rimmed wheels and into his tin can.

He only filled the tin can up halfway, but it was a start. In a few more months he would probably have about a dozen or so cans, full of rust, in his new rust collection. For there were plenty of other old, abandoned metal things by the sides of trails that he could scrape lots of corroding rust from in the future.

He looked down inside his half-full can of rust. When the sun hit it, he gave a sinister snicker. He noticed how it gleamed and glistened and glittered in the sun's rays. And he noticed how it gave off a golden aura.

That's a funny thing about rust. When it's way down inside something, and light hits it, it gleams. It gleams and glistens and glitters just like—well—just like gold dust would gleam and glisten and glitter. And with the same golden color, too. Yes, the miner reminded himself. The rust certainly did gleam and glisten and glitter just like gold dust would. He cackled diabolically. Just like gold dust would.

Yes, just like gold dust would.

## **Endnote**

Perhaps now you can guess what I saw that night when I shined my flashlight down the hole of my outhouse. Of course one thing I saw was a tall pillar of dried excrement. That wasn't the glorious part. The glorious part was all the rust that had flaked off the bottom of the water tank and into the hole.

The light from the flashlight made the rust gleam and glisten and glitter. It was a beautiful sight to behold, as it coruscated and sparkled and twinkled back at me. And it reminded me of gold dust. So much so, that I felt tempted to jump right down there with my pickax and start mining. Until I realized that it was just rust.

And that's when I was hit with the inspiration to write this story.



# Story 2:

# The Ghost Of Pinacate Ranch

## Backstory

I had a great-uncle who was loved and hated at the same time. He had a lot of charm, and that's why he was loved. But he suffered from mythomania. And that's why he was hated.

According to all the psychology I once studied in college, mythomania is a disease where you make up shit and tell exaggerated lies, to the point where you start believing the bullshit, yourself. That's the textbook description, anyway.

Uncle Bob made up a lot of shit. He loved to regale anyone who'd listen, with tales of all his fantastic, heroic exploits, and what a wonderful guy he always was. His rodomontades and fanfaronades tended to leave eyes rolling and stomachs wambling.

There was one particular tale he liked to tell, about the time he was a stagecoach driver and encountered a ghost. Now, he was born during the days of the horseless carriage, after stagecoaches had long gone out of use. So it was obvious to everyone, except maybe him, that this was a tall tale of astronomical altitude.

But it was an interesting tale, so he held a captive audience, as they sat mesmerized and a little frightened over his recounting of a brush with the paranormal.

One evening my drunken grandmother was listening to this bullshit for the umpteenth time. She'd had enough, and stood up and called Uncle Bob a fucking liar. Well, nobody calls Uncle Bob a liar. He ordered her out of

his house. She refused to leave. So he twisted her arm behind her back and frogmarched her out the door.

And after that humiliation, many years would pass before she ever shared a beer with Uncle Bob again.

It's true that she had an altercation with my uncle. And after this she wouldn't speak to him for a long, long time. And Grandma did drink a lot. But the rest of this tale of family schism is hyperbole and embellishment. Because, you see, I suffer from mythomania also.

And I'm also a thief. Hell, if my Uncle Bob could lie so much, I figured I could take it further, and do a little stealing, myself. And so I stole my uncle's stagecoach story and made it my own.

Yep, I gave myself credit as the author. But I put it into my own words, and changed a few details, and embellished even more than my uncle, to hopefully make it a little better. So not only am I a thief, but I'm also a fucking liar.

And now I present to you the story, handed down through generations of family braggarts, of that time when I worked as a stagecoach driver.

## **The Ghost Of Pinacate Ranch**

I had just taken on a job as stage driver for a new line, that had a route I was unfamiliar with. Actually the line wasn't new, I was just new to it, having been fired from Komfort Koaches Stageline a month back. They told me I was lazy and irresponsible and unreliable. Which I didn't deny until applying for this new job I got.

The new job, over at Speedy Springlines, didn't pay as well, but that's the direction things went when you were a bum like myself. But things were done a little more casually at Speedy Springlines, and I liked the easier atmosphere.

Like I said though, they had a route that I was unfamiliar with. My boss, Hector Gonzales, did his best to describe it to me, but the description was like a map of uncharted territory—sketchy at best. He put it to me like this:

"Pendejo, see here. You go down thee main trail teel eet looks like eet peters out amongst some boulders, keeping thee western mountains by yer

right eye. You'll find thee trail again. Never leave thee trail. That's eemportant, because once you geet through thees canyon, called Hell's Bell Canyon, you'll come to some trees where's there's a fork een thee road. Steek to thee right, don't turn left. Whatever you do, and no matter how hard your horses pull to thee left, don't turn left." Gonzales was emphatic. He stressed, "That trail on thee left leads to thee old Pinacate Rancho. Thee Pinacate Ranch ees one place you want to avoid. Eet's *haunted*."

He looked me smack in the eye when he said that, like he was expecting me to be scared and shaking the brown stuff out of my boots or something. I just laughed at him and said, "Don't worry, I'm not afraid of no haunted houses or nothing. Why you say it's haunted anyways?" I asked out of curiosity, not superstition.

A dark shadow crossed over Gonzales' face like a hawk over a chicken coop. His thick accent got heavy and dramatic, "A long time ago thee Pinacate was a happy ranchero, weeth laughing and singing cheeldren, a reech and generous owner, and a beautiful, smiling señora. Theen one day, great tragedy. A bandido named Pedro Pescadilla rode eento thee ranch weeth a gang of nine desperados.

"They asked thee owner, Señor Pinacate, for half of all hees cattle. Naturally he refused, and put up a fight. But there were much too many of them, and they shot down Señor Pinacate, theen slaughtered all hees eenocent cheeldren. All that was left was hees poor, beautiful wife, who they raped eleven times, once for each man, but twice for Pedro. They might as well have keeled her, too.

"But they left her, and afterwards she was too ashamed to be seen een town, so she stayed at thee ranchero all alone, to look after thee graves of her poor dead husband and cheeldren. Theen one day her grief and shame were so tereeble that she hanged herself.

"Ever seence, thee house has bean haunted by her ghost. And to thees day, eeny man who spends thee night een that house weel never wake up alive. He ees murdered in hees sleep by her ghost. But your horses weel try to go to that ranch, because thee grass ees green and theeck, and water ees plenteeful. But I warn you thees day, stay away!"

I laughed and scoffed. Haunted house, my hangnail. Sounded like another story invented at a campfire to scare the bejabbers out of a

greenhorn. But I reassured Hector that I wouldn't take the Pinacate road, so he didn't have to worry about me being murdered in my sleep by some female ghost.

I hit the trail next morning on a rickety old Speedy Springline stagecoach, driving a team of four resistant horses. I had whooped it up the night before with a whiskey bottle and whore, so I was feeling the strong elements of fatigue by the time the trail dust was rising through my nostrils. Man was I ever tired!

It was a good thing I had no passengers—since it was just a cargo run—'cause I was bouncing carelessly over rocks and ruts and things, that I was just too tired to see in time. It was a good thing I didn't split an axle, too.

I was trying to recall Gonzales' directions, but there was a bit too much haze on the horizon of my clouded brain. But I was proud of myself. Because, sleepy-eyed and everything, I did make it through that maze of boulders and refound the trail.

The afternoon sun was burning warm over my head though, and that was just contributing to my tiredness. Finally I just started nodding off, and before you know it I must have just fallen asleep, because things just got all dreamy and peaceful-like of a sudden.

Next thing you know a loud crash of thunder makes me sit up like a telegraph pole. It was the middle of the night, and thundering and lightning all around. Man did that ever scare me. Here I was, sitting on this stagecoach on a trail I didn't even know, on a pitch black, stormy night.

And I was completely lost.

And then the clouds burst into pieces. And it rained, and it poured, and it deluged, coming down in sheets that actually seemed more like blankets.

The horses seemed to be doing good though, trotting along with their ears all perked up, like there was something up ahead they were trying to get to. I figured a horse is smarter than a man in a situation like this, so I just let them have their heads and take me to wherever they wanted to go. Meanwhile, I hunched my slicker over my head and peered out at all that falling water.

After about an hour or so the coach slowed to a halt, so I popped my head out from under the slicker to see where I might be. To my surprise, I

was looking straight at a big old two story ranch house. So I jumped down, thinking about a nice warm bed and place to stay the night out of the rain. There was candlelight showing through a window, so I rapped on the door as pellets of rain shot all around my feet.

That's when I remembered the ghost of Pinacate Ranch. Something seemed to grab my body and shake me to my heels. Naw, I thought, it was just the cold wind, not superstition that was making me feel this way. I hoped. Besides, who said I was at the Pinacate Ranch anyway? Why I could be anywhere. I rapped again, only this time not quite so enthusiastically.

And then the door slowly creaked open. And standing there was a beautiful young woman, olive-skinned, and shapely as a prime pear. She may be a Mexican, I thought, but still I could be anywhere. Besides, that Pinacate woman hanged herself, didn't she? Then I thought, well maybe this is her murdering ghost. I laughed it off to myself, then said, "Evening ma'am, mind if I step in out of the rain?"

She smiled the most warm, inviting smile I've ever received from a woman that beautiful. That alone raised my suspicions.

She nodded and stepped aside.

Well, once inside I felt better, but was still a bit wary of this strange woman. I told her of my predicament about getting lost, omitting the part of my falling asleep at the reins, and asked her if I could stay the night for a fresh start in the morning.

Well it was like she was just waiting for me to ask, 'cause she assented a bit too eagerly, saying she'd go upstairs right then and prepare a bedroom for me. My suspicions were growing.

But I went back outside and stripped the leather off the horses and put them away in the stable. Come back inside and there she was, all smiles and cheer, a'waitin for me.

I wondered how she could be so trusting of a stranger, so I asked her if she was there all alone. I was surprised when she said she was, and told me she was the only person who lived at the ranch since her husband and children had died. Visions of Hector Gonzales' worried face kept coming back.

The woman asked if I wanted to visit, but I was too edgy and nervous to be in the mood for it. So instead I yawned, drooped my head, and asked her to show me my bedroom.

Upstairs there was a tightly made bed by the window, with a nightstand next to it. There was a chest of drawers on the far side of the room, and a grandfather's clock on the side near the door. I told her a bedroom seemed an unusual spot for a grandfather's clock, and think I made her mad for saying so. The cheer flushed out of her face, and she became tense as a coach spring.

She said I was not to move a one stick of furniture while in there, and not even to touch anything except the bed. No matter what. When she said that part about no matter what, a hard gleam flashed in her eyes, like the red glint off a bloody butcher knife.

I slept like pancakes at a cookout that night. Tossing and turning every few minutes. Kept thinking about the Pinacate Ranch, and how no one ever woke up alive there. I wondered if I would be next.

But that woman seemed like real flesh and blood to me. I had stared hard at her with all my eye muscles, but couldn't see through one bit of her. To think of her as a ghost was ridiculous. Gradually, sleep crept up to me like it had done earlier on the stagecoach.

Suddenly I woke up, goosebumps freezing on my naked skin. The window was wide open, with a gale of wind and rain blowing straight through. I got up quickly and closed it, then dove back to the warm bed.

My eyes were adjusted to the dark, so I spent a few minutes examining the bedroom walls. Something just didn't seem right. I couldn't put my finger on it until it occurred to me that the grandfather's clock was on the wrong side of the room. Now it was where the chest of drawers was, and the chest of drawers was near the door.

Instantly, my heart thumped up my throat and sucked my mouth dry. Now that was weird. Mighty weird. I sat up in bed and looked all around. I thought I could be mistaken about where things originally were, so I laid back cautiously. Before I knew it, my immense fatigue put me to sleep again.

The grandfather's clock banged loudly, four distinct times, and I jumped awake again. I squinted through the darkness to find it, because I couldn't

figure out why it was so loud. It had sounded like it was coming from right next to me.

I hugged my ribs and sucked the dead air of the room. It *was* right next to me. It was where my nightstand had been, and my nightstand was where the clock last was!

That was it. I knew then and there that I was in a haunted house. Either that or someone was playing a downright cruel joke on me. I backhanded the sheets away and sprang out of bed. I danced into my clothes, jerked on my gunbelt, then crouched low behind the mattress with my pistol drawn. I pointed it at the clock.

This time there was no more falling asleep, I told myself. I was waiting it out until sunrise, which was only about an hour or so away, then shy-tailing it on out of that joint like a deer for open country.

I plucked lashes from my drooping eyelids, held burning matches to my skin, ground my boot heels on my toes, and anything else to stay awake. Along about six a.m. by the mysterious grandfather's clock, a knock came on the door. It was the woman. Or ghost, maybe.

She opened the door and stood there with a sunny warm smile on her face, wishing me a "buenos dias." When she stepped into the room I could tell she knew that the furniture was different, by the way she glanced her eyes about. But she didn't say a thing. Just stayed her same cheerful self and, in fact, insisted I eat breakfast with her.

I quickly declined the invite, saying I had to get on the trail fast, as I was behind my schedule. Being behind schedule had never bothered me before, but I needed any excuse to get out of that house.

She didn't seem to notice how hard I was looking at her, but I was giving her body a thorough scan to see if she really was transparent or not. As we descended the stairs I kept studying her, and finally she returned the gaze with a somewhat annoyed look.

I pardoned myself, then told her I really had to go, and bade her adios. But then I just stood there and kept staring, trying to find anything wispy or otherwise weird about her physique.

She asked me if anything was wrong, and I vehemently denied it. Then I just couldn't help myself. I said, "Pardon me ma'am, you've been very kind to me, and I hate to intrude. But there's something that's been bothering me about you ever since I got here. I heard rumors that this here house was

occupied by a very beautiful Mexican woman, just like you. Only I was told that she was a ghost. I know it sounds funny, but there were some strange things that happened in my bedroom last night that almost scared the skin off me. Can I just ask you point-blank, ma'am? Are you, or are you not a ghost?"

Well, she cocked her head back and cackled long and loud, then reassured me that, no, she was not a ghost.

She said, "Just to prove to you that I am not a ghost, señor, why don't you touch me. Here," she opened her eyelids up wide and pointed at an eyeball, "touch me right here. Touch me right on my eye."

It seemed like a strange place, but she wasn't inviting me to touch her anywhere else. And in spite of all my other faults I do like to behave like a gentleman when I'm with a woman.

So I did it. I reached up and—with my forefinger—placed it softly upon her eyeball.

Only it went right through. It went straight through her eyeball and into her head. There it stopped, pushing against something soft and squishy.

And that's when I woke up.

Now look at my finger.

That's how far it was stuck up my asshole.

**The "End"**



# Story 3:

# Horse of Daydreams

## Backstory

I have mixed feelings about horses. On the one hand, I have many fond memories of riding them. But on the other hand, these giant, four-hooved fuckers are dangerous.

My grandpa used to say that there are only two things you have to know about a horse: one end bites and the other end kicks. Wrong, Gramps. There's a lot more to know than that.

A horse will stomp you, bolt, buck, and rear up. It will shy at the silliest provocation, sending you tumbling to the ground. It will rub your legs against brambly bushes. It will knock your head off, while passing beneath low limbs. It will jerk your shoulders out of socket, fighting the bit. And it will always test you to see if you're really the boss.

If you go too rough on your horse, it will secretly plot to kill you. If you go too soft, it will overtly plot to kill you. You must earn your horse's respect, while at the same time becoming one with your horse. *Simpatico*. But even then, it may kill you.

Horses are fucking quick. One moment you're enjoying a nice, pleasant ride in the soothing afternoon sun, while your old palfrey is just plodding along. The next moment you're sitting on your ass in a cloud of dust, while your nag is galloping off over the horizon.

I myself have been stomped. But that ain't too bad. I knew a lady who was enjoying a fine ride one day, when suddenly her horse shied sideways.

Off she toppled, headfirst onto a paved road. It knocked her doolally, and that's how she remained from that point on.

Even pros aren't immune. My sister is a renowned horse trainer, with a lifetime of experience at equitation. One day she was sitting in a sulky when bam! The pony that was pulling her kicked like a flash of lightning, connecting with her right hand. She's had mangled fingers ever since.

I had a stepfather who was a jockey. His name was Britt Layton. You probably never heard of him, but he was a rising athletic star on the track, back in the 1940s, and a falling star in the '50s. And off the track he played a bit part as a jockey in the 1950 movie, *Riding High*, starring Bing Crosby.

But Britt was an alcoholic, and drinking killed his riding career. If he had laid off the bottle he might have become as famous as Willie Shoemaker. Yeah, he was that good. But instead he traded the promise of fame and glory for a life as a drunken stable hand.

He reached for the bottle and held on tight, riding it as high as he ever rode a two-year-old. He became a washed up, pathetic alcoholic, eventually sliding down from the bottle and into a rehab facility for dipsomaniac former jockeys.

He recovered briefly from his addiction, long enough to marry my mother. But a few months later he returned to the bottle, and my mom had the marriage quickly annulled. He died, probably from the effects of alcoholism, at the age of 60.

So not only will horses hurt you, but they'll also ruin your livelihood, drive you to drinking, break up your family, and eventually send you to your grave.

And yet, I have some very fond memories of horses. My sister taught me how to ride, after she learned from Britt. And at eleven years old I was helping out at a riding stable where Britt was employed. Those are some of my favorite childhood memories.

When I was in my twenties and thirties, I was a dreamy idealist. And I had a lazy bone in my body as big as a Clydsedale. But I had to eat, and my sister was kind enough to employ me from time-to-time as a ranchhand. I mucked many a corral for her, and became an expert with the manure fork and wheelbarrow.

I also rode her horses, to keep them exercised and trail broke. And sometimes I rode with a young lady I was courting. We had a blast exploring the desert, and the rugged foothills below Mount San Geronio, in Morongo Valley, California. Those are some of my favorite riding memories of all.

But I was lazy and she sensed it. Smart lady. She didn't want a deadbeat, unemployed husband, so our relationship never blossomed beyond horseback riding.

Some of the horses I rode for my sister were lazy also. They'd get barn sour, and I'd have to goad them to keep them from turning back and heading for their corrals. It left me wondering what the big deal was. Corrals are prison. Why would a horse be so determined to return to incarceration?

And I wondered what horses did all day, while standing in their prison cells. How could they enjoy such an existence? Seemed to me like the only thing they could do was daydream.

Daydream!

It occurred to me that perhaps that was the answer. The big deal about corrals was that they afforded lazy horses the time to daydream. I myself enjoyed daydreaming. And I was lazy. So why wouldn't daydreaming have the same appeal to lazy horses?

This inspired the short story you're about to read. But it wasn't the only inspiration. My imagination was also prodded by a famous artist named Charles Russell. In 1915, Russell limned an oil entitled, *Meat's Not Meat 'Til It's In The Pan*.

This painting depicts a hapless hunter, who rode his horse high up into the mountains and shot a bighorn sheep. And that damned ungrateful sheep fell off a cliff and landed on a precarious ledge, just out of reach from the hunter.

My uncle had a replica of this masterpiece hanging on a wall of his livingroom. One day while I pondered over it, a lazy, daydreaming horse wandered onto the scene, and divulged the story behind the artwork. In stentorian voice, he described what happened before and after.

Here is the tale that horse told me:

# Horse Of Daydreams

**C**all me lazy and you'd be hitting square on the horseshoe nail. Oh yes, I'm a lazy horse. A son-of-a-bitch, that's what my master used to call me. A lazy, no-good-for-nothing, son-of-a-bitch, jughead horse, to be more exact.

I ain't ashamed. I can't help being lazy. It's not my fault. I guess I was born that way. For as long as I can remember I've had lazy tendencies. Even the brand on my ass is lazy. The "Lazy-J."

I grew up on the Lazy-J ranch. Raised to be a cuttin' horse, so I could go out and help round up cattle. Boy that was miserable work. But lazy as I was, I'd still put energy into it. In my younger days, that is. But as I grew older these lazy bones solidified into a kind of stubbornness, and purposely I became worse and worse at cuttin' cattle.

So more and more the cowboys would leave me with the remuda and use the younger, more go-gettin' type horses. They'd use me as only a last resort, when all the other equines were tuckered out. Which suited me just fine.

I liked nothing more than just to stay in my corral, chew hay, and think. Daydream is more like it. What a daydreaming horse I was, too. I daydreamed about most everything. My mind would take me across deep grassy meadows, through water-bubbling creeks, into craggy canyons—anywhere. Anywhere, as long as it was far away from the Lazy-J and those stinking cows.

To me, that was the meaning of life. To enjoy it. And daydreaming brought me the greatest enjoyment there seemed to be in life. It's like my brain was the greatest organ of pleasure I had. Well I was a gelding, so I wasn't aware of any other organs of pleasure.

But to daydream . . . that required hardly no effort at all. And it made me smart. Got me out of cuttin' cattle, didn't it? To become smart without hardly any effort at all—what a deal.

I found that when I turned my brain loose to thinking on a subject, it would wander all over the countryside of my memory. It would gather a little bit of information I'd once learned here, a little bit there, then without

my even trying it would put all the pieces together for me. From this I would have the solution to a problem. Or an inspiration for a new concept.

And I would have the joy of learning.

My daydreaming brain was my greatest teacher. And learning from daydreaming brought me the best enjoyment I'd ever known. I don't know what there is about learning that brings me such joy, but maybe it's because variety is the spice of life. Perhaps it is that comprehending a new concept brings variety to my mental frame of mind, and this variety makes life seem fresh and new.

Whatever the case, this learning was done without hardly any effort at all on my part. My brain would just work all by itself. It would daydream. And automatically teach me wonderful things, that would bring me joy.

When I discovered this phenomenon about daydreaming, I was about five years old. That's when the stubbornness started to come out in me. The lazy stubbornness that the cowboys began to curse me for. I'd miss a cut on a cow, and it would get away. I'd pull up short too quickly when a loop soared over some horns, and a lassoing cowboy would topple off my back. When he'd try to get back on, I'd take off at a dead run just at the point when his leg was swinging over my back. And off he'd go again.

All this got me exactly what I wanted. He'd lead me back to the corral cursing and take a different horse. And I'd be left alone to daydream to my heart's content. It was a perfect system. Soon after I started this I was almost never picked to cut cows. It always seemed to be another horse. And I'd get to stay behind. With my wandering mind. My teacher. My great source of pleasure.

One day when I was daydreaming I began to wonder why none of the other horses were like me. Why didn't they resist like me? Why, in fact, did they hardly ever seem to want to daydream? They were suckers, in my view. They'd try hard at their jobs, spending an entire day in the hot sun faithfully cuttin' cattle to the best of their ability, and all they'd get for it was a friendly pat on the neck from an appreciative cowboy. At the end of the day they'd be led back to the corral, heads hangin' down, dirty dried up rivers of sweat matting up their backs, and ribs showing hunger.

They'd eat like horses all evening long, sleep like dead clods of dirt, then go wearily back to work come sunup next morning.

I observed this with horror, because I knew it was the kind of life I had only recently been living. A nothing existence. No time to daydream, hardly. No time to hardly even think. Just work, work, work. I concluded that their problem was the same one that had once made me like them. They were just ignorant. Plain old ignorant. Ignorant of the enjoyment daydreaming could bring them. Ignorant of learning. Ignorant of life.

So I tried to teach them. In the evenings before they'd nod off to sleep, I'd talk with them. I'd tell them of the great joy I'd found now that I had time to just stand around and think all day. I'd nicker that they too, could find the same kind of happiness. It was to be found in their minds. And all they had to do was to resist the cowboys, just like I had. And soon the cowboys would have no horses to cut cattle with. We'd all be left in the corral to just daydream our lives away. And to enjoy ourselves to our heart's content.

But the horses never listened to me. Incredible, it may seem. Here I was offering the answer to all their problems, yet they refused to learn. They continued to be good at cuttin' cattle and lousy at enjoying their own lives. I couldn't believe their stupidity.

One evening I was trying to teach my ideas to a chestnut gelding. He was one of the hardest working, most skilled cuttin' horses on the Lazy-J, so I figured he needed help the most. What does he do, he turns on me and whinnies, "Get out of here with that horseshit! You may want to be lazy and worthless, but not me! If we all did what you wanted us to do, you think they'd keep feeding us hay and oats? Heck no, they'd sell us all for dog food. Which is exactly what they're going to do to you if you don't shape up and start working hard again. You're going to become food for our master's dog!"

So that was it. They were afraid to daydream because they were too scared of the consequences. They wanted that daily ration of hay, and they were too afraid it would stop if they stopped working.

And when I thought about it—when I daydreamed about it—I knew that chestnut was right. I was treading on thin ice acting the way I was. Daydreaming sure was fun, but it was also dangerous. I shook with terror when I thought about being inside a dog food dish, being devoured by those German Shepherds my master kept. And I began to worry that

perhaps I'd taken a wrong turn in life when I'd turned to the joys of my mind.

But I was mistaken. It wasn't a wrong turn after all.

A few days later, while I was standing alone in the corral trying to figure out how to get out of my mess, my master came sauntering up with a stranger. They both came inside the corral and looked me over real thorough-like. Then they talked a lot. The stranger kept looking at me, all the while talking with my master. Then he threw a saddle on me and rode me around the ranch for a little while.

Remembering the dog food dish, I was careful to be a very obedient horse. I stood still when he wanted me to stand still, walked when he wanted me to walk, and trotted when he wanted a trot. I was every bit a tame horse as I could be. I'm not saying I liked it any, but it sure beat going to the dog dish. Then the stranger pulled a few green dollars out of his wallet and gave them to my master. He rode me out of the ranch that day, and I never saw the Lazy-J again.

My new home was some miles away, at a small ranch tucked away up against the mountains. And my new way of life—well it sure beat things at the Lazy-J. The ranch was just a small spread, where my new master raised a few chickens, some pigs, and even a few vegetables. But it was nothing that really required the help of a horse. The only reason why he had bought me was so he could go hunting on horseback whenever he was of a mind to, up in the mountains.

But usually he wasn't of a mind to go hunting, so I got the chance to just stand around in my corral all day and daydream to my heart's content. It was truly a good life, the days I passed away at that ranch. I'd stand around, daydream, swish my tail at flies, daydream, blink my eyes at flies, and daydream some more. In the evening, my master would throw me a block of hay, and it almost felt like stealing. But I never let myself feel guilty about it. After all, isn't the meaning of life to enjoy it? And doesn't daydreaming bring the greatest enjoyment? So I was just fulfilling my meaning of life. The whole reason why I'd been put on planet Earth.

But there was something about that block of hay every evening that bothered me. And I found myself daydreaming about it more and more all the time. It was a problem I had to resolve, and not an easy problem. The problem was, that block of hay meant life to me. I had to have that block

of hay every day, or I would die of starvation. I was dependent on that block of hay. Which meant I was dependent on my master, who provided the block of hay. It meant I had to do anything my master wanted me to do if I wanted him to keep giving me hay.

And that bothered me.

I was always a reluctant horse to do anything. I always preferred to stay in the corral and daydream. But nonetheless, I needed that block of hay to continue daydreaming. To continue living to daydream. And now and then I'd have to work to earn that block of hay and go on living. Work meant no more daydreaming. Work instead meant concentration on the job at hand. Work meant no fun.

So the problem for me was, to figure out how to provide my own block of hay every evening, without the help of my master, so I wouldn't have to work for him anymore. Then I could be an independent horse. Free to do whatever I pleased. And free to daydream as much as I wanted. It was truly a puzzle for my mind to figure out. A big puzzle. But that's what daydreaming was for—to figure out such puzzles. While at the same time to provide the best enjoyment life had to offer.

About twice a week my master would take me out and train me to be his hunting horse. This was always a real pain-in-the-ass because it always seemed to interrupt a real good daydream. I'd have to turn my attention to him and do whatever he wanted. It was either that or no more hay. I'd go to the dog dish. So I was careful to pay close attention and be very obedient.

The first time he fired a gun off my back, it scared green liquid manure out of me. I jumped, farted, bucked, shied, and bolted. Not on purpose, as part of a plot, but just because I was scared to death. I wasn't used to guns being fired off my back. I'd heard them from a distance before, but never as close as the top of my back.

But after awhile, and a lot of patience on my master's part, he got me used to it. Finally I got to the point where he could discharge a gun off my back at any time, without any kind of warning, and I wouldn't even flinch. Sure, my heart would skip a beat, but on the outside I'd show not a sign of fear. I'd act like I didn't even notice it. That's how my master seemed to like it, so that's how I gave it to him.

After that he began to take me up the mountain. It was the first time I'd ever been in any mountains—so this, too, took a lot of training. But this



was training that I liked. I learned how to scramble up steep grades. Most important, I learned how to go back down a steep grade. That took some thinking and getting used to, for a flat-land plains horse like myself.

But up there on those ridges—on those peaks—amongst those pines—that was an experience like I'd never had before. I grew to love the mountains. To love the deep wild grass in the high mountain valleys. To admire the boulders, that offered so many different hiding spots. To appreciate the creeks, that always offered a cool drink of pure water. Nothing like the mossy barrel water back at the corral. I loved the mountains. I saw potential in the mountains. I saw potential for independence. Potential to no longer need that evening block of hay. The mountains offered more food than I could eat in a thousand lifetimes. There was a heaven-load of grass for the grazing just waiting for me up there.

And as I daydreamed about these mountains, I solved the big puzzle. I figured all I'd have to do to get to all that mountain grass, and end my dependence upon the hay, was—just escape from my master. So I took to my mountain training well, and learned the tricks fast. It was my hope that this way my master would take me up there often. And then one day maybe I could make a break and escape, and have all that green grass to myself.

I got good at picking my way along a hairline trail on the cornice of a cliff. Became an expert at maneuvering through stands of thick forest, careful not to scrape my master's legs on the bark of trees. Developed a talent for turning around in tight spaces, where trails had a tendency to dead-end. In this way I became a mountain horse. A mountain horse well suited for mountain travel, and for my master's intention.

Which was to hunt the bighorn sheep up there.

Thing was, my master didn't know MY intention. Which was to escape. Escape, and spend the rest of my life living off the land in some high mountain valley. Where the grass was always green and plentiful. And where I could spend my time whiling away the hours, daydreaming and grazing. Grazing and daydreaming. No longer needing to earn a block of hay to live.

The thought of having all that time to just daydream, without ever being disturbed, set my heart to beating faster. I became more alert, more ready,

more plotting and cunning. I became like any horse or other creature would become when it saw the opportunity to step into paradise. I became alive and deadly inside, like a wild animal.

Three seasons passed, and thrice my master had taken me bighorn sheep hunting. And each time I had gone with a plan to escape. And each time I had given up that plan when we got up on the mountain and into the thick of the wilderness. I would see an opportunity to escape, but then my heart would sink. A flood of doubts would overwhelm me. Doubts like, what would I do if I were to be attacked by wolves? How could I eat grass in the winter, when it was covered by ten feet of snow? What if my master recaptured me? What would he do to me? The dog dish, maybe.

Then I'd think of the corral, and life would seem so easy there. All I had to do was just stand around all day, and every evening I'd get thrown a block of hay. So easy. No questions asked. No doubts to my survival. Sure it was a pain-in-the-ass sometimes, when my master interrupted my daydreams and wanted to do something with me. But at least I was mostly happy.

And then thoughts of escape seemed silly. Why endure the hardships of wilderness life for the sake of a few extra daydreams, when I could have the easy corral life back at home, and still daydream almost any time I wanted? With these thoughts, I'd give up my escape plan, help my master get his sheep, and we'd both head home. With me tugging at the bit for that nice, cushy corral.

It was early spring when he took me bighorn sheep hunting for the fourth time. This was the time of year when the snow was melting. When the grass was crisp and fresh. When there was a fertile smell to the air that stirred up daydreaming thoughts that were deep and ancient. And when other thoughts, of escape, were moving strongly through my mind, as powerful as the winds of March. This time, on this hunt, I vowed, I would do it. I would escape, and to hell with my doubts. I would find a way to survive in the wilderness.

We hit the trail ponying a packhorse behind us. This packhorse was a new horse my master had acquired. He was trail-breaking it, getting it accustomed to the mountains, as I had become accustomed. But it still had a lot of bad habits, including the annoying habit of grabbing and munching chunks of grass off the edges of the trail. Lucky bastard. I felt jealous.

We took a ridge route, where the snow had all drifted off and travel was easier. This time of year the bighorns were heading back up the mountain, where the grass would be new, fresh, and just waiting for them to gobble. And my master knew a spot where the sheep always passed. And so there he planned to be waiting, too.

It was a very steep, rugged area. Full of rocky pinnacles and sheer cliffs. What few pines could grow in that area grew straight out sideways first, then up. The kind of country bighorn sheep loved, and where they least expected to find an enemy agile enough to follow them.

But my master knew a trail, and it was on that trail he took me. It partly followed the side of a cliff where a giant leaf of granite had once flaked away and fallen a thousand feet to smash on the talus below. The ledge that it left was only three feet wide, and it made the hair of both of us stand at attention when I picked my way across it. In one spot, it notched down to less than a foot, where a giant chip had dislodged from erosion, and I had to kind of jump-skip across. But my feet were sure and my legs were steady. Indeed I was a well-trained mountain horse.

The untrained packhorse was a lot less steady than me. I thought for sure it would plummet over the side. But somehow he managed to keep up.

During the easier parts of the trail I didn't have to concentrate on where to put my feet, so I had time to let my thoughts wander. And mostly they wandered onto my plans for escape. Again a flood of doubts overwhelmed me. Again I wondered what I would do if wolves attacked me. Or how I could survive a blizzard. Or what I would do if I had to cross a cliff trail. Like the one we had just crossed.

My master always knew if such a cliff trail was crossable by a horse. He would get down and scout ahead, then come back and get me. But what if I should try such a trail alone, and find it impassable at a point where I couldn't turn around? No doubt I'd have to jump off the cliff or starve to death on the spot. Could I really survive alone in the wilderness, or did I truly need the help of my master?

These worries crowded my thoughts and compressed my dreaminess. I turned to thinking about the corral. How safe and secure it was. How I always got that faithful evening block of hay. You know, the corral never really seemed like such a bad place once I was out and away from it,

walking through the wilderness. So once again, I must humbly admit, I chickened out on my escape plans. I decided again that I wasn't quite ready for wilderness survival. I decided that maybe I'd give it a shot next time, but this time it was definitely back to the corral again for me. Once we got our sheep.

We came onto a small bench overlooking a jumbled up mess of boulders hanging haphazardly off the side of the mountain. Looked like a war between the mountain and the moon had taken place here. It was a high, broken, weird sort of place. A spot where thin clouds would boil through, and freeze to pillars of rock. Where cirrus clouds would charge down cliffs and attack aiguilles sticking up from below. Where the wind swept through narrow gaps in bare rock, whistling a wicked, piercing song. A place where you'd expect to find ghosts and eagles. And, of course, bighorn sheep.

The small bench was the only sane piece of land for miles. It was about twenty feet wide and a hundred feet long. It was sloped at a slight angle away from the mountain, but was easy enough to walk on. On it grew the luscious green grass that the bighorn came for, and where my master would be waiting with his rifle. He prodded me forward a little ways so he could have a clearer look.

There was a small patch of dirty snow at the far end of the bench. Then the patch moved, and we both realized that it wasn't snow after all. It was the fleece of a ram. About a 250-pounder. Light brown fleece and large curly horns. Nice and big, and ready for the shooting, just like that. It was straight dead-ahead, just standing there, gazing curiously at us while chewing on a mouthful of grass.

I froze in place and my head came up, ears perked like a jackrabbit. My master aimed his rifle. I took a deep breath and steadied myself. The ram stared. I slowly let my breath out. I remember seeing a red spot erupt on the ram's chest just before it fell and disappeared from sight. Then I heard a wicked thunder and felt lightning strike my ear, jag down into my skull, and scramble my brains.

I leapt and spun. Bucked and ran a few steps. Something had hit me, and hit me hard. I shook my head mightily, and snorted.

My right ear was stinging like a hornet's nest. The very tip of my ear. In fact, the highest spot at the very tip-top of my ear was where the jaggings

pain kept striking. It took me a few moments to figure out what had happened.

I shook my head again and a tiny wet droplet hit my nose. It smelled like blood. That's when I knew. I felt sick. My master, while taking aim at the ram, had not realized in his excitement that the very tip of my ear was in his sights. He had shot off the tip of my ear!

And now he was cursing me! Because I had done like any normal horse would have done, and jumped when I felt a sudden pain, I was being cursed! My master grabbed my long reins and whipped the side of my neck. He called me a stupid horse. He didn't seem to realize he had just shot off the tip of my ear. He didn't seem to realize the stinging pain I was now enduring. He didn't seem to understand just how stupid he was for shooting the tip of my ear off in the first place!

I began to calm and stopped dancing around. I stood there sullen, listening to the barrage of insults my master was inflicting upon me. The stinging had gone away, and was now replaced by a heavy, throbbing ache, that started at the tip of my ear, rolled down like an avalanche, and smashed into my skull, over and over again.

I stood there knock-kneed, with nostrils flared, and eyes white and glaring. Something deep down began to burn inside me. Like a spark that ignites a forest fire, that bullet had touched off a blaze in my heart. My blood was boiling. My mouth was frothing.

Suddenly I wanted to kill my master. I wanted to kill him, then carry out my former escape plans. To hell with his corral. To hell with his block of hay. What were things like that to me? To him they were only a license to take me up into the mountains, shoot off the tip of my ear, then curse me for jumping at the pain. To him I was just a no-good-for-nothing horse, with no purpose in life a'tall, to be used in any tortuous way he wanted. Well I'd show him I was a better horse than that. I would *kill* the son-of-a-bitch, that's what I'd do. I'd kill him!

My teeth clinched around the bit as he drew rein on me. I snorted softly, then took a deep breath. A signal to him that I had calmed down. But just a ruse to hide the forest fire smoking away inside me. I planned to kill him when he least expected it. But right then he expected it, so I tried to act as calm and cool as possible.

My ear was still throbbing when he turned my head and nudged me forward. From the tip down to the skull, it burned. But the pain was nothing compared to what I planned to do to him. Heh-heh, it simply was nothing.

We came to the spot where the ram had been shot. There was no sign of it. But we were at the very edge of the bench, where a cliff fell sharply away. No doubt the ram had fallen down the cliff.

My master leaned out of the saddle and peered down over the edge, to the depths below. My heart convulsed and my muscles flexed, but I stopped myself. No, now was not the right time. I needed something more sure. He could grab the saddlehorn real quick and stop his fall. If I failed now he might never give me another chance. So I stood peacefully still and let him peer all he wanted.

It was a good thing, because there was a ledge only ten feet below that would have probably caught him and saved his life. So my attempt to throw him off the cliff would have been futile. That ledge was about four feet wide, and it was where my master expected to find his bighorn ram, all laid out and dead, nice and pretty-like.

But there was no ram.

A mystery.

The only explanation was that it had fallen over that ledge, and was somewhere farther below. And the only way to find out where it really had fallen was to get onto that ledge and look down over it.

There seemed to be a way down onto it, but it looked tricky. We had to double back to the other end of the bench and follow a whisper of a trail over some loose rocks and, finally, out onto the ledge.

My hooves slid a little bit going over those loose rocks, but it was only on purpose. I wanted to put a little fear of death into my master's blood before I actually killed him. A small landslide of pebbles rolled and tumbled from under my feet, and disappeared over the edge of the cliff. We did not hear them strike ground below. My master grabbed the saddlehorn.

Now we were on the ledge, cliff on one side, outer space on the other. With barely enough walking room if I took it slow and easy. Only I walked just a little bit faster than I should have, and sometimes stumbled and stopped suddenly, tottering uneasily on my hooves—as if I were about

to lose my balance. Then I'd continue on, just a little bit too fast for good safety.

My master clung to the saddlehorn like a two-year-old boy's first ride on a pony. Now he talked to me softly, soothingly, trying to slow me down without making a big issue of it. You see, you don't make a big issue of anything when you're on horseback with a cliff on one side of you and outer space on the other. You just hope your horse listens to good sense and does what you want him to do.

Only I was listening more to a throbbing in my ear that beat the drums for revenge. The soft talk didn't fool me none, and I continued on like a daredevil acrobat, making my master wish he'd never climbed aboard the back of any horse ever in his life.

We got to the spot where the ram had apparently fallen and bounced off, and he whoaed me. And I whoaed. That time. I stood peacefully still again, while he leaned out of the saddle and peered over the edge of the cliff. Only this time he was hanging onto the saddlehorn real tight with his right hand.

I didn't start anything.

I heard my master swear, and he straightened up in the saddle. I peered over the edge, into the empty space, to find what he was swearing at. And there was the ram. Its body was lying on the tip of an outcropping of rock eight feet below. And below that was nothing for at least two thousand feet. Just air for the birds to flap their wings in. Or for my master to flap his arms in.

Above the ram was nothing also. The ledge I was standing on sort of jutted out over the rocky outcropping where the ram lay. So there was not much of a cliff to climb down, to get to it. Mostly just air.

Here was a predicament. That was a 250-pound ram, a nice trophy for my master, and lots of good meat for the eating. And there it lay, only eight feet away. Eight feet that may as well have been eight hundred miles.

But my master was not one easily daunted. When he wanted something, he usually figured out some way to get it. So he sat in the saddle musing and muttering for a long time. Me, I just stood there musing also, and feeling the pain throb in my ear. I decided I would just bide my time. I knew I'd get a chance sooner or later, so I figured I'd wait for my master to

try something stupid. Then I would make sure it was the last stupid thing he ever tried. I would kill him right then and there.

After a minute he began to stir. He legged me to the right, forcing me to step sideways up a small, steep slope at the base of the cliff. Then he slowly swung a leg over my back and carefully dismounted. He was just a step away from the precipice. I could have, and perhaps should have, shied sideways and pushed him over, right then and there. But I didn't. I guess my daydreaming brain just doesn't think quickly enough.

He pulled his dastardly rifle out of its scabbard and stepped (just one small step) to the cliff's edge. He peered down at the ram again. Eternity peered back. He took off his hat and scratched his head, as if trying to figure out a plan. I think he was also trying to determine that the ram was actually dead, or if maybe it needed to be shot again. After all, how could it have made its way down to that outcropping, unless it still had some life in it?

But I guess he finally satisfied himself that the beast was in the afterlife. He returned to my side and slid the gun back into the scabbard.

And he apparently had concocted a plan. He pulled a coil of rope from the saddlehorn. He tied one end of the rope to the horn and with the other he made a loop. A lasso of sorts. Then slowly, carefully, he lowered the lasso over the lip of the ledge and guided it toward the ram's horns.

A fairly brisk breeze was stirring, up on that high mountain declivity, so this was no easy thing for my master. It blew the loop here and there, twisted it, and kept it away from the ram's head. Painstakingly, my master tried and tried again, but never with any success. Finally, he cursed and hauled the rope back up.

He sat still again for awhile, before coming up with another plan. And the next plan he hatched proved to be far more daring.

He rummaged through the bags of the packhorse behind me and found a picket pin. What he used, to sink into the earth of a pasture and tie me to, so I could graze without wandering too far. Only here there was no earth to sink a picket pin into. It was all just rock. Bare rock.

He cleared away some snow near my feet, and searched for cracks in the rock. When he found one, he jammed the picket pin into it. He checked it for tightness, then tied a rope to the pin and my bridle. Whatever his plan was, it sure didn't involve me going anywhere. I was now tied to the cliff.



Next, he tightened the cinch of my saddle as tense as he could get it. I was almost breathless from the pressure. Then he took his lasso and undid the loop, so he had just a straight rope. He made sure one end of the rope was tied very tightly and securely around the saddlehorn. The other end he let fall over the ledge.

After this, I could scarcely believe it. My master grabbed hold of the rope, crouched over the ledge, and dropped his feet over the side. He steadied himself with one hand on the rocky ledge and the other on the rope. Then he gradually lowered himself into the wind.

Leather was creaking and whining. My saddle twisted around just a little bit, but it was cinched so tightly around my body that there wasn't much room for any give. And a few seconds later my master landed safely, just like a horsefly, on that rocky outcropping with the ram.

I now saw his plan. He made a new lasso, at the end of the rope. Then he started contorting his body in such a way that made it possible for him to inch the lasso closer and closer to the ram's head. But the head was perched at the edge of the outcropping, with the nose sticking out into space. My master had to figure out how to get that noose over the nose and under the head, without losing his balance and toppling ass over teakettle into the great abyss below.

But once he had that loop around the ram's neck, his plan was to climb up that rope, back to the ledge where I stood. Then he would use my horsepower to haul the ram up to my level. My cattle roping experience helped me understand this. And so I could see his plan clearly.

And he was making progress with the loop.

I realized that if I was to gain my revenge I had to act immediately.

Without making any noise, I eased myself forward a few feet, drawing the picket rope tight. Then, I bobbed my head up and down, trying to work the picket pin free. It was jammed in there pretty good, but I did feel some give. So I kept at it, working somewhat frantically, yet careful to be noiseless.

Finally I heard a slight chinking sound. It was coming free. I worked harder, and the pin got looser. I took another step forward and gave one big lunge with my head. With a loud clang, the picket pin shot out of the crack and hit my flank.

My master looked up quickly at the sound, and saw I was free. However, this slight looking up movement caused him to lose balance, due to the awkward position of his body. So he instinctively let go of the lasso and grabbed the rocky side of the cliff, to steady himself.

That was the break I needed.

In a split-second, he realized how much his life depended on possessing that lasso. So he grabbed for it. But I was too fast. The picket pin hitting my flank had startled me. It had made me jump reflexively forward on that ledge, and this had caused the loop to pull a few inches clear of his grasp.

After that I went a few feet further, then stopped when I heard him curse.

The rope dangled freely down the side of the cliff, about three or four feet from my master's fingertips. I just stood there for a few minutes, watching him trying to reach it. It was no use, and I knew it. But I enjoyed watching him try. He'd wait for a breeze, and the rope would swing close to his outstretched fingers. But never close enough.

Finally he stopped trying, and began talking to me easily, trying to coax me back to him. I felt a throbbing pain hit my ear. Then I remembered the way he had shot off the tip, then cursed at me. A curse or a daydream—I had my choice right then of what I wanted. So I just shook my head, snorted, and started walking.

That's when I heard a volley of cursing start up behind me. But in front of me I heard a call. Like a wild call. Unvoiced, but there. The call of freedom. The call of independence. The call of joy. Joy that comes from uninterrupted daydreaming and uninterrupted learning. Paradise was calling me. And I kept moving forward toward it.

About a half mile on I could still faintly hear the cursing. But then a cold gust of wind hit me and carried the noise away for good. The sun was going down, and an icy breeze was picking up. I wondered how my master would fare the night.

But he was not my concern anymore. Now it was wilderness survival I had to think of. I continued on down that ledge until it widened out onto another bench. From there I found an old game trail that took me up over a mountainside.

The moon was rising when I topped the mountain ridge, and I looked below to see a ghostly valley in the dim pines. A slashing meadow of

frosty grass reflected blue diamonds of moonlight. It was to that meadow I trotted.

Or actually, we trotted. For the packhorse had followed me. It had nothing against my master, but it wasn't well-trained yet. So it just did what comes natural to horses, and stuck with the herd. A herd of two escapees.

We ate a good meal that night, but getting used to the wilds still took a few pounds off over the next few weeks. But that worked out well, because the skinnier we got the easier it was to get rid of our saddles and packs.

Our cinches had loosened and our saddles and packs were sliding easily over our backs. Finally we managed to break the cinches by rubbing against the bark of an old pine. And our burdens fell free. The bridle I'd lost long before. My packhorse buddy didn't have a bridle, so he had no problem at all in that area.

Within a few months we were totally free of anything man had put on us, except the old, faded "Lazy-J" brand on my ass. We'd even lost our shoes, scraping over the rough rocks in those mountains.

We were totally wild and free horses.

And no wolves ever attacked us.

In the winter we went to lower elevations, where the grass was easier to get to through the snow.

We never took chances on cliff trails we didn't know, so we never got stuck and had to jump off.

And no one ever shot off my ear-tip again.

We lived safely and happily. We daydreamed and grazed. Grazed and daydreamed.

We let our lazy bones lounge in the wilds of paradise.

And we daydreamed.

And we grazed.

And it was in those mountains that I found, as an independent, wild, daydreaming horse, the unending happiness I had always hoped for.

# Story 4: Where's Uncle Buckshot?

## Backstory

**H**arold and his wife, Lizzie, headed the gang of outlaws, and his sons Bill, Roy, and Tom were part of the gang. And so was Buckshot, Harold's brother. Or Uncle Buckshot, as he was known to Bill, Roy, and Tom. They were hard working criminals, these six. And enterprising. They made a dishonest dollar wherever they could find one. The good ol' American way.

They hit their heyday back in the early 1970s, when they were into all sorts of lucrative ways to generate filthy lucre. One of Roy's favorite gigs was to steal private airplanes and fly them down to Mexico. Then he'd load up on cocaine, and fly the drugs back across the border, low under the radar.

He and his brothers also took to illegal gold mining up in the Sierras. They used scuba gear in rivers such as the American and Russian, to find nuggets in the water. They could pick up thousands of dollars worth of the yellow stuff every summer, that way.

Bill was the oldest, and wildest. And so they called him Wild Bill. But he eventually met and married Blanca. She was a big, tough Mexican lady who knocked Wild Bill upside the head enough that it exorcised the wild clear out of him. He went straight and towed the line, with Blanca keeping a watchful eye to make sure he stayed that way. Especially when he hung out with his family.

Harold and Lizzie were the brains of the outfit, but not the back. They organized and instigated, and refereed any infighting to keep it fair, but they never actually committed any crimes. Other than conspiracy.

My sister married Roy about this time, and that's how I became acquainted with these outlaws. I was just a young stripling, pushing into my teens. But I knew they were tough hombres by their hard faces and rough language. However they weren't bad folks. That is to say, they weren't mean. Or at least, they always treated ME nice.

But when they were drinking or doing dope, look out. Those were the times when Roy would get rough with my sister. He broke her nose and jaw a few times, while jacked up on coke and alcohol. And she left him more than once, while fleeing on foot for her life.

And after five years of wedded chaos, she deserted him for good. But during those five years, she saw a lot of shit. And she heard of a lot more shit, when the gang would return home from one of their escapades. And one of those things she heard, concerned Uncle Buckshot.

One day, about 30 years after freeing herself from that family, my sister was visiting me and casually mentioned Uncle Buckshot. I'd never heard of him before. I felt tickled with his name, and asked her how he had earned such an odd sobriquet. She didn't know, and said she had never been told. And she said it was probably best that way.

But she did pass on a story to me about Buckshot. Now this is a hearsay tale because she wasn't there when it happened. So it could be pure bullshit. And it is bullshit in one sense. I've had to fill in many details with my imagination, due to the sketchiness of this tale. So it might be most accurate to call this fiction, based on possible truth.

She was told the sketchy version one day, after sitting around with her outlaw in-laws, relaxing and shooting the bull. It suddenly occurred to her that she hadn't seen Uncle Buckshot in a long time. So she asked about him.

That was a conversation-killing question. And where the conversation stopped, this modern Western begins.

## Where's Uncle Buckshot?

“Where’s Uncle Buckshot? I haven’t seen him around in awhile.” Everyone stopped talking. Her husband Roy, and her in-laws fell silent. Not the kind of silence where everyone’s thinking, “Hey yeah, where IS Uncle Buckshot?” No, this was an awkward, floor-staring silence. It was a silence with the message that she should never ask that question again.

Later her mother-in-law, Lizzie, pulled her aside and told her the tale in quiet whispers.

Her in-laws were outlaws. Most had done time in prison. And Uncle Buckshot had been the worst of the recidivists. She’d only met him a few times, between stints in correctional facilities. And no one had ever told her how he came to be called “Buckshot”.

He was likable enough, but kind of squirrely. And after meeting him those few times, she realized she did not want to know how he acquired his nickname. Some stories are best left untold.

But here was a different story. And it had been told. Her mother-in-law had spilled those beans into her ear in somber whispers. And it was a story best kept unrepeatable. Which is why it was repeated to me, and why I’m repeating it to you. There are good lessons to be learned from unrepeatable stories.

Uncle Buckshot had just gotten out of prison from his most recent conviction. Was it burglary? Grand theft? Assault? Who can remember? His rap sheet was a medley of felonies and misdemeanors.

Fresh out of stir, he joined up with his brother Harold, and sister-in-law Lizzie, and his nephews, Bill, Roy, and Tom, for one of their infamous outlaw forays. A road trip. A vacation for highwaymen on the byway, where crimes of opportunity are spotted by experienced eyes, and freebooters sortie forth to liberate treasures from their careless owners.

Roy’s wife stayed behind to mind business at home, and keep on the right side of the law.

They caravanned across the West in a motorhome and several jeeps. They sought plunder wherever serendipity smiled at them, and lived off the fat of a land populated with unsuspecting victims.

One evening they rolled down a dirt road in western Colorado, seeking a place to park and camp for the night.

The next morning they lounged about like lazy lizards under the unfurled canopy of the motorhome. They were in one of those isolated, hidden spots where silence is palpable as cotton, during dead spots in conversations. There was no sign of civilization around for miles.

Except one sign.

Uncle Buckshot tore through the cotton. He pointed out this solitary sign of civilization. It paralleled their dirt road campsite. "Jist look at those lines," he mused.

His brother Harold said, "I wonder why they'd have telephone lines way out here?"

"Not telephone lines," corrected Buckshot, "POWER lines. I know power lines when I see 'em. Look how thick they are. Way I figger, there must've been a town down this road at one time. Those power lines fed the town its electricity. You see that shit all over the West. Abandoned, dead power lines leading to nowhere. They never bother to take 'em down."

"Yup," said Harold. Then another cotton-thick section of silence. Then a clinking and rattling of dishes as Lizzie got to work in the motor home, cleaning up breakfast.

"Know what I'm thinking?" Uncle Buckshot broke the reverie.

*Dear Lord help us*, thought Harold. When his brother got to thinking, trouble soon followed. Harold did not take the bait. He made no reply.

But Buckshot's nephews hadn't learned to be so wary. "Whatcha thinkin', Uncle Buckshot?" asked Tom, the youngest nephew, with a tinge of eagerness.

"Copper! Those dead power lines are pure copper. We could cut about a mile of that line down, strip it, an' sell it to a recycler. Must be thousands of dollars up there, jist waitin' for someone like us to cash in."

"Yeah someone will cash in alright," said Harold. "How do you know those lines are really dead?"

Buckshot knew. He just knew. Ipsedixit. It was true because he said it was true.

“Why, they don’t leave power lines jist sittin’ around, unmaintained, if they was usin’ ‘em. No, hell no. An’ they ain’t usin’ ‘em. There ain’t nuthin’ out here for miles. Jist old ghost towns. An’ look at those poles. Piss-poor condition, I’d say. They’re about to fall over, I’d say. No. Nope. No sir. Those lines have got to be dead.”

Wild Bill and Roy, Uncle Buckshot’s other two nephews, were in on it. Along with Tom, of course, who was always in on anything impulsive and ill-advised. Harold was out. He stomped up the metal motor home steps and retreated inside.

Within a few minutes they found the long-handled bolt cutters. The tool they used for breaking into sheds and stuff. These would do for snipping the lines. Then they rigged up a harness-like contraption out of ropes. They put the harness on Uncle Buckshot and sent him up the pole.

He got the climbing honors because, after all, this was his idea.

Squeezing the ends of the long handles was the last act of the outlaw Buckshot. A flash. A crack that sounded like buckshot itself. And a plummeting to the ground.

“Jesus Shit Christ! Now what’re we gonna do?” Harold muttered as the family gathered around the blackened body.

“Service truck should be coming along within the hour,” remarked Roy. “We gotta get outta here.”

The three nephews loaded their uncle into the back of a jeep, along with a few shovels. They took off down the service road. The motor home, driven by Lizzie, and the other jeep, with Harold behind the wheel, headed in a different direction. The next morning they all met up at a campground near Moab, Utah.

It’s been about five decades since Uncle Buckshot disappeared. In the interim, Harold and his wife passed away in rest homes. Tom was arrested in Montrose, Colorado, after a barfight, and hanged himself in his cell. Or did a deputy organize the hanging? Wild Bill went sober and straightened out his life, with his wife’s determined assistance. Roy was divorced.

And Uncle Buckshot’s bones remain decomposing in an unmarked grave near a jeep trail, somewhere in the lonely hills of Colorado.



# Story 5: Bus Ride

## Backstory

**T**his modern Western is mostly a true tale. I'll point out the one part that isn't true, later on. It's a story about visions of Texas instilled into the heart of a California dreamer. I was that dreamer, though I wrote this autobiography in the third person, with a changed name.

I was a young man who had left southern California to spend my last school year in upstate New York. I went through a culture shock during my senior year of high school, having been born and raised in California, and not accustomed to east coast ways.

But the greatest shock came from my new stepmother, whom my father had just married. My stepfather was a giant asshole, and he and I didn't get along. I thought for sure my dad could do a better job at picking a spouse than my mother had. So I traveled across country to live with these newlyweds, and escape the abuse from my stepfather.

But my dad's new wife was an alcoholic. Just like my dad. And a mean alcoholic. Unlike my dad. In fact, she was even meaner and more abusive than my alcoholic stepfather.

So after I graduated high school I forlornly decided to return to my mother's house, put up with her asshole husband, and attend college in the state of my birth.

My dad felt disappointed and wasn't about to spend any money on a plane ticket. Instead he had my stepmom drop me off at the Greyhound bus station, with a one-way ticket back to where I came from.

And I was nearly devoured on that bus ride.

A ten-hour trip to Grand Central Station from Ticonderoga, New York, left me feeling tired and anxious. But then I met a helpful man. A smooth-talking Texan who called himself John Lash.

Lash had a slick tongue, cool eyes, and the quiet, patient instincts of a hunter. And I, the disaffected 18-year-old, returning from one dysfunctional home back to another, was the unsuspecting and vulnerable prey.

Let this tale serve as a cautionary lesson to young adults. Especially to those who need a safe place to live, yet have never known home to be a refuge.

## Bus Ride

**E**ighteen and a tough realization to swallow: Dad's home was worse than Mom's. Dad's wife was more abusive than Mom's husband. So he decided to jump from the fire and back into the frying pan.

At seventeen he left Mom's house and flew clear across the country to live with Dad and his new bride. But his new stepmom didn't like him. Didn't want him. Besides, she was a crazy, mean drunk. So when he faced a choice between east and west, he opted for a college on the west coast.

She dropped him off at the bus station. *So long, you wicked witch of the east*, he muttered to himself as she sped away. Depressed, disappointed, and disillusioned, he boarded the Greyhound.

Grand Central Station. A crowded, confusing mess for a small town young man who needed to make his connection. He finally found the correct terminal in the hurly-burly ruck of this massive building in the heart of Manhattan. His bewildered eyes were like searchlights, exploring the proper way to go, while at the same time attracting attention.

"Need help?" he heard a gentle Texan drawl. There beside him hovered a tall lank man in a cowboy hat, about ten years older than him. "Howdy, I'm John. John Lash. You goin' to Albuquerque, too?"

He took in the tall Texan, warily scanning him up and down. “No,” he replied coolly, and turned his attention to studying the transfer ticket in his hands.

“Ah, *California*. I can see that on your ticket. Well this is the right terminal. Gets confusing here, don’t it?”

The younger man glanced back up. “Yeah, it does.” He felt suspicious and cupped the ticket so this stranger’s prying eyes couldn’t read it anymore.

Lash laughed a little. “Hey, I’m just trying to help. Well if you need anymore help I’ll be standing over there,” he pointed.

*What kind of prick am I?* The thought sneaked into his head. *That guy seems nice enough.* He felt a little guilty. A few minutes later he made his way over and introduced himself. “I’m Sal, by the way.” They shook hands.

The Texan was a very present man. He listened attentively. He seemed relaxed and self-assured. He conveyed confidence and security. And he seemed ever ready to assist with any need. These were things this young man craved from the people he associated with, yet received so rarely.

Sal gradually relaxed his guard and fell into the confidence of the self-assured man with the cowboy hat.

The bus ride carried them through the Garden State, and across the Alleghenies of Pennsylvania. What an exciting time for this young man, who’s only prior crossing of the continent occurred at 30,000 feet. Now he was getting a ground’s-eye view of America the beautiful.

John Lash befriended him, and they spent many hours in the seat cushions, next to each other, sharing stories, swapping lies, and commenting on the passing scenery.

Lash claimed to be a Texas Aggie alumnus, and regaled him with tales of his A&M years, and the exploits of the Aggie’s famed football team, and all kinds of other stories about Texas.

Sal learned that Texas was the last Confederate state to surrender during the Civil War. And he learned that Texas had the best this, and the most that. And he learned these aggrandizing facts with interest, because John Lash had a charisma to him that made every word he uttered seem necessary to know, cool, and immutably correct.

Sal grew fascinated with Lash and the state he hailed from. And he began to wonder if Texas might be a good place to settle down and start a career. This was an important consideration for a fledgling like him, with his whole life ahead of him.

Just past a cup of coffee at Hubbard, Ohio he began to voice this interest to John. The cowboy squinted two approving eyes at him, then lowered his voice and quickly promised, "We'll talk about it later."

He then stood up from his seat, swaggered up a few rows, and plunked down next to a pretty young lady who had just boarded at Hubbard. He sparked a conversation with her, and it seemed his charming, genteel ways won her over within minutes.

Sal felt instant jealousy. He was attracted to Lash. Not in a sexual way, for Sal liked pretty young ladies also. But in a comradely way. But now it appeared he had to share his new friend's attentions with this muliebrity that had transfigured the bus.

Finally the nubile one disembarked a long eight hours later, at her destination in Indianapolis. Lash returned. Now, as promised, the cowboy discussed Texas as a place to live.

Great state, wonderful state, he advertised.

But, he pointed out, New Mexico was even better.

For the first time, he brought up copper mines. He was employed at a copper mine in New Mexico, he revealed. The work was hard, but not too hard, and it paid very well, according to him. Between Terre Haute and St. Louis, he spun yarns and otherwise expounded at length on his experiences in this occupation that he described as the best thing that had ever happened to him, making it seem magical to the ears of the young man beside him.

The bus stopped for awhile in Joplin, and they got out to stretch their legs and walk the town a bit. A Mexican man in his 30's, named Santino, had joined them for occasional conversation, on the bus, and he accompanied the two on the town walk. Their dialogue mainly consisted of comments about various sites they described. But somehow these comments always found their way back to the copper mines of New Mexico.

Lash startled the young man when he suddenly suggested, "Why don't you try to get hired where I work?"

“Who, me?!” Sal felt both flattered and flummoxed at the suggestion. “They’d never hire me. I’m too young, and I’ve never done that kind of work before.”

John spit a stream of tobacco onto the street. He was perpetually chewing that stuff. On the bus he carried around an empty soda pop can that he spit frequently into. “Shit!” he declared, “They’re always hiring people. Long as you’re willing to work, you’ll do good there. Pays well, too.”

Sal had never lived on his own before. The thought frightened and fascinated him. Here . . . here . . . was an opportunity to make it on his own. He didn’t need college. He didn’t have to go back to living in an abusive home. Why, he could get a good job in New Mexico and never have to live under the roof of an abuser again.

He promised John he’d think about it.

Past the Oklahoma Ozarks, the sleek Greyhound raced. John, Santino, and Sal got into a penny-ante poker game at the back of the bus. John kept at it with his fulsome praise of the copper mining industry, while Santino seemed bored and kept trying to change the subject. Sal felt a little annoyed with Santino about this, but minded his manners.

Then Santino lost a big pot to John and had to stop playing. Sal felt guilty pleasure at Santino’s misfortune, but did his best to keep his glee to himself.

A long stop at Oklahoma City invited a stroll in the summer morning heat. Santino guided the conversation to food, and how hungry he felt. John bought him a hot dog from a sidewalk vendor, then steered the talk back to the glory of copper.

An hour later, the motorcoach flew further down the highway.

Sal felt intrigued by the long cracks in the earth, breaking through the Llano Estacado of the Texas panhandle. And of course Lash, a Texas native, had plenty of tales to tell about his supposed exploits in Amarillo.

By this time the two were great friends, and Sal drank in every word uttered by this cowboy, like a longhorn steer at a watering hole. But the subject of copper mining no longer came up much, because it already seemed like a given that Sal was sold on the prospect. Besides, Santino had done a fairly good job of discouraging any further talk on the matter. All Lash did was occasionally check to make sure Sal was still interested.

Sheet lightning washed over the long bus as it motored into Tucumcari. “Ya see,” Lash drawled, “Indian legend has it that many years ago there lived two great chiefs, named Tucum and Cari. They fought a great battle here, and from then on lightning strikes became very common on this plain. This town gets more lightning strikes than anywhere else in the world.”

This was all pure bullshit, but it sounded great to Sal. He believed it. He believed anything his Texan friend told him. But he barely heard John, because he was looking forward with so much excitement to his new life that was about to unfold, as a New Mexican copper miner.

Around midnight, air brakes hissed the Greyhound to a long stop at a terminal in the downtown Albuquerque bus station. Everyone had to get out for a spell to allow for cleaning. But also this was Lash’s destination. And Sal’s too now, it would seem. Sal stuck beside his Texan friend, while Santino tagged along to say his goodbyes.

John Lash called his brother, informed him of his arrival, and told him he had a friend with him who also needed to be picked up.

Santino moved into Sal’s view and suddenly, ever so briefly, transformed into a singular figure of abject fear. “Are you sure you want to do this, Sal?” he gasped.

The worry lines, the genuine concern that flashed on his face . . . it triggered a feeling like a kick in the gut. And suddenly Sal felt doubts.

Lash heard the question and spun around to face Sal, with an inquiring look.

“Uh, yeah, I, I, I don’t know. I think so.”

Lash’s eyes were gimlets, boring into his skull. “You mean to tell me you were all fired up all this time about working at the copper mine, and now you’re not sure? Come on!”

“No, I still want to do it. I think. But then I won’t go to college. My mom is expecting me tomorrow in San Diego. What do I tell her?”

“Hay-ell,” John drawled out. “You can call ‘mommy’ tomorrow and jist tell her. That way she won’t worry. Come on. Be a man. Be like a Texan.”

Calling her in the morning sounded kind of reassuring to Sal, but he still felt troubled. It’s funny how a person can feel very enthusiastic about a big decision until the time actually arrives to commit. Hesitation has a way of stealing its way into the soul of those who possess even a small fraction of

wisdom. And even at his young age, Sal possessed a bit of wisdom. For wisdom is known to weave itself into the warp and weft of children who endure years of abuse.

It's a good thing, this hesitation and wisdom. It can really save you sometimes.

They kicked it around some more, and then a half hour later a fourth man appeared in their midst. John Lash's brother, George. George looked nothing like John. He had a dumpy figure, was slovenly dressed, and seemed about ten years older.

George looked Sal up and down. He glanced over to John with a fleetingly approving look. Then he sort of whined, "Oh, I don't know . . . I guess he can come if you want." He shrugged his shoulders and sighed, "He can sleep on the couch for awhile." He acted as if this would be something of an imposition, but expressed a reluctant willingness to humor his brother.

The two Lashes directed hard gazes Sal's way. Sal rolled his head up, down, then all around, trying to dodge eye contact and the pressure that goes with it. Then he caught Santino's eyes, who stood out of view from the brothers, behind them. Santino dramatically shook his head side to side, while mouthing the word, "NO!"

Sal was young, but not so naive he couldn't recognize the quality of Santino's character. This Mexican was no nonsense. He hardly possessed a fraction of the excitement and charisma owned by John, but he did carry within him a somber grasp of reality, and resignation to the hard facts of life, that seemed to kind of elude the self-assured cowboy.

Sal didn't like such resignation, because it was so unexciting. But his own life experience enabled him to connect with it. It was familiar. It was real. And it was something he knew he could count on.

It was enough. This unspoken "NO" from Santino was perhaps the most fortunate piece of advice Sal would ever receive. And Sal took it to heart.

"I think I'll pass, John," Sal murmured, feeling a little ashamed.

"Are you sure?"

"Yes, yes!" with a little more emphasis. Sal hung his head but stood his ground, as a diesel engine purred in the background.

The bus was now boarding. It was time for a parting. They all shook hands and the Lash brothers sauntered out of the station.

Who knows what might have happened had this young naif gone with them? Perhaps you can imagine many hypotheticals. But here's what we do know. Here's what resulted from Sal's decision:

Sal attended community college in southern California. After college he faltered in his career aspirations, as many young men do who've emerged from an abusive childhood. But he eventually found success, entered into a satisfying marriage, and retired in relative comfort.

As for John Lash, he and his brother were also successful. Over the next six years they succeeded at luring eight young men into their home. There they raped, tortured, and strangled them with ligatures.

They buried their bodies in an abandoned copper mine.

Santino hung near Sal all the way to San Bernardino. When the Greyhound stopped from time-to-time to allow its passengers to get off and find a place to dine, Santino followed him to various eateries and never left Sal's side.

You see, Santino was penniless and very hungry, and Sal had a few bucks to spend. In Flagstaff, Sal bought him some burritos at Taco Bell. Barstow saw Sal treating Santino to a bag of chips from a vending machine.

Sal didn't have much money, and felt annoyed with Santino's mooching ways. Such annoyance is understandable, given Sal's limited resources. But any annoyance would have quickly evaporated had he realized then, just who this man was that he was feeding.

For as it turned out, Santino was Sal's guardian angel.

## **Endnote**

The only part of this tale that is fiction, is that I don't really know what the hell John Lash and his brother were up to. They could have been genuine, and really wanted to help me get a job in a copper mine. But my older, wiser self feels very doubtful about that.

Maybe they were just planning to rob me of what little I had. Or maybe they were planning to traffic me into the world of male prostitution. Or perhaps drug smuggling. Who knows? I only know that I'm alive to tell this tale today. I did not fall prey. I'm one of the lucky ones.



Oh yeah, the other part that may not be true is Sal being a guardian angel. Maybe he was just a hungry moocher who saw me as a meal ticket he didn't want to lose. Is there really such a thing as guardian angels? Who knows?

# Story 6: Calamity In A Cornfield

## Backstory

**W**e humans love to nitpick at each other, and stir up controversy. And all over nothing, most of the time. One of the “nothing” issues we often fight about is music choice.

When I was a teenager I got into rock ‘n roll. But I had a stepfather who disapproved, and who would mock the tunes I rocked to. He liked putting people down, so you’d better believe he seized upon my choice of music for his uninvited criticisms.

But then I got into country music. And since he was a redneck, he had to give up on that line of critique. Nonetheless, others criticized. And that’s because they thought I was a redneck, too.

So I just did what any old redneck is expected to do, when criticized. I doubled down. I bought a cowboy hat, blue jeans, and pair of boots. And I started a career as a country music deejay.

But my tastes changed again. When I hit my late-20’s I discovered classical music. The vibes of the symphony orchestra. By this time I was in the military. I shared a barracks dorm with a guy who liked to judge people based on their choice of music. And when he’d see me listening to Beethoven, or Tchaikovsky, or Rachmaninoff, he’d just shake his head, cluck his tongue, and warn me that I was going to grow bugs in my ears if I kept listening to that stuff.

But I kept listening anyway, and bugs never did grow in my ears. I know. I checked.

Of all the musical genres, it seems classical takes the most heat from critics. Those who are fans of any other kind of music seem to regard the classics with disdain. And they seem amused and befuddled when they encounter ordinary folks who are fans of this genre. They assume that classical music is only for octogenarians and white shoe society types.

And yet I submit to you that classical music serves many useful functions that we all enjoy. For instance, it provides the juice that makes our elevators go up and down. It enhances the effects of Novocaine, at the dentist's office. And it cues our mood when watching movies, so that we know which emotion to feel. Consider how sterile and bland the cinema would be without classical music.

And there's one other thing. Classical music grows houseplants. Scientific study has proven that plants grow better when vibrating to concertos.

And that's what inspired me to write this modern Western (or perhaps, Midwestern) about music, criticism, and conflict over what we listen to. So put on your overalls and join me in my cornfield. This is a tale where I imagine I'm a redneck farmer who has discovered the agricultural advantages of classical music.

## **Calamity In A Cornfield**

I hired a violin player for my cornfield. I was tired of fertilizers, tired of so-called "miracle" seeds, and tired of hearing my neighbor, Rutherford Abercrombie, brag about how his corn crops were always riper, fuller, and much more abundant than mine.

Then I read a magazine article about how plants exposed to classical music, in a laboratory experiment, grew greener, stronger and taller than similar vegetation exposed to nothing but silence. I threw away my fertilizer bags. I tossed the pesticide. And I called the Omaha Musicians Guild and asked for an out-of-work violin player. I figured live music was more natural, and would have a better effect than something coming out of a speaker.

Two days later my inch-high stands of corn played audience to concertos in B-Minor, Fifths and Sixths of Beethoven, and other

compositions from guys like Bach and Obendorf. Not being a fan of classical music myself, I closed all the windows of my farmhouse and turned on the country on my radio.

But my corn loved it. Every day for an hour it bathed in resplendent tunes of Old Europe. And it feathered more leaves. It shot out stalks. It pierced the air, pushing for the sky. It was as if each corn stalk was trying to get higher than the other so it could better enjoy the daily aria of concerto music. The violinist sang with his bow. And as the corn grew with the music, it seemed to crackle with applause.

One day, while Faith Hill sang on the radio, Chopin was outside fertilizing the crops. And a staccato drumroll reverberated on my front door. It was Rutherford Abercrombie. He was nervous. He was upset. He was angry. He demanded that I stop that infernal violin music outside. He claimed that it bothered him. Interfered with his Rascal Flatts when he was up in his tractor.

"Bull!" I told him. I said my music was meant for corn, not people. And since the cab of his tractor was one of them environmentally controlled, sealed up, air-conditioned, dehumidified contraptions, he could barely hear a single wailing string with the wind going in his direction.

But I knew Abercrombie didn't mind the music. Rutherford Abercrombie was a highly competitive man. The envious type. He knew what I was doing. And he knew I was succeeding too, at growing a better corn crop than him. And he didn't like that. Didn't say so, but he did storm out of my house tossing a threat over his shoulder about how two could play at my game of "noise pollution."

The next day he carried his threat out. My dignified, \$90-dollar-a-day corn entertainer strutted into the field. He arched his back. He gripped the violin with his chin. He poised the bow straight up into the air. Then, closing his eyes, he daintily lowered the bow and applied it to the strings. The instant the very first feathery soft note lifted from the delicate wood frame and sought out the attentive ears of my five-hundred-acre audience, a heavy thud smashed the reverie.

Then another thud. Then a skull-piercing scream. It was Abercrombie. He had lined up large speakers and amplifiers along the edge of his farm, facing my jungle of bumper crop. And behind the speakers and amplifiers was a rock 'n roll band. Heavy metal to be exact. And while my feeble

violinist chortled out "Swan Lake," they belted him hard with a tune that could have been called "The Mad, Skreeking Cat Fight From Hell."

The violinist couldn't take it. I had to give him earplugs to continue on. But the corn was doing worse, and there was no way I could plug those ears. Already it seemed the leaves were turning brown along the edges. Finally the heavy metalists took an intermission and I stole upon the silent scene to call a truce.

Talking to the band leader, who had a scar running across his forehead and down a cheek, and whose chest was as thin as a pencil, and who was wearing greasy Levis held up by a motorcycle chain, I got to the bottom of the story. It seemed he was having no luck in finding a place to rehearse. Until his generous Uncle Rutherford offered him the use of the farm. As long, of course, as the speakers faced away into my cornfield, and the band played as loudly as possible. Especially during the violin concertos.

That damned Rutherford Abercrombie! What a low-down, slimy salamander, son-of-a-skunk puddle of horse piss he was. And he was beating me! There was no way in hell I could stop his war of noise pollution. At least nothing I could think of at the moment.

I walked back to the farmhouse as the band attacked again. There were long screeching sounds punctuated by howls, thumps, and mind-altering rhythms. Sounded to me like I'd died and finally gone to the place those preachers always said I was headed for. I looked over at the corn, and it seemed as if the stalks were slowly beginning to droop over and wither away.

Sitting in my farmhouse, with the muffled noise of the heavy metal band banging at my windows, I tried to think. For a few hours nothing came to me. Then about an hour after they'd packed up and left for the day, the silence enabled my brain to work again. And I got an idea. An idea that was so simple it was stupendous. An idea I was sure would succeed.

Early next morning I dragged some sprinkling equipment over near the property line. The same stuff that I use to wash my cornstalks when the leaves get too dusty. Dusty leaves are bad for photosynthesis, you know. 'Sall there in a book I read once.

Anyhows, I hooked it all up and then waited like an anxious general for the day's battle to begin. But I was off in hiding, back behind the water lines in a stand of corn.

My violinist showed up promptly at 7:00. I gave him my battle instructions. He was to begin his concert of whatever-it-would-be standing over behind the sprinkler equipment. Then as soon as the enemy showed up—those damned demons of demented mayhem—and started playing their screeching, scritchng, hissing wailing that they called music, he was to quickly retreat as far away from the sprinkler equipment as possible.

My violinist smiled slowly, and nodded. He understood. Yes he knew what I was going to do. He realized exactly. He told me that today he was going to perform Handel's "Water Music." Felt that it would be appropriate. I did too.

He began his concert, and the sweet soothing notes that emerged from his violin seemed to have a curative, restorative effect on my battered corn. The corn seemed to be uplifting its leaves, and the whole scene began to look greener and greener and greener.

Then about five minutes later a van with naked ladies in chains painted on its sides, pulled up in the distance, and a group of hairy-headed men jumped out. They pointed at the violin player and began hauling equipment out of the van. I snickered softly.

They quickly dragged the large speakers, the amplifiers, the electric guitars, and the long extension cords out to the property line, and set them directly opposite from my violin player.

My stringed instrumentarian stood his ground.

I waited, hidden in a secret stand of corn.

They were shoutin' and cussin' and grinnin' and spittin'. You never seen such varmints-on-two-legs before. They were greasy-headed, with hair down past their shoulders, wearin' old dirty tank tops with weird designs on 'em. Designs like giant spiders killing people with razor blades, eagles with swastikas, sharks eating musical instruments, and one tank top that had a guy in a straight-jacket who was barfing up a big old wad of money. I tell you, these guys weren't much in the way of musicians, but they'd of made damned good scarecrows.

My violinist kept playing that "Water Music."

And I kept waiting.

They must've had about 1600 feet of extension cord leading from their electrical musical contraptions over to Rutherford's farmhouse. They finally got it all hooked up and got ready to play.

As my violin player hit an especially high, sweet and uplifting note, they bombed him suddenly with a roaring squelch and riff of satanic squealing. Then they peppered him with an atrocity of mutilating synthesizer tones, and strafed him with an electronic whumff that came from God-knows-what, traveling down a long line of speakers, and back and forth again several times.

My violin player recovered from his shock and remembered my instructions. He took off and ran for the opposite side of the cornfield. The band leader—Rutherford's nephew—the one who held his pants up with a motorcycle chain—screamed in satanic silly delight when he saw this.

But I was even more delighted. 'Cause just then I reached for the water valve and turned it on full force.

Well, first they just kind of stood there in disbelief, and got themselves soaked. But when that water began to seep into their electronic equipment, a few things began to snap, crackle, and pop. And then you never seen such a bunch of fools trying to pull their electric guitars from around their necks so fast. Comical it was. I tell you, I was rolling down the corn rows.

Their guitars would touch their bodies and shock the shit out of them. So they'd grab 'em, and their hands would get shocked. So they started dancing all around with their necks craned over, trying to make those damned guitar straps fall over their heads.

Yessir, this was sure fun to watch. But it wasn't the best of it. What happened next was the cream of the crop. I would have paid to see this, but didn't have to, since I was right there causing it all. Seems like Rutherford's nephew's guitar couldn't take the strain. It started to spit out all these sparks, and then it exploded and caught fire.

Why, he just went plumb crazy when this happened. He started to scream like a coyote in mating season. He started yap-yapping and half-howling. Then he grabbed his guitar by the neck and whipped it off his body. I could tell he was getting shocked, by the way his body kept convulsing, but he held on tight to the guitar. And with eyes ablaze, and spittin' and screamin', he spun around and around in circles, then let loose of the guitar and sent it flying.

It landed in a cloud of smoke and fire right at the edge of Rutherford Abercrombie's corn crop.

I ought to tell you now, that when a cornfield catches fire it burns up like a toothpick in a torchlight. It just goes ablaze in seconds, and before you know it nothing's left but ashes and corn flakes.

That's exactly what happened to Rutherford Abercrombie's cornfield. That flaming guitar caught the cornfield on fire, and before you knew it—poof!—it was wiped out. And so was Rutherford, who stood to lose a lot of money.

Well, war is hell. Especially on the loser. But I was doing pretty damned good myself. Once the ambulances had taken away the band members, the fire department had poured their last drops of water on the ashes, and the sheriff had stopped knocking on my front door, I was able to sneak out of my stand of corn where I was hiding.

As I walked back to my farmhouse, a proud, happy, and triumphant general, my violin player emerged from his hiding place, too. He lifted his violin toward me and I nodded my head. He then put the violin under his chin and began performing again. And "Water Music" never sounded better to an old country boy like myself.

But I preferred my country music, so I went on inside and turned on the radio just in time to catch a George Strait tune.

But I could almost feel what was happening to my cornstalks outside. Their ears were growing bigger and bigger as they listened to the soothing classical music. I could feel that. And their leaves were growing greener and greener. I could feel that too. But what I could mostly feel were dollar signs.

Eat your heart out, Rutherford Abercrombie, for this year I was having a bumper crop.



# Story 7: The Empty Purse

## Backstory

I always carry a few gallons of water in my car. That way if my tin Lizzie ever breaks down in this convection oven I live in, that humans call a desert, I can survive for a few hours before my brain boils like an egg, and my body turns into a slab of beef jerky.

I'm surprised at how few people take such lifesaving precautions. And it seems to happen a few times a year, in my neck of the Mojave, where a driver gets stuck in the middle of nowhere, and wanders away in search of cool, clear water.

It can take months for search and recovery to find their bodies, if they ever are found. So I wrote this modern Western as a warning.

But I also wrote it to win a prize. This is the only short story I have ever written for a contest. Contestants were required by *Writer's Indigestion* magazine, to pen a story about a woman who empties out all the contents of her purse.

My submission did not win first place.

The winning entry was a parable about a woman who overturns her purse to find something helpful for some poor bastard in need. And I understand why it won. What a unique idea. Who would have thought about actually overturning a purse to empty it out?

My story came in 3,919th place. Which ain't bad for a nationwide contest, don't you think? So I thought its level of appeal would make it fit right into this book.

## The Empty Purse

**H**er car bucked and banged over the dirt road. Rumbled over washboards. Swished through sand. Sank through sand. Slowed. Stopped.

Too much sand.

A back and forth. Wheels spinning. Sand spraying. Sinking deeper. No go.

Stuck.

Mojave desert all around . . . nearest paved road about seven miles away as the raven flies. She wiped sweat from her forehead with a slightly trembling finger.

She had always heard that the best thing to do in a situation like this is to stay put. Sooner or later someone would come looking. Her best chance of being found was to remain with the car and not wander away.

But that highway back there. If only she could make it back. There were cars she could flag down. Out here . . . who knew how often any car made it this far. There were no tire tracks in the sand in front of her. And hers were the only tire tracks behind her.

That pavement would be more than 10 miles away if she walked back using the meandering dirt road. Just not enough water. Footwear was okay—her sneakers could do it. Legs had the strength. But the water probably would not hold out.

Now, cross-country—only maybe seven miles. But kind of rough country. She squinted her eyes northeast, using her hand as a visor. Looked walkable enough. Seemed like it was all downslope, and she could bypass around the boulder-stewn inselbergs. And no problem crossing those dry washes. After all, they were dry. Unfortunately.

She had a map. And she had a pretty good idea where she was, on the map. She had a half-drunk one-liter bottle of water from the Circle K store. A Three Musketeers bar was melting in her purse.

And yes, her purse!

Lots of small items in the purse! The idea smoked in her head, then caught fire.

She left a note on the dash, and at ten o'clock in the morning, headed out. About a hundred feet away she stopped in a clearing where all the winter's cheatgrass had wilted away. She took a shiny pair of fingernail clippers from her purse and placed them on top of a white quartz stone.

And on she hiked.

Every hundred feet or so she extracted another item from her purse and posed it on top of a rock, or on bare ground. Conspicuously. In open areas between the creosote bushes or cholla or bunched up galleta grass. Any clear spot where someone searching for her could notice it from a distance, and follow her trail.

A brown hiking boot came down beside a lipstick tube of brass. A man knelt and lifted it. Wiped the dusty surface off on his jeans and examined it. Clicked his radio and announced, "Found lipstick. Let's keep heading northeast."

The search party was arrayed like a comb. A turkey vulture wobbled its wings overhead and watched as the figures moved in one general direction, during the hottest part of the day.

But late in the afternoon they broke formation. Each of the figures seemed to take on independent movement. One ambled about here, while another headed straight out there, and another veered off in the opposite direction. It was as if they'd lost their direction, and didn't know which way to travel next.

One of the figures stopped beside a yucca and lingered. Then one by one the other figures gravitated to the yucca.

They congregated and studied a black object hanging by a black strap on a green blade of the Spanish Dagger. They muttered among themselves, until one of the men slid the black object up and off the blade.

A mile away, a turkey vulture plunged its beak between two ribs, prying, twisting, widening the gap that barred access to the dead, but tasty internal organs within.

The man examined the black object. It was a purse. He pried the leather edges of the purse apart and peered inside.

It was empty.

# **Story 8: A Spontaneous Chemical Reaction in the Midst of a Desert**

## **Backstory**

**I**t was summertime, and baking like a pizza oven outside. Made us desert rats hungry, so my wife and I took my 89-year-old father-in-law out to a specialty pizza cafe.

The swamp cooler wasn't doing much good inside that stuffy little pizza place, as it rattled and strained under the July sun, while competing against the work of the ovens. As we sat at a picnic table, I watched the young lady behind the counter swelter away while taking orders from a queue of sweaty customers.

She was plain-looking, but possessed of a spirit and attitude that drew my eye and made her attractive to me. She had a straightforward gravity to her demeanor, and a careful presence that held the attention of each customer she waited on. I felt enamored just watching her. And I wondered if I was falling in love with her.

Problem was, she was young enough to be my granddaughter. And besides, I was married. And if I gawked at her any longer, my wife and father-in-law sitting next to me might notice. I had to shake my sunbaked head and take a sip of my cold soft drink, to bring my overheated brain to its senses.

I then realized that what I was really falling in love with was a time so long ago when such treasures as her were available. A heady time when life was starting out and couples my age were beginning long journeys together. I missed the feel of that. And for just a few brief fleeting moments I wanted to return, but knew I couldn't.

A young paramedic walked in and stood in line. And watching him, and observing her, it occurred to me that maybe something more than pizza could result from their encounter. It probably didn't, but I imagined it could.

This modern Western is about that imagined encounter. It's a romantic vignette about heat, chemistry, and the reaction they might set off, between two young strangers in the moments before they meet.

## **A Spontaneous Chemical Reaction in the Midst of a Desert**

**I**t was high noon at the High Moon Pizza Cafe. The desert sun outside desiccated the rocks, cacti, and Joshua trees. But inside, a swamp cooler purred away, refreshing each new customer who staggered through the front door.

It was 98 outside and 88 inside. The swamp cooler only shaved ten degrees off the heat. But it felt like the Antarctic for those seeking refuge from the flaming overhead sun.

This refuge was her place of employ. While El Sol baked brains outside, she baked pizza pies inside. And she waited on zombies. The zombies were her customers. They were the desert rats who staggered through the front door in a state of brain-baked dyscrasia, and as delusional as the heat haze on the horizon.

She was practically a zombie herself, from the effect of the pizza ovens. This heat on the brain plays tricks on people. It boils the cerebral hemispheres, fries the neurons, and sizzles the synapses. And it makes possible a phenomenon between two encephalons that is known as a spontaneous chemical reaction.

Her 22-year-old face and figure were not beautiful, just pretty. Plainly pretty. And then only under cooler circumstances. Today all shreds of prettiness washed away from her.

Her face was enwreathed with sweat. It dripped in beads down her forehead and stung her eyes, burning them as red as two suns. It formed droplets under her nose, lips, and chin. And it ran rivers down her bare neck, shoulders and meaty arms.

She wore a thin, green, cotton tank top, soaked in moisture. The décolletage of this bodice exposed a hint of sweaty cleavage. Below this beaded valley rolled two sweat-stained green hills, and below each of these hills, trapped heat unleashed runnels of perspiration that streaked the fabric of her top from her bosoms to her waistline.

He poked his head through the cafe door, attracted by the 20% discount he'd heard about, for First Responders. Then he wiped the sweat off his brow with the palm of his hand, and staggered inside to join the zombies waiting in the queue. He stood behind two other customers and slowly shook his head a bit, trying to clear and orient his heat-hazed mind.

She glanced over their heads and caught sight of the face of this man who was last in line. It struck her with a shot of adrenaline. Her heart flip-flopped. A mysterious, volatile element surged through her internal chemistry.

One millisecond later: Flashpoint!

Then: Explosion!

And suddenly she knew she had glimpsed the face of her future husband.

He was 24 years old, of towering stature, and in peak physical condition. He sported upside-down sunglasses perched atop sweat-soaked auburn hair, which was neatly trimmed around salty wet ears.

He was an EMT, dressed in a close-fitting blue shirt, mottled with blotches of moisture. A black web belt cinctured the narrow waistline of his pants, which stunk of perspiration. A 2-way radio clipped to this belt could quickly drag him back outside into the smoldering heat, to assist at the next car wreck, heat stroke, or other emergency. He prayed to all the gods that this wouldn't happen until he'd had at least 30 minutes of respite in this cool refuge.

He was a handsome man at other times, when his sudoriferous skin did not pour waterfalls all over his body. He was for sure much better looking than she. And his income as an EMT was far higher than her fast-food slave wage.

He was cool, magnetic, and possessed of savoir-faire in other seasons. But not so much during the withering heat of the desert summer. However during the fall, winter, and spring, this young man had much more going for him than that young woman.

His zombie eyes were transfixed on the hot pizzas in a glass display, and failed to notice the overheated young lady standing behind them. She finished with a customer. He moved up a step in line, and as he stepped he directed his bleary eyes over the head of the zombie before him, and focused on her perspiration-pocked face.

An electric frisson traveled up his back. He suddenly felt a little queasy and faint. His knees buckled, and the upside-down sunglasses dropped off of his head. He caught them with clammy hands, and fumbled nervously with them, almost jabbing out an eye, until he finally gave up and stuffed the shades in his pocket.

He was plunging into love. He knew it, but couldn't explain why. And he couldn't stop it. His heart practically pounded out of his chest. He couldn't pry his eyes off of this woman swimming in the product of her own sweat glands.

EMTs are expected to be calm and unflappable in the face of any situation. He wondered what was happening to him. How could such a plain-looking, sweat-drenched woman unhinge such a powerful response in him? Was it the heat?

Of course it was the heat. Heat that induces spontaneous chemical reactions.

He'd managed to remain single up until now, but this happened too quickly to put up any defenses. Besides, he felt too weak from the heat to resist. Nature, in her enigmatic, ruthless ways for ensuring reproduction of the human animal, was winning.

She finished with the customer, then caught his eye. She smiled with a twinkle of excitement, as beads of moisture dripped from her chin.

“Sir, may I take your order?”

*Part Too:*  
**GO WEIRD**



# *Story 9:*

## *Executive Fear*

### *Backstory*

I originally wrote this long, short story back in the 1980's, but it's been a work in progress ever since. That's because I can't keep my obsessive-compulsive, wordsmithing fingers off of it. So it's received a few revisions. Which perhaps are improvements. One improvement was to scratch out references to the old stone and chisel way of doing things, that preceded 1990, and update this manuscript to today's technology.

This tale reflects my inner sentiments about our modern, so-called civilization. In fact, I first penned it to paper (yes, good old-fashioned treeware) when I was living in my underground log cabin in the middle of the Mojave desert.

As I sat in my log cabin, wondering why I had to go to such great lengths to get away from that great monster known as civilization, which dehumanizes people and destroys the environment, I had plenty of time to think. And my thinker came up with a theory.

I reasoned that there are invisible forces at work that make our world the way it is. And these invisible forces are the executives who head big businesses, such as banks and large corporations. They stay hidden in their high-rise offices, out-of-touch with humanity, and far away from the primitive appeal of nature. And in a cold, machine-like way, they use paperwork to pull the strings and levers that make everything function the dysfunctional way things function.

And it occurred to me that maybe these executives hide in their offices out of fear. They're afraid of humanity. They're afraid of the outdoors. They shun reality. And they're phobic about being anywhere away from the safe cocoon of their homes or corporate offices.

This is radical thinking, I'll admit. And I'll also admit that I lived in my underground log cabin in the Mojave at the same time that another radical thinker lived in his own little cabin, in the woods of Montana. His name was Ted Kaczynski.

So I've sometimes wondered if maybe I'm just as nuts as Ted.

But while he was mailing surprise packages to executives and academics, as the Unabomber, I approached the problem from a different angle.

I simply wrote this story.

## *Executive Fear*

**O**tis Felp was a frightened man. Always. Always there was the fear. Lurking just outside. Ready to pounce. Fear stalked him. It waited for him to leave. It waited for him to return. It waited for him to be caught unawares. It was always around. Somewhere around. Just outside those doors. Stalking and hunting him like a cougar sniffing out a wounded deer.

Every day.

Every day of his life from the time he was born.

Crippling, destructive, inner fear. Fear that assaulted his soul and body, worming into his heart and hollowing out his worried eyes.

His soul was condemned to a constant hell by this stalking fear. And it left him with no heart for enjoying life.

He was also desperate. Desperate for an escape from the terror that always awaited him.

But he saw little opportunity for hope. No, there seemed little hope for an escape from this phobic paranoia. Little hope for an escape from the phantom fright that constantly breathed just outside. No, he saw scant opportunity for this kind of hope.

But he did see one opportunity.

Small? Yes it was.

But it was still an opportunity. It was a slight chance. As slight as the little tin of brown powder he now held in his hand.

He sat at his desk and fiddled anxiously with the tin. He had been told not to handle it much, but he was so desperately excited he couldn't control himself.

It was yellowcake.

Yellowcake is a powder produced from crushed uranium ore. It is used for manufacturing enriched uranium-235, which in turn is used for making nuclear fuel and nuclear weapons. And in spite of its name, it is neither yellow nor cake-like. Rather it is brown and powdery.

It had taken him awhile to obtain this uranium-rich powder, but he had been persistent. His client had hesitated, had hedged, had put it off, but had finally given in. His client brought it to him secretly. As a present. Or as a gratuity. Just yesterday—the day after the loan was approved—his client had walked into his office, set his briefcase down on the big, expansive desk, opened it a slight ways, and removed the tin of brown powder.

He began to act as if he had committed a great crime. There was a big, guilty smile on his face as he palmed the little tin toward Otis Felp. "Here you go, Otis, just what you were asking for," he said in a low voice. "Now don't go advertising what it is, and don't say it came from me. Just stick it on a shelf somewhere and don't handle it too much. I think it can hurt you if you play around with it a lot. Remember, don't say you got it from me."

"I don't intend to 'play' around with it," Otis said, stiff-lipped, "I just want it as a souvenir." Then he let himself smile a little. "But thank you, thank you very much. I appreciate the gift. Don't worry, I won't tell anyone what it is. I want it as a *personal* souvenir only. A keepsake, so to speak. Thanks very much for your trouble."

That about concluded Otis Felp's deal with the president of Loplite Mine Enterprises. The miner had received his loan—and at a very reasonable rate—and the bank manager had received his little tin of yellowcake.

That was yesterday. That evening he had gathered together other needed materials for his experiment, and had prepared his lab in the garage. Now, tonight, he would take his yellowcake home and try his experiment.

Tonight he would put all the elements together and—poof!—see what would happen.

Perhaps nothing.

Probably nothing.

But then again, one never knew.

In his office he felt no fear. Behind the big sign that said "Manager"—that sat squarely at the head of his big, expansive desk—sitting in his big chair, with a big, important look of concern on his face—he felt no fear. He felt perfectly safe. No jitters. No trembling hands. No darting eyes, nothing.

Nothing.

It was a secure feeling to be an important bank executive.

Even out there in the lobby it wasn't all that bad. But that's because he was treated with respect by his employees. They respected him very much, and feared him even more so. It was the fear, really. They showed him respect, but felt fear.

Whenever he came around he sensed there was an instant change in the demeanor of his employees. A hush came first. Then darting eyes. Then a flurry of busywork.

He loved the employees best who stammered. "Uh, uh, yes sir, y- yes Mr. Felp. Y- yes of course. Sure. Th- thank, uh, thank you sir." He loved those employees. They made him feel that everything was going okay. That the bank was still functioning properly. That he was still, definitely, in control. That nothing would cross him or cause him any kind of harm while he was in the bank. It was security.

And that big pile of paperwork in front of him. Now that right there showed just how important his job was. No one could question that he was an important man when they came into his office and saw all the paperwork he had to do. People would roll their eyes and say, "Boy, I'm sure glad I don't have your job, uh, sir." He would just smile and keep on working.

Or maybe he'd say, "Sometimes I wonder how I put up with it myself." No sense making people envy his job. Let them be scared of such importance. Let them lose their ambition. Then they would be less of a threat. The less people who wanted his job, the more secure his job was.

But the paperwork had a greater value than just that. Most people bemoaned having to do paperwork. He didn't like it much himself, but it did have a hidden value that many people seemed to overlook. It was the ultimate in power. It was power at its best. Paperwork was power. Paperwork was the power that made minds rule over backs. It always seemed to be the case. The ones who did the paperwork always had control over the ones who did the backwork.

Otis Felp was an expert at paperwork. Because of this he thought of himself as an invisible force of power. Like the Emperor of Japan, who for many centuries was not allowed to be looked upon by the common people. Otis was hidden behind the walls of his office, behind his big, expansive desk, out of sight, making deals on paper that could shake the entire city.

The average citizen depended on him to make sure the wheels of finance moved smoothly. To make sure jobs were available, and that businesses could operate. To make sure progress was made. And yet Otis Felp was virtually unknown to the average citizen. He was an anonymous man, hidden in an office somewhere, doing whatever anonymous, important men and women do. To the average citizen, Otis Felp was virtually invisible.

And that's the way he liked it. He liked exercising his power anonymously. And he could do that with paperwork. There was such little risk. He could control his outside environment without actually going out into it. He could initiate a form, sign a sheet, or send a letter, and wheels would turn somewhere. He didn't have to go out there and turn the wheels manually, and take all the chances that could entail. The chances of—who knows?—God knows—what could happen to him. No. He could sit inside his safe office and just do some paperwork. And then someone else—someone out there—some poor fool—would turn the wheels for him.

Paperwork was so much safer. With paperwork nothing wrong could happen to him. He was so safe. An anonymous but safe, secure, powerful man. A man who pushed paper, while others pushed their luck.

After filling out a few more forms and signing a few more signature blocks, he turned his attention back to the yellowcake. Tonight, he thought, it would be tonight. He turned the tin of powder slowly in his hands.

Perhaps it would work, perhaps it wouldn't, but at least he would try.

He was an alchemist. Kind of as a hobby, but more like an obsession. Alchemy was a practice begun in ancient times, that concerned itself with how to change metal into gold through the process of chemistry. And so many had tried through the ages to discover such a chemical process for making gold. But no one had ever succeeded.

Otis Felp was the same. He had been experimenting for over ten years, but still with no success at alchemy.

He had started his alchemy experiments as kind of a personal joke on himself. A psychiatrist he used to see had suggested he find a hobby. Something to divert him from his office work, that might also get him more involved with the outside world. The psychiatrist reasoned that this would help him overcome his fears of the outside world. It would force him to face these fears and think about them, so that he could realize just how unreasonable they were and get over them.

Then he could finally learn how to enjoy life.

So Otis decided to practice a few chemistry experiments at home. Chemistry had been one of his favorite subjects in high school, in his less fearful days, so it was a natural hobby to choose. And it did, indeed, make him have to go to a hardware store, and a few hobby shops in the city, so he could buy equipment and supplies. So he was getting out more, and facing his fears of the outside world.

But on one of his supply-hunting trips he picked up a book on alchemy. He was an ambitious assistant bank manager at this time, and hotly coveted money, power, and position. And the experiments that the book described gave him inspiration. Inspiration to try to figure out that long-sought-after secret of how to make gold.

Gold!

Pure, solid, yellow, gold!

Power. Position. Security.

Gold!

But his first few attempts were only half-hearted affairs. He approached these endeavors as a lark upon himself, and did not take it very seriously. He reconstructed some of the experiments in the book, and then laughed at himself when they didn't work.

But then he tried his own variation on one of the experiments. It didn't work either, but it seemed to come closer. So he tried more variations.

Gradually, he became obsessed. And the psychiatrist's suggestion of starting a hobby began to backfire. Otis was spending more and more and more of his time at home. Long hours at night stirring and pouring and boiling and mixing.

He bought up large supplies at the hobby shops so he wouldn't have to go supply hunting very often. And he canceled his visits to the psychiatrist. He simply didn't have the time to see him anymore, what with all the experiments he needed to do.

And he had a natural knack for this kind of work. It was an aptitude he seemed to have been born with. Well he had been born with a crippling, irrational fear, so perhaps being born with an aptitude for alchemy was some sort of compensation from Divine Providence.

Eventually, the natural genius he possessed for this hobby finally paid off. For Otis Felp devised a method that enabled him to turn heavier metals into lighter metals. And he even developed a way to control what kind of lighter metals they would turn into. It was chancy, but he did have some control.

The end product never amounted to much in weight either. But with gold at over one thousand dollars an ounce, not much weight would be needed. He could build a fortune with just very small quantities.

Problem was, he needed a metal that was significantly heavier than gold if he ever stood a chance at producing gold. And that was where the uranium came in. Uranium is one of the heaviest known elements on the face of the earth. Its atomic weight is significantly greater than the atomic weight of gold.

Otis Felp picked up the tin of yellowcake. The uranium it came from would add the weight he needed for his experiment. He kissed it, then put it in his briefcase. Tonight, tonight, he would make gold and become rich.

Hopefully.

They were closing up the bank when he stepped outside his office. He adjusted his tie. Eyes darted about. A flurry of activity. "Good night Mister, uh, Felp." Susan. Susan, the blonde-haired head teller.

"Good night Susan."

"H- have a good evening!"

"Thank you." He strode for the door. Droplets of sweat oozed from his forehead. It was like this every evening. The door was not a door, it was

the mouth of a monster. It snarled and roared at him, louder and louder the closer he came to it. Just like all evenings past. With trembling hands, he pushed the jaws away and stepped outside, into the clamor and mayhem of the noisy city streets.

Here he was not in control. Here it was every man, woman, child, and creature for itself. Here anything could happen. He didn't know what, but anything.

Anything.

Anything at all could happen to him.

His armpits were soaked with perspiration, just like every evening. Even cold, wintry evenings. His eyes darted right and left. He rounded the corner of the building, and into the parking lot.

It was there, miles and miles and miles away. But he could see it. His car. A speck of remote safety. So far off. He felt like running, but knew better. Better not to panic, he thought. Better not to show any fear. Don't show any fear at all or maybe something will attack you.

His eyes darted left and right. His car was still impossibly far away. Then he did what he did every evening. He imagined he was on a long, moving conveyor belt that was carrying him swiftly to his vehicle. It was carrying him to safety. It was rescuing him.

A few more quick paces and he was there. Desperately he fumbled with the key fob, finally pressing the correct button. He opened the door, jumped inside, slammed it and locked it.

Safety.

Safety.

Well, relative safety.

He was still not home yet. But the car could get him there pretty quickly. As long as it didn't break down or wreck. That was his biggest fear. No breakdowns needed. No accidents needed. No traffic tickets needed. He must get out of the city jungle and into his safe home as soon as possible.

And into the city streets of Mumblegum he motored. Mumblegum, the city that depended upon him, and others like him. But still a dangerous city. A dangerous city in a dangerous world. He had to get through the traffic snarls of Mumblegum and into the safety of his home as quickly as he could. But also as carefully as he could. The city was no place to have



an accident. Then he'd be stuck out in the open. In a dangerous place. Then anything could happen to him.

Anything.

Anything.

Anything at all.

He did not know what. He had no idea what. But something could happen to him. Something deadly. Something horrible. Something specifically and directly aimed at him that would destroy and kill instantly.

He had this feeling every evening. A feeling that something terrible would happen to him. A premonition, you might call it. Of awful, impending doom. This was the fear that gnawed at his heart and soul every day. Every day that he left the safety of his home or office and ventured into the mean streets of Mumblegum.

His psychiatrist, so long ago, had called it agoraphobia. Agoraphobia is an irrational fear of open, public places. An irrational fear of being in an uncontrolled environment.

"Otis," he had said, "you have a severe form of agoraphobia. You must do something about it right away before it ruins the rest of your life."

That psychiatrist had been full of statistics, facts, and figures. Yes it was obvious to Otis Felp that the psychiatrist too liked to hide behind paperwork. Graphs and charts. Surveys and studies.

But according to the psychiatrist, around two percent of the population has agoraphobia. And maybe more. It's a rather common phobia, you see. Especially amongst white-collar workers and executives like Otis.

That Otis could believe. Oh yes, he had seen his own fears in others of his type. Other business executives. Many a time he had looked out the windows of his bank and seen a hapless executive caught outside. More often than not the man was walking quite fast, with eyes darting all around. There was fear in those eyes. Definite fear. Perhaps irrational, perhaps not, but definite fear.

But the psychiatrist had called *his* agoraphobia "severe." That distinguished him from most other agoraphobics. And most other executives, he supposed. Perhaps that was the reason he had not been as successful as most other executives his age. Bank manager was as high as he sensed he would ever go in the world of business. And it had been a slow road just getting to that.

But most execs his age had roared on past him. They'd gone on to be chairmen of boards, presidents of their own companies, mayors, senators, and other positions that spelled high power and success. So why had he foundered at bank manager? "Severe" agoraphobia was the only reason he could think of.

*His* agoraphobia was too severe to fight. But others could fight theirs. Other executives were brave enough to get out, at least every once in a while. Get out and face the mean, terrible world. Get out and turn a few wheels manually if they had to. Get out and use their backs.

And they could be brave enough to venture out and attend functions, and Rotary Club meetings, and conventions, and such things. They could make contacts and network with others who could assist their ambitions.

They could move up in the world, because they were willing to face the outside every now and then.

But "every now and then" means that most of the time they were just like Otis Felp. Most of the time they, too, would hide behind their paperwork, inside their offices, trying to control the world with pen and ink.

But sometimes, sometimes, they could build up enough courage to work a few, fleeting moments—a few, fleeting *strategic* moments—in the outside world. And that was the advantage they had over Otis. And he envied them for their courage.

It was a courage he felt he would never have.

But gold, gold, perhaps gold would make up for it. He could have his success by producing a fortune in gold. But only if he could uncover the secret that so long had eluded science. The secret of alchemy. The secret of manufacturing one's own gold.

The traffic was thinning. The road was narrowing. He was passing the outskirts of Mumblegum and nearing home. The safe haven. The place he could breathe easily at, once again. Out in the uncrowded countryside, and then into his own house.

Up a long driveway he turned. Run the gauntlet of the driveway and make it to the garage, and he'd be home free. Every evening he ran the same gauntlet. Not that the driveway was any more dangerous than any other place. But that it was just so close. If something terrible should happen here, what a let-down it would be.

Closer and closer he came to the garage door. He hit the button above the visor, and the door automatically lifted and rolled open. Slowly, smoothly, and carefully he glided inside, while hitting the button again so the door would close behind him and lock out that hostile world.

At last he was home. At last he felt safe. At last he was no longer in danger.

There was a workbench not far from his parked car, with a heavy steel cauldron on it. His makeshift lab. He took the tin of yellowcake from his briefcase, kissed it, and set it down next to the cauldron.

But first, dinner.

Then work.

The maid had done some shopping, so the freezer was full. She was a very good, reliable maid. She kept the house clean, but most important, she ran all his errands for him. He never had to leave his house for one thing. All he ever had to do was drive to and from work. And that was dangerous enough. The maid was well worth the money. Almost worth her weight in gold. He chuckled to himself at the thought.

After a quick TV dinner it was back to the garage for some real hard alchemy work.

He had all the necessary ingredients. On the floor near the workbench was a five-gallon bucket of crushed quartz powder he had purchased from a mill, over the internet. Next to it were two tightly sealed buckets of calcium oxide, commonly known as quicklime. And of course, on his workbench next to the heavy steel cauldron was the final needed ingredient. The tin of yellowcake, containing about 10 ounces of the brown uranium powder.

First the quicklime.

He measured out a few ounces of the CaO from one of the buckets. He was very careful to reseal the bucket tightly. Quicklime, when it comes into contact with moisture, gets very hot and explodes. So he remembered to use great care, as the mine president had cautioned, when resealing the lid. That would ensure the remaining calcium oxide would stay safe and dry.

He poured the quicklime onto the bottom of the steel cauldron, forming a thick, three-inch-diameter circle with it. On top of this layer he spread a

thicker layer of quartz powder. And on top of the quartz powder, he spread a tiny spoonful of the yellowcake.

He was not sure if he had his proportions correct, but he felt fairly confident he was about right. What he planned to do was to pour a small amount of water over the layers of powder so that it would filter down through the yellowcake and quartz, and contact the quicklime. He would cap the steel cauldron tightly and wait for the water to react with the calcium oxide, causing it to flash and explode.

He hoped that this explosion, for an instant, would create temperatures of volcanic proportions. The same temperatures needed to produce gold.

And if all went according to his theory, the volcanic temperatures would cause the heavy uranium elements in the yellowcake to break down into lighter elements. And as it broke down into lighter elements (such as gold), it would also expand significantly in size. In the meantime, the quartz powder would fuse and surround the yellowcake. The quartz would then keep it at a certain constant temperature for a few precious moments. This temperature would be the exact, ideal temperature needed for the formation of gold.

Otis Felp theorized that since gold was quite often found by miners in veins of quartz rocks, the quartz had something to do with harboring the favorable temperature needed to form gold, within the hot magma beneath the earth's crust.

Felp rejected the scientific consensus that gold is only formed in the supernovas of stars, and thus can only come from outer space, via falling asteroids pelting the Earth. And this is the trouble when you don't get out and mix with others. You have no check on your own hair-brained schemes. There's nobody around to lend their thoughts and lead you to have second thoughts.

Had Otis joined a club for amateur scientists, maybe he wouldn't have gone to the great length of obtaining yellowcake and pursuing this experiment. This experiment that most scientists would have warned was both dangerous and doomed to failure.

And so, he stuck with his magma theory. His unchecked, blind assumption that hot magma forms gold. And this was what he hoped would happen. He hoped, but only half-believed, would happen. Because

he wasn't completely nuts. Deep down inside lay a sense of reality that helped harbor some doubts.

But all that gold he could make. All that gold. All that power. All that success. All that respect. It led him to ignore his doubts. With the things he could buy with gold maybe he wouldn't have to live with fear anymore. Maybe he would become famous and be respected by all people, instead of just those at the bank. Maybe his power would be far-reaching. Maybe he could control the entire world and no longer be afraid of it.

His heart beating a little faster, he began to pour the water evenly over the powder. He had to work quickly. He had only a minute before the reaction would take place.

He emptied the beaker, then quickly grabbed the cauldron lid. A fumbling with the snaps, but finally the lid was firmly secured to the top of the cauldron. Then he dashed swiftly through an open door and into his kitchen, where he crouched down behind a counter.

He heard a faint thump and began to laugh. At the worst, he expected the whole roof of his garage to blow off. But just a thump?

When he cautiously peered into the garage, he laughed even louder. For there was the cauldron, just sitting there as harmless as could be, right on the workbench. Right where he had left it. It hadn't even budged a quarter-inch.

It was pretty hot, so he allowed it cool off. About an hour later he estimated it was safe and cool enough to unsnap the cauldron lid.

He did so without any problems.

With the lid off, he peered inside.

And was surprised by what he saw.

Liquid.

A liquid slurry of watery goo. Gray watery goo, and not a spot of yellow in it.

Otis Felp could tell at just a quick glance that his experiment had been a failure. A giant, stupid, ridiculous failure.

He sat down on the fender of his car and buried his head in his hands. He felt like crying, but forced back the tears. No, no use in crying. After all, this wasn't his first failure. It was more like his thousandth in a row. He should be used to it by now.

Well, maybe tomorrow he would rethink the formula and maybe try again later.

He looked at his watch. It was late. He'd better get to bed, for tomorrow was another work day. He picked up the cauldron and with a grimace of disgust and anger, dumped the gray slurry into a potted plant near the workbench. His maid hadn't figured out where to put the plant yet. Well maybe the slurry would kill the damn thing and she wouldn't have to concern herself with it anymore.

He washed out the cauldron, cleaned up the workbench, and went to bed.

The next day was typical. Typical, as usual. A frightening, paranoid, almost paralyzingly fearful journey to work, a mundane but safe day at the office, followed by another treacherous journey home. Same as always.

Safely back at home, Otis stood at his workbench. He sighed to himself and wondered where he had gone wrong. And a boiling anger began to fulminate internally. An anger that was becoming more and more uncontrollable every second that he continued to ponder his past failures.

Like water hitting the quicklime, Otis' temper was reaching a flashpoint. That damned, sickly looking slurry! That's all he had to show for all his efforts! And where had it gone? He raced through his memory. He should have flushed it down the toilet! But no! He had dumped it into the potted plant! So that's where it was!

He turned swiftly and kicked the plant. Worthless slurry! Worthless plant! That would show all his failures! Kicking the plant! That would show them!

He cursed and kicked a plant that wasn't even there. No, the plant was gone. And yet he had kicked it. Or he had kicked something. It kind of felt like he had kicked a plant. But the plant wasn't there. At least, not that Otis could see.

So what the hell had he kicked?

Something seemed wrong.

Something wasn't there.

But something should be there.

He reached his foot out lightly and carefully felt around for the plant. He was sure he had kicked something. He had even heard a noise.

But there was nothing.

Nothing but thin air.

He felt lower, and his foot came against something. He knelt down and felt it with his hands. Yes it was, indeed, something. Then he looked again and noticed that he couldn't see his hands. He let go of whatever it was and jumped back. Then he looked at his hands again. They had reappeared. So he felt for the object again. His hands came against it, and once again they disappeared.

This was pretty spooky.

He felt more of the object. The object that appeared to him to be thin air. His hands came against something soft and brushy lying on the floor. Something like leaves.

And that's when he realized, with a sense of awe and wonderment, that it was the potted plant he was feeling. And the potted plant was completely invisible!

A moment of stunned stillness. His brain went into overdrive. It clicked and clattered inside, trying to make sense of this weird situation.

And then it flashed a thought.

An idea.

An explanation for Otis Felp to consider.

The slurry had done it.

That could be the only explanation. The plant had absorbed the slurry, and the slurry had somehow made it become invisible! There was something in that gray slurry that caused things to become transparent.

At first he considered this explanation with the even-minded temper of a scientist coolly pondering a hypothesis, utilizing the exacting language of logic. But then the magnitude of this explanation exploded in his mind like a hydrogen bomb. And he began to sweat and tremble with excitement.

It was an accident.

It was unintentional.

But Otis Felp realized he had somehow discovered the secret to invisibility!

He went sleepless that night pondering over his amazing discovery. He didn't know why the slurry had made the plant invisible, but he reasoned that it probably had to do with the uranium in the yellowcake. The uranium might have changed into some substance that produced a kind of

powerful x-ray effect. And this powerful x-ray effect might have made it possible for him to see right through the plant like it was invisible.

It was a major discovery, he finally concluded.

A discovery that could change the entire world.

But Otis Felp wasn't thinking as much about the world as he was thinking of himself. He had tried to invent gold so he could amass a personal fortune. He had failed at that, but now he realized he had discovered something that could help him even better to acquire a fortune.

If he could use that slurry to make himself invisible, he could gain free and easy access to every bank and gold vault in the world. And that could make him a rich and powerful man. That could even make him the most powerful man on the planet. And then, with all that power, he'd have no reason to ever fear again.

Otis Felp liked to live safely. So first he had to experiment. He got some more yellowcake and quicklime from the president of Loplite Mines. Offered him a refinanced loan at stunningly low rates, with an unwritten understanding that he could have more yellowcake and quicklime in the future, whenever he wanted.

Now it was time for more experiments.

He used his cauldron and produced more of the slurry, the same way he had done before.

He had a pet canary named Fernandez, so he decided he would experiment with this bird, first. Then, if the slurry was safe and effective, he would try it out on himself.

He put a drop of it into the canary's water tube.

A few minutes later the bird took a drink.

And a few minutes after that it began to slowly fade away.

When the bird had completely disappeared it began chirping loudly and flying into the bars of the cage. Otis could easily track its movements, because everywhere it went the cage bars and other surrounding areas disappeared.

It seemed the bird was getting confused. It seemed that it was trying to fly through the cage bars, not knowing that they were still there, but invisible.

Otis spread some of the slurry on his own finger. It had no effect. He spread the slurry on plastic, on metal, and on wood. Again there was no



effect. So apparently it had to be ingested by a living organism for it to take effect.

It seemed that for some reason, the x-rays could not be released until the slurry had mixed with the cells of a living organism. But then the x-rays were powerful. So powerful that everything even in the vicinity of the living organism disappeared.

It took almost 48 hours for the slurry to wear off, and for Fernandez to reappear. He looked like he had been beaten with a stick. Most of his larger canary feathers had been torn off as a result of his flying up against the bars of his cage. And he was bleeding in several spots from the wounds he had inflicted upon himself while doing this.

One thing that was kind of unusual, and that bothered Otis a little, was that during the entire time Fernandez had been invisible he had never once sat on his perch. Instead, he seemed to prefer sitting on the cage floor. And that was something Fernandez had rarely done before.

Otis concluded that maybe it was because the perch would become invisible when the bird would fly close to it. Therefore, the canary could not see it to perch upon it.

And Otis speculated this might cause a slight handicap when he robbed bank vaults, because the money would disappear as soon as he started to grab it. On the other hand, that could also cause a great advantage. After all, the money would remain invisible as long as he held it close by. Like in a large sack, up against his body.

He had no doubt in his mind as to this being what he would do. He would rob banks using his secret power of invisibility. Using the slurry. It would be so very easy to do.

But first he had to experiment on himself to make sure it would work. Oh, he was pretty sure the slurry would work, but he felt it was always safest to experiment first anyway. Safety always came first with Otis Felp, for he was a careful, cautious man—what with all the fear he had been born with.

But he wondered how he could conduct the experiment without arousing suspicion. He had gotten away with the canary experiment by telling his maid to take a few days off. Now he would need her to take at least another few days off while he experimented on himself. And maybe he might want to do more than just one experiment.

She already was suspecting that something was going on, especially after she came back to work and saw the condition Fernandez was in. And she was kind of nosy as it was, and had a way of occasionally dropping in on him unexpectedly, even on her days off.

The bank was no problem. He had all kinds of vacation time coming to him, due to his aversion to leaving his home. They wouldn't suspect a thing. It was a slow time of year anyway, so the bank's president would no doubt approve of his request to take a leave of absence.

The problem was the maid, and he could only think of one solution. He had to rent a motel room in the city. He cringed at the thought.

The city. The jungle. The place of terror. The crowds. Death. Instant, horrible death. But on the other hand, he thought, if he became invisible what power could the city have over him? It would be as safe as being in his office at work. He would be just as invisible, if not more. Nothing could see him. So nothing could harm him, either.

When a man is invisible he is perfectly safe. The outside world has no power over him. In fact, the man instead has power over the outside world. Great power. He could be an invisible, anonymous, and powerful force. He could do anything he desired, and without fear.

His vacation was approved. Now he must choose the motel. This would be no problem.

The Loaded Gourd Inn was having difficulties paying back its loan to his bank. So they would be very, very accommodating to the bank manager if he were their customer. The owners would be worried. Their voices would tremble with worry. And they would make him feel very secure in their subservience.

The drive to the motel made his palms and forehead run with sweat. What was out there? What wanted to get him? What horrors did the world have to offer on this day? He drove slowly and carefully, but steadily toward the motel, taking the most direct route possible.

When he arrived he almost couldn't get out of the car. He hadn't done something like this in such a long time. Here he was, in a foreign place. With foreign dangers. Foreign terrors. It was only a few blocks from where he worked at the bank, but it may as well have been across the ocean. It was a strange, new foreign place. The first such he'd been to in a very long time.

He feared he might have a panic attack.

He almost ran to the lobby, but managed to control himself. Inside, he had trouble speaking.

"I . . . I . . . I'm M . . . M . . . Mister . . . F . . . Felp."

He said it as a statement. Like he expected something.

The face on the other side smiled with slight amusement and said, "Well how can I help you Mr. , uh, what was that? Felt? Felp? Oh, oh, Mr. *Felp!* Oh, I'm sorry, I- I didn't recognize you. Y- yes, how can I, uh, help you, uh, sir?"

His confidence returned a little. "I- I want a room. I want a private room. One week. No disturbances. Not even maid service. A *private* room."

It was all "yes sir," "right away sir," "no problem sir," from there on out. He got his room. Having someone walk with him and show him to the room helped out a lot, but that walk was still pretty scary for Otis Felp.

But then he was in his private room. Privacy. Safety. He would have meals brought to him whenever he requested. He would have towels brought to him whenever he asked. He would have anything brought to him that he so desired. All he had to do was pick up the phone and make his wishes known. He would never once have to leave the room for any reason if he didn't want to.

But of course he *did* want to leave the room, once he succeeded at making himself invisible. But as an invisible man it would be easy for him to venture into the outside world. Nothing could see him, so nothing could get him. It would be perfectly safe. He would have nothing to fear.

His bank was just a few blocks away. Now that right there presented an opportunity. He grinned red-faced at the thought. He could walk right in, completely unseen, and just kind of hang around the lobby. Listen to the gossip. Hear what they were saying about him. He could go inside the ladies restroom. Some of those tellers sure were pretty. He could get an earful and an eyeful, he thought as he chuckled.

He thought of robbing his own bank, but that was out of the question. In fact he had already considered and dismissed the idea. It would look too much like an inside job and he, himself, would automatically be one of the suspects.

So it had to be a different financial institution. Well there were hundreds of other banks in the city of Mumblegum, so his choices were pretty widespread.

He figured if his invisibility worked, he would spend the week doing just that. He would walk into banks with open vaults, clean out as much money as he could carry, and take it back to the motel. By night he could transport the money home in his car. It would be dark, so no one would probably notice there was no apparent driver behind the wheel.

It all seemed pretty pat-and-dried perfect. Otis Felp looked at himself in the mirror and smiled smugly. Soon he was going to be a rich, rich man. A multi-millionaire. A man with power and pull. A man to be feared. And a man with no fear.

He had a small bottle of slurry all capped and ready to open and drink. He estimated that it would be enough to definitely make himself invisible.

Now was the moment. Now he would discover. Now he would try it on himself. This would be the experiment that determined everything.

He stood in front of the mirror that hung on the motel wall, and uncapped the bottle. Then he smiled at himself confidently, toasted himself, then put it to his lips.

He tilted the bottle up.

And swallowed the slurry.

It tasted horrible. Like a mixture of ashes, sand and sulfur. But it went down easy enough, and settled in his stomach well.

And it did nothing.

For a few minutes.

Otis barely breathed, as he waited before the mirror with an anticipation that began to melt into a hint of sadness and disappointment.

But then his heart sped up a little.

And his breath quickened.

For as he gazed into the looking glass, he saw his body begin to fade. His face, clothes, body—all of it—was growing transparent right before his wondering eyes.

And within a few minutes it was as if he wasn't standing there at all. He had completely faded away.

When he searched for his reflection in the mirror, all he could see was the motel room furniture behind him.

Otis Felp had become an invisible man!

He looked down at himself, searching for signs of his body. But there was nothing. Just the floor.

It was amazing. Absolutely amazing. A miracle. That's what it was. A new miracle of science.

And Otis Felp had discovered it.

And he was the only one who knew.

Now he had the power of invisibility.

It was a fantastic power. It was a super power. He felt exhilarated. Like he was the most powerful man on earth, at this very moment. He could do anything and go anywhere, and nothing could stop him.

Nothing could hurt him.

Nothing.

Nothing at all.

He was Power. He was a great powerful man.

And a man to be feared by all.

And then something weird began to happen. Something completely unexpected. The room he was standing in began to fade. Not as if it was becoming invisible also, but . . .

. . . but as if it was being washed out.

Washed out by the growing glow of a bright white light.

As he looked toward the lamp in the motel room, things became even more washed out. And now the whole room was almost completely cloaked in this white light.

Finally, it became totally white-washed in the glow. And there was nothing in the room that he could see.

That lamp. That lamp had seemed to cause it. Otis stumbled toward the lamp, feeling for it with his hands. He was completely blind. The lamp had somehow blinded him.

He found the lamp and felt for the switch. Then he frantically turned the switch. The blinding light vanished. Now everything suddenly went gray. Just a flat, washed-out gray. It was a featureless gray. A dull, flat, featureless gray, with nothing in it.

Otis was still a blind man.

A convulsion of panic hit him.

Suddenly he no longer considered himself to be a great powerful man. Instead, all he could think of was, he needed help.

He searched in the grayness for the phone, but could not find it. Now what?! Now what?!

He must go outside and yell for help. Someone would come and someone would help him.

A minute or two of panicky groping and he found the door. Fumbled with the knob, then stumbled outside, and instantly the gray turned into the purest white light he had ever seen. It was a beautiful translucent light. The color of white you would see if you gazed directly at the orb of the shining sun.

But he was still blind. Everything was brightly, beautifully washed out in a fog of shiny whiteness.

It must be light rays, he speculated. Too many light rays were getting into his brain, because his skull was invisible. He had no protection from the light rays, and they were washing everything out to the point where his vision could not distinguish objects.

And to be blind was dangerous. Anything could get him.

Anything.

He yelled for help and stumbled farther out into the blinding daylight.

He yelled again and heard footsteps. Someone was nearby, but seemed confused. He pleaded, "Help me, help me please. I'm blind. Please help me."

Someone cursed, and then the footsteps ran off. That's when Otis realized. No one could find him. Not only was he blind, but he was also invisible. And no one could find an invisible man. So no one could help him.

He thought that the best course of action now would be to go back to his room and wait until the invisibility wore off. But by this time he had gotten himself all turned around, and did not know which direction his room was.

He had to guess. So he began walking in the direction his gut instinct thought was correct.

There were step-ups and step-downs. He tripped over the step-ups. Almost fell over the step-downs.

He hit a step-down with back-jarring impact. Blindly and helplessly he kept walking forward, hands in front of him, reaching out and feeling the air. Something traveling very fast brushed past his hands. He took a few more steps forward to find out what it was.

Then he carefully walked a few more steps.

Then something hit him with tremendous violence. He felt his body fly upward. And as it flew he hit something else with great violent force and was tossed upward even higher. He rolled like a spinning top over something hard and metallic, then smashed onto the ground. Then he lost all sense of feeling, and the bright white light faded into heavy black.

The motorist pulled over because he knew he'd hit something. And he had a crack in his windshield to show for it. He hadn't seen it, but it sure had made a lot of noise, whatever it was.

He looked all around but there was nothing. The only thing peculiar was that the passing cars seemed to be bumping over something on the road. He couldn't see what it was, but it sure was creating minor havoc for the traffic. He figured it must be some kind of weird bump or ditch in the road that he was looking at from an odd angle. But there was a slight dent in his radiator grill, and a crack in his windshield.

That bothered him, but what could he do?

He could see nothing.

He could find nothing.

There was nothing.

Finally he got into his car and drove off.

Two days later, headlines exclaimed the news. A local bank manager had been found dead in the streets of Mumblegum. It was a grizzly, bloody sight. He had been dead for several days, after having been run over perhaps hundreds of times by passing cars.

But apparently no one had seen the body until just yesterday afternoon.

Bank manager Otis Felp was dead.

No one knew how this bizarre demise could have happened, but some blamed the mafia. Others blamed drugs. Most just shook their heads and wondered.

At least, that's what most business executives did, who read the newspaper. They just shook their heads. And as they sat behind their big, expansive desks, in their giant leather chairs, they wondered just what it

was out there that got him. They wondered just what strange, unknown thing it could have been that had caused the death of Otis Felp.

And they looked out their windows at the streets of Mumblegum and shuddered in fear at the thought of whatever it could have been.



# *Story 10:*

## *Rule Number Seventeen*

### *Backstory*

I was running out of money and realized I would soon have to sell my underground log cabin, get a job, and rejoin the rat race. So I investigated new careers.

Broadcasting had been my first career, where I rode gain on 45's and LP's as a country music disc jockey. Then I joined the Air Force and worked for the Armed Forces Radio and Television Service on a four-year hitch.

But after my hitch was up I felt reluctant to return to broadcasting. In the military it was a cushy job that avoided grunt work. But as a civilian the pay was poor, unless one was talented and lucky enough to be hired in a large market, such as New York City or Los Angeles. And I hated big cities. In fact, I hated metropolises so much, the thought of achieving great success in broadcasting felt depressing.

So I tried to find a career that paid well, while allowing me to live in a small town. Yep, I wanted it both ways. Grab that cake and eat it, too.

One career I considered was insurance. But then I learned what insurance adjusters do, and my conscience guided me away from this career avenue.

But the insurance career continued to fascinate me. It paid well enough, but required a cold heart and unempathetic, no-nonsense business acumen.

It fascinated me that quite a few other careers that paid well, were also like this.

I felt inspired. Not inspired to pursue such a career. Hell no. Rather, inspired to write the following story. This is an allegory about a dystopian society, where insurance has become lethal, and cold-hearted underwriters keep cold-handed undertakers rich and busy.

## *Rule Number Seventeen*

A man in a black suit stepped out of the grayness of the night. He was carrying a valise. He walked up to the front door of a house and knocked. Three sharp, loud, commanding knocks.

The man who answered was wearing blue jeans and a white teeshirt. He had a big belly and an unshaven jaw.

He peered at the man in black.

"Yeah?"

"Are you Nolan Nailtharp?"

"Who are *you*? What do you want?"

"Are you Mr. Nailtharp, sir?"

"You some kind of bill collector?"

The man in black reached inside his valise and pulled out a piece of paper with a picture on it. He looked at the man in the white teeshirt. He looked at the picture. He nodded his head and put the paper with the picture back inside the valise. Then he pulled out a pistol and pointed it at the man.

"Hey, hey, careful there. I'm Nailtharp all right. What do you want? I'll try to help you!"

There was a silencer on the pistol. So it merely sounded like a twig had snapped. A small stab of flame. The man in the white teeshirt opened his eyes up wide. Then he fell to the floor and died.

Through the gray night and up the stairs of an apartment building, the man in the black suit stepped. He came to a door on the second floor. He knocked. Three sharp, loud, commanding knocks.

The door opened a small crack, and a little head poked out and looked up at the man in black.

"Excuse me," he said, "are you Sonya?"

"Yeeessss . . . !" she said.

He looked at her. She was only three years old, but she should know her own name by now. He reached inside his valise and pulled out a piece of paper with a picture on it. Yes, yes, it was her. A little older. But same face. Same curly blonde hair. Yes.

"Is your mother home, Sonya?"

"Nooooo! She's watching a moobie! Wif Jim! She's in the bedwoom!"

"Gooood! I tell you what—let's go for a walk."

He reached down and grabbed her by the hand. He led her downstairs. He was very gentle and slow with her, because she was so small. And she did not resist. She was glad to have a friend.

When they got to the bottom of the stairs and walked outdoors, he found a dark corner of the building. The security lights didn't reach deep into that corner, so that's where he led Sonya. Then he took his pistol out of his valise and put it against her head. There was a small snapping sound, and that was all.

A man sipped coffee at his kitchen table. Suddenly, there was a knock at his door. Three slow knocks. He opened the door and it was the man in black. He invited him in and the man in black sat at the table. He poured coffee for him, and they both sat there for a little while, sipping and chatting. Making small talk about the weather, and current events, and such things that men talk about after their work is done and they need to rest and relax.

After a bit, the man in black pulled out of his valise two pieces of paper with pictures on them.

"Here you are—both jobs are complete."

"Thank you. I trust you did very well."

The man in black ignored the compliment. "Hey," he said, "can you tell me something about this one?" He pointed at the picture of the little girl.

The other man said, "Just a moment."

He walked over to a gray filing cabinet and pulled out a portfolio. He looked it over, then back at the picture, and shook his head. "This can be a hard job," he said. "It's too bad, but some people seem to forget what's at stake. They forget they've staked their own life, or the life of someone they

love. They just don't seem to take us insurance people seriously. But we gotta make a living too, you know.

"Yeah . . ." he looked inside the portfolio again.

"Yeah, it seems about a year ago this dame wanted to get married. But her fiancé didn't trust her. So they came to us, and she said she'd stake the life of her own daughter that she'd be true to him. So, about two weeks ago he comes to the claims adjustment department I guess, with proof that she'd been stepping out. They verified his evidence and gave the job to my division. So I gave you the assignment. You don't let sentiment get in your way you know. That makes you the best claims adjuster I've got."

Not even a smile from the man in black. He was all business, that man. He never seemed to notice a compliment, no matter how hard the adjustment manager tried.

The adjustment manager pointed at the other picture and chuckled. "I remember that man. About six months ago he went to a bank and asked for a loan at the prime rate. Didn't have no collateral, so he offered to stake his own life on the loan. Bank took him right up on it, like they always do. Damn good interest rate, too. Guess he didn't take the bank's insurance policy too seriously.

"That's the trouble with some people. About 99% of our accounts go unclaimed. Most people take us damned serious and they always meet their obligations. But there's always that one percent who don't think we're for real, and let things slide. *That's* what keeps you and me in business. Especially when I have a good claims adjuster like you."

No response. The claims adjuster in the black suit straightened his jaw and stood up. "Guess I should go now," he said. He put on his coat.

"All right. See you tomorrow. I've got three jobs for you to do tomorrow. Looks like we're having kind of a busy week."

The claims adjuster left, and the adjustment manager went back to the table and sat down. He thought for a few minutes, then went over to the gray filing cabinet and pulled out the portfolio on himself.

He didn't like it, but it was a company rule. In order to work for the insurance company, he had to take out a policy on himself, issued by the company.

Really it was more like an agreement. But an agreement with teeth, because it was written like a policy. Just like any policy a client would

have. In the policy, he agreed to follow a list of rules. And he staked his life on the promise that he would follow those rules.

He reread the rules on a regular basis, just as a safeguard so that he would not accidentally break one. After all, his life was at stake. One can't be too cautious with something like that.

There were twenty rules in all, but it was rule number seventeen that always bothered him. Number seventeen he always reread over and over again.

It was the fraternization rule. In that, he agreed not to fraternize with his subordinates in any manner, as this could create a "conflict of interest."

He looked over at the coffee cup that the claims adjuster had been sipping from. It was half empty.

No, no, not really fraternization, he thought. After all, he *had* to get along with his claims adjusters. Promotes the morale of the department. Not fraternization at all. Business, pure business. And if he *didn't* do this, he might get on the bad side of his claims adjusters. And he didn't really trust them that much. After all, they were professional killers, and what if one of them should develop a grudge against him?

He put his portfolio away.

No not fraternization at all, he told himself again.

His job was so nice. He worked out of his own home. He set his own hours. He belonged to a generous retirement plan. And he would not allow a claims adjuster get in his way and spoil that. He would not get on a claims adjuster's bad side.

He had to get along with his claims adjusters, or else. Or else face some possible deadly consequences. Surely they understood that when they wrote rule number seventeen.

A little while later he washed out the coffee cup and went to bed. He didn't sleep well that night. But then again, adjustment managers never did.

# *Story 11:*

## *No Exception*

### *Backstory*

I've never been in good health. Or so I imagine. It could be that I'm just a hypochondriac. Or maybe I'm imagining that, too. But if I am, I inherited this disease from my mother.

She's the pill-popping type of hypochondriac. Me, I stay as far away from pharmaceuticals as I can. I eschew pills, due to their many side effects and unpredictable interactions with other pills. And I don't like doctors. I'm sure they'll figure out a way to kill me if I give them the chance.

No, I'm the researcher type of hypochondriac. I've burned through medical encyclopedias, cover-to-cover, trying to figure out what strange, rare disease it is that has plagued me all my life. So far I haven't unriddled the mystery, but when I do I'll be treating myself rather than visiting some quack in a white lab coat. Because I'm no fool.

My mother has often repeated her story of that time when I lived in her belly. She claims she had cancer, and that her doctor had advised her to have an abortion. And she claims that due to her opposition to abortion, she refused to end her pregnancy. Instead, she left her fate and mine to God's will.

Thus, due to a miracle from God, and my mother's love, I am here today breathing life. At least that's the story my mother would have me believe. And I did believe it for many years.

But don't go thinking this made me a faithful follower of my mother's religion, or a guilt-ridden son who would do anything to make his poor, sick mother happy. Oh no. Her story did not inspire such gratitude.

Instead, I wondered if my strange and rare disease that I've always suspected I have, didn't originate in the womb. After all, maybe the reason she was so sick was because there was something wrong with her fetus. And maybe that's a good reason to have an abortion. Not for the protection of the mother, but for the protection of a child that might have to go through life in poor health.

And this thought inspired me to write this little piece of flash fiction.

But one caveat. One day I took my nose out of the family medical encyclopedia and asked my Munchausen mother if I had been born by C-Section or natural childbirth. She hesitated, as if she was searching her memory. Finally she ponderously answered that it was "na-tur-al child-birth." Strange, that answer. I could have sworn she had mentioned a C-Section on some prior occasion.

Over the years, I've asked her several more times. Each time the story changes. Sometimes it was C-Section and other times it was natural childbirth. It occurs to me that my mother has taken so many pills, from all her imagined ailments, that it's severely affected her memory.

And so that has put her whole abortion story in a questionable light. My father was asked about it once, and he said it was bullshit. And it probably was, knowing my father's way of calling out bullshit, and my mother's way of dishing it out.

But my father's calling out of bullshit was too late. I had already written the following story, based upon the bullshit. I wrote it with a mission in mind to warn potential mothers of the perils of strict adherence to moral rules.

This didactic tale warns of the consequences that can occur, when a sick woman steadfastly and inflexibly refuses to have an abortion.

## *No Exception*

**S**he couldn't do it. She refused to have an abortion, despite her doctor's wishes. Her doctor had warned her that if she didn't have an abortion she would probably die.

She had never been so sick from a pregnancy before in her life. But to abort, well, it was unthinkable. The laws of God forbade it.

These laws of God had been instilled in her mind from youth. Carefully placed there by the stern teachings of her religious leaders. And from these laws there grew a fear in her of risking the wrath and vengeance of a God who sought to protect all of His children. Including the child of God now growing within her own body.

Her fear and her faith were unwavering. They stood as a powerful citadel, buttressing all efforts, all urgings, and all pleadings from those who wanted her to live. Her doctor, her family and her friends all counseled her that sometimes it's wise to make exceptions to even the strictest of rules. And they were sure God, in all His love, would understand.

But she remained obdurate. She refused abortion. Her fear and faith in the teachings of her upbringing could not be overcome. And so she would risk her own life for the flesh and blood growing inside her.

She would make no exception.

The months passed and she became sicker. She was feeling gravely ill almost every moment of her waking days. It scared her to be so ill, and yet she stubbornly held to her firm resolution. She would not kill human life. She could not murder this child of God growing inside her. Even though it was slowly murdering her.

She would make no exception.

The time came. She was finally in her ninth month of pregnancy. She was in the delivery room in an advanced stage of labor. She was in pain, but at the same time she felt relieved. To her this was the lifting of a burden. It was the saving of her soul. It was the unfolding of a miracle. It was vindication.



And as she lay on the table, she had the exhilarating feeling of one who had just saved someone's life. The life of a child of God.

And she had made no exception.

Her doctor told her to bear down. She thought of the baby. Soon she would be cuddling the pink infant in her arms. Breathe. She smiled as she wondered what to name it. Breathe. She thought of the beauty of giving birth to human life. Breathe.

Especially since this was such an exceptional birth.

It was coming out. The once condemned child was coming easily out, head first—a perfect birth. The doctor pulled the infant from the womb. He raised his eyebrows as he lifted this child of God up high for the mother to see.

It was alive, kicking and waving.

With all three legs and all four arms.

# *Story 12:*

## *The Calculus of Love*

### *Backstory*

**W**hat can be weirder than someone who fanatically brushes and flosses their teeth? Yes I do that. But at least I'm not as obsessed as the young man in this story.

When I visit my Registered Dental Hygienist for my semiannual prophylaxis, I always hope my kempt teeth will impress her. But only because I'm proud of my impeccable oral hygiene.

But the young man in this tale has a different motivation. He's in love with his RDH.

He reminds me of someone I knew many years ago. Myself. I was a weirdo when it came to matters of love and romance. Just like him. When I fell for a woman, I employed courting strategies more likely to attract a psychiatrist, than the heart I aimed for.

And that's what inspired this story. One evening I was brushing my teeth and fantasizing about what weirdo things a young nerd might do to win over the heart of the lady who scrapes his teeth. This tale illustrates my youthful weirdness. It's what I imagined I might do, if I was that young nerd.

## *The Calculus of Love*

**H**e was fastidious. He brushed his teeth after every meal. And he flossed every day, without exception. And his main reason for doing this for the past six months was not to have healthy incisors, cuspids, and molars. Sure, that was important to him, but he would never have taken such extreme care of his teeth just for that reason.

No, his main reason was to impress his dental hygienist.

He was in love with her. A secret love. He felt too bashful to admit it, or to ask her out on a date. Why, she was just too winsome and prepossessing to ever have any interest in a nerdy little guy like him. Or so he assumed.

He regarded himself as unworthy, and felt hopeless. But not completely hopeless. Because he had a plan. A plan to win her heart.

He calculated that if he took excellent care of his teeth, it would impress her so much that she wouldn't be able to resist him. She'd fall helplessly in love with him and pursue him. And all he'd have to do is let her catch him.

Ironically, his calculus was to rid himself of calculus. And then he'd have love. Which admittedly, was a stupid plan. But men who are in love aren't known for clear thinking.

He came in for his semiannual prophylaxis. His professional cleaning of teeth that were already spotless. He smugly settled himself into the Naugahyde dental chair and opened wide, anticipating a gasp of amazement and awe at his flawless set of ivories.

She finished reviewing his chart, then moved to his side and peered into his mouth. But no gasp of amazement and awe issued forth.

Instead she smiled warmly. "So, what have you been up to these past six months," she routinely asked, as she reached for a sharp, pointy object.

"Giglesmlxsuh," he replied, as he tried to speak while simultaneously accommodating the poky tool that was now probing his teeth.

"So," she continued, "I've heard that less and less people are buying PC's, and are instead opting for smartphones and tablets."

She knew he was a computer hobbyist. In fact, she knew a lot of things about him. She had his personal history written down in his chart. And every time he revealed something new about himself, she stealthily took note, so she could bring it up in small talk at a future cleaning session.

This is an old ploy by dental hygienists. It's a personal touch designed to mislead their patients into believing that they are somehow special, to be remembered so clearly. She hoped he felt impressed.

And he did. He fell for it. Every time. The moonstruck nerd took it as a sign that she liked him. That he stood a chance. Even though deep down inside, he knew he was unworthy.

“Inssutrudathig,” he answered.

The session continued, with much probing, poking, scraping, rinsing and spitting. Finally, after the torture ended, he asked smugly, “So, how did I do?” as if he had just taken a test that he knew he had aced.

“How did you do? What do you mean?”

“I mean, how did I do? Any calculus?”

“Oh. Oh yes, yes, there was quite a bit of calculus. Between the front four teeth at the bottom two quadrants. But that's common,” she shrugged.

He felt crestfallen. “Were they at least better than last time?”

“Oh sure,” she reassured him. “Yes, I think you're making an improvement. Keep up the good work. And I'll see you again in six months.” She thrust a baggie at him, containing a complimentary toothbrush and small dispenser of floss.

He hung his head, feeling discouraged, and trudged out of the office.

But this setback didn't stop him from continuing to try. After all, she had advised him to keep up the good work. So he doubled and tripled his efforts, brushing not just after every meal, but also after every snack. And right after waking up, and right before going to bed. In fact, he brushed so much, he had to replace his toothbrush every two or three weeks.

And now he flossed two, three, and sometimes four times a day. He even bought floss in bulk, over the internet. And he cut out all sweets. For he was very determined to win his hygienist's heart.

After six months of this fanatical pearl polishing, it was time for his next visit. He assumed the position in the reclining Naugahyde chair. She hovered over his gaping mouth, with a sharp, hooked instrument held

menacingly before his eyes. Then she plunged it in, picking, poking, and scraping.

She kept up a monologue about things she thought might impress him, based upon his personal history she had just reviewed in her chart. And he occasionally offered up garbled responses.

It was all very routine.

But his heart was pounding, throbbing, twittering. He kept expecting her to compliment him on the excellent way he'd kept his teeth so very perfectly clean. Surely she must be noticing.

But nothing. No compliments came. Was she blind?!

When she finished, he once again asked for the verdict on the calculus, crossing his fingers and hoping that this time she had found absolutely none. But no, there was calculus. Dammit, there was calculus!

Considerable calculus, she reported, on the backs and between teeth numbers 23 through 26. Perhaps he needed to focus more attention on these areas while flossing, she advised. But not to worry, she reassured, for most people get calculus in that area, despite their best efforts.

*Well fuck it*, he thought. And then he just couldn't take it anymore. His eyeballs welled up. And as she handed him the baggie with the toothbrush and floss, the dam broke. He began to cry.

"Are you alright?!" her eyes widened. She seemed shocked.

"Yes, yes, I am," he felt embarrassed and waved his hand back and forth, trying to ward her gaze away. Then his face scrunched up and he began sobbing hard, with convulsive shakes of his shoulders. "No, no, I'm not," he shakily admitted. "I'm n-n-not."

"Wh-what's wrong?" she handed him a tissue. She felt horrified.

He wiped his nose. And between convulsive sniffles he declared, "I don't wanna keep doing all that teeth brushing. And the flossing is so hard to keep up. I'm tired of it. I'm tired. I'm just so tired." he pounded a fist on his knee.

Perhaps she shouldn't have felt surprised, for brushing and flossing teeth truly is a pain in the ass. But she'd never had a patient react this emotionally to the American Dental Association's official recommendations for oral hygiene, that she routinely repeated to those who occupied the Naugahyde chair.

She placed a hand on his shoulder. “Hey,” she reassured, “If you want to skip a teeth brushing or flossing once in awhile, it’s okay. It won’t make that big of a difference. Now you just calm down,” she implored. “I can’t believe you’re so worked up about this.”

He looked up at her with his tear-streamed face. “No, you don’t understand. I’ve been trying to impress you. I like you, and I wanted to go out with you. But no matter how good I take care of my teeth, you never seem to notice. I always keep having calculus. That damned calculus!” he angrily shook his fist at no one. “So I don’t think you’d ever want to go out with me.”

Upon hearing this admission of secret love, the dental hygienist took a startled step backward. Her mouth agape, all she could do was stare at him for about thirty seconds, as he hung his head, while dabbing away at tears with his snot-soaked tissue.

Then she did an about-face, and turned her back to him. She covered her nose and mouth with her hands and bowed her head in thought. She pondered this odd situation. After about a minute, she suddenly whipped back around and looked him square in the eye, with severe demeanor.

“Hey, if you want to ask me out, just ask me out. You don’t have to do any of this other shit. Stop your fucking crying, and just ask me out to a dinner, a movie, or something like that. Don’t play no fucking crybaby games with me.”

Now it was his turn to feel stunned. And he instantly stopped crying. His eyes expanded. He was speechless. *Could it be*, he wondered. *Could it be that she would actually go out with me?* His heart skipped a beat.

She turned slightly away, as if she was giving up on him. He knew this was his kairos. He must act now. Now, now, now, or never.

“How about Chili’s?” he blurted out. “Tonight. Seven o’clock.”

Thus began a romance between a dental hygienist and her nerdy patient. They dated for several months, before finally deciding to live together. And during this budding romance, they learned some surprising things about each other.

She learned that nerdy computer hobbyists can also be interesting. And they can have big hearts. And they possessed a level of gratitude that made them very attentive and compliant while playing between the bedsheets. Or at least, this was the case with this particular computer hobbyist.

And during one of their true confession conversations, he learned something surprising about her. He learned just how well all that brushing and flossing of his teeth actually worked. For she divulged a professional secret.

She told him that the picking, and prodding, and scraping of his teeth that she had tortured him with during cleaning sessions, was all for show. She confessed to him that in reality, he'd had no calculus to scrape off, anywhere on his incisors, or cuspids, or molars. No, in fact she felt very impressed with how clean his teeth always were, whenever he came in for his semiannual prophylaxis.

She admitted that she had lied when she told him there was considerable calculus behind those bottom teeth. It was her way of keeping him as a patient. After all, if she were to tell him that he never had calculus, he might decide he didn't need her anymore. And she'd lose a patient. A good patient. Someone who was easy to work on.

He felt a flame of outrage upon learning this, as he reflected on all the pain he'd endured as a victim of this fraud. But she tamped down this flame, by pumping up his ego.

She told him that she rarely dated, and would absolutely never, ever, go out with any patient who came in with lots of calculus on their teeth. And that most of her patients did have lots of calculus. And that the only reason she had agreed to date him was because of how impressed she felt with his immaculate oral health.

And there it was. His stupid plan, his calculus, wasn't so stupid after all. His calculus had rid himself of calculus. And that solved for him the most perplexing calculus problem of all.

The calculus of love.

# *Story 13:*

## *Death At A Well*

### *Backstory*

**F**lash fiction is the art of writing a very short story, or the “short short”. Generally, 1,000 words or less is considered to be flash fiction, although some claim stricter limits.

I think death is a subject well-suited for short shorts. Why not? Death shortens everything.

In fact, the world’s shortest piece of flash fiction is sometimes touted as this six-word tale: “For sale: baby shoes, never worn.” Legend has it that Earnest Hemingway wrote this tiny tale, but this is unlikely, for it first began circulating when he was 10 years old.

I wonder if Hemingway got the attribution because someone wanted to lend literary value to this tale. But a six-word story is hardly literature. After all, there’s no real plot development in a mere six words. It can be argued that to qualify as a genuine short story, the writer must invest enough words to immerse the reader in a plot, and leave them with the sense that they’ve been involved in a complete event.

I once read that the world’s shortest story, containing enough plot development and enduring appeal to qualify as a bona fide work of literature, is an ancient Arabian fable. And of course, it’s about death. This fable has been written in different ways, but here’s a 176-word version:



## *Appointment In Samarra*

There was a merchant in Baghdad who sent his servant to market. Shortly, the servant came back, white and trembling.

“Master, just now when I was in the marketplace, I was jostled by a woman in the crowd, and when I turned I saw it was Death. She looked at me and made a threatening gesture! Now, lend me your horse, and I will ride away from this city and avoid my fate. I will go to Samarra, and there Death will not find me.”

The merchant lent him his horse, and the servant mounted it, dug his spurs in its flanks, and as fast as the horse could gallop, he went. Then the merchant went to the marketplace, and saw Death standing in the crowd, and confronted her.

“Why did you make a threatening gesture to my servant when you saw him this morning?”

“That was not a threatening gesture. It was only a start of surprise. I was astonished to see him in Baghdad, for I had an appointment with him tonight in Samarra.”

###

The first time I read this story, and learned that it was the world’s shortest short story, I decided to break the record. I wanted to immortalize my name by writing a story even shorter than this. A story that would have substantive plot development and enduring appeal. So I wrote my own tale about Death.

But wordmongering got the best of me. I was undisciplined. I indulged in too much verbosity and failed to beat the record.

So like the Baghdad servant, the name of Tippy Gnu is doomed.

What follows is my 460-word failed attempt at immortality, with my own piece of flash fiction about an encounter with Death.

## *Death At A Well*

One day, Death on horseback rode out of the desert to a certain house where a man had a well. He appeared parched thirsty and asked the man for a drink. Being very afraid of Death, the man was quick to allow permission, and Death dipped a drink from the well.

"I'll make you a deal," said Death, after he finished swallowing. "If you save this well for me alone, and let no others taste from it, I will make you immortal."

Naturally this keeper of the well desired eternal life, so he eagerly agreed.

Thereafter he had to fight off many a person. Usually passing strangers who desperately needed water after a long, hot ride through the desert. He killed most of them, but they never succeeded at harming him. He was immortal, but they did not know that, or they would not have fought him. And none of them ever got a drop from his well.

He turned aside hundreds of travelers who had depended on his well for water. Most of those who did not die fighting him, perished of thirst later. Only a few ever survived.

However those few spread the word, and eventually the well developed a reputation for being inaccessible. Thus travelers came less and less often, and there were fewer and fewer people for the keeper to kill. Until finally, no travelers passed through the area anymore.

One morning the keeper of the well spied a lone horseman approaching from the desert. When the rising sun glinted off the white bones, he knew the rider to be his friend, Death. The keeper waved a hand of greeting as Death grew closer. But Death did not acknowledge it.

Death rode his black horse to the edge of the yard and drew a long bow made from a rib bone, and an arrow made from an arm bone. He took aim at the surprised keeper of the well and shot him through the stomach.

The wound was mortal, but the keeper still had a few breaths of life in him. With fading eyes, he looked up at Death and asked why he had not lived up to his end of the deal.

"I *have* lived up to the deal. Did I not say that no one should drink from the well, but me?"

"And no one has," the man sputtered.

"A lie. Since we made the deal I have watched the well every day. And every day I have seen you, yourself, dip the bucket into the well and quench your own thirst."

Suddenly the keeper comprehended his mistake, and a fire of realization burned in his eyes.

But a chilly wind from the mouth of Death blew the fire out.

## *Story 14:*

### *The Lonely Wish*

#### *Backstory*

I grew up on the move. From the day I was born to the day of my 18th birthday, my family moved 19 times. And they usually took me with them.

There was that time in the first grade when my brother and I came home from school and our family was gone. A few hours later, as we sat tristfully upon the front porch, my mother pulled up and saved the day. I can't blame her for forgetting us. She had five kids, pets, and a shitload of possessions to transport. Her brain must have been frazzled.

I changed school 13 times while growing up. Because usually when we moved it was to another town, far away.

We weren't in the military. Nor were we gypsies. Our reasons for moving about were not that glamorous. Fact is, we were just dirt poor vagabonds. So sometimes we moved because the sheriff had posted an eviction notice on our door.

My stepfather was a drunk, liverish, child-abusing and molesting pervert. I suspect that some of the moving was his attempt to escape his own miserable self. But he was also eternally discontent with his employers. Sometimes he'd move us a hundred miles just to get a nickel-an-hour more in wages.

And then my mother divorced him. And we moved. And then my mother divorced her next husband and went back to the pervert. And so we moved again.

I got so accustomed to the vagabond life that I thought it was normal to move around like that. That is until other kids would regard me with astonishment when they discovered how many different schools I'd attended.

But I liked moving. It taught me the fine art of making enemies and then skipping town. Moving gave me the courage of a runner. I could behave with bravado, and then, just when the bullies were plotting a pummeling, I'd stop showing up to school without warning. Because we moved.

In fact, I liked it so much that I continued moving as an adult. From age 18 until age 32, I moved 29 times. I even figured out how to move a lot while in the military, and got myself stationed to three different bases over four years, not counting basic training and tech school.

It was the escape that motivated me to relocate so much. I became addicted to washing my hands of my current situation and starting out anew. I felt safe with noncommitment. And like my stepfather, I might have been trying to get away from myself. Though not for his fucked up reasons.

But deep down inside lay a desire to settle down. And by age 32 I could no longer suppress this yearning. I succumbed to the domestic life. I got married and moved into a house, where I lived contentedly with my wife for the next quarter century, while holding down the same job. Something I once never imagined I could do.

We finally moved, but only because it was to a nicer house that my wife inherited. And here we plan to remain until we die.

When I was in my 20's, the loneliness of the peripatetic life would sometimes well up inside me. And I knew my soul couldn't survive if I remained fiddlefooted into old age. I pined for an anchor. I wanted someone to give my love to. And for a few fleeting moments my vacant heart would be ready for commitment.

During one of those wistful moments, I pondered how it would feel if this vagabond life were to continue forever. And these ponderings evolved into a plot. And that plot became the basis for a fantastical story. A story that I naturally had to imprison on paper, lest it escape my mind the way I had escaped so many of my addresses.

Come visit this inmate of a story and give it some company. And learn a lesson from a very old man who stayed on the move, and the lonely lengths it drove him to.

## *The Lonely Wish*

I'm lookin' for a lady name of Penelope Frooze. Been lookin' since I was twenty years old. She's prob'ly a rich woman by now, and she no doubt lives in a mansion. An' I'll bet she's young and beautiful. I'd like to find her again. Because last time I found her, she became the luckiest woman in the world.

I met Penelope in 1969. But it all began more than a hundred years earlier, in 1864. I was 46 years old at that time, an' just a poor white trash dirt farmer workin' a spot o' land down in Georgia. In 1864 the Civil War was breakin' things up down there in Georgia like a fire at a barn dance.

One day some Yankee soldiers rode onto my farm. These here soldiers were interested in pillagin'. It was Sherman's way of winnin' the war. They wanted to loot, murder, and destroy. They tried to kill us all, but I escaped and ran into the woods with two of them soldiers chasin' me on a horseback. One of 'em got in a lucky shot and shattered my elbow with a minie ball. I just kept a'runnin in spite of the pain. Into the woods and into the woods, deeper and deeper.

Got away from 'em, but the next day I come back to the farm to see what they'd left behind. Nothin'—there was nothin'. They'd murdered my wife and kids, burned out my crops, and taken all my possessions—what few I had. To pour salt on my wounds, they'd torched my house before they left.

So that's what I got out of the Civil War. I got a ruined farm, a crippled arm, and a poor little graveyard for my family.

With my crippled arm I wasn't worth much to no one, not even to myself. So I left my farm and began wanderin'. In my wanderin's I began to think of just how cruel this here world was to me. And the more I thought about it the more I felt sorry for myself. And then the more depressed I got.

A few years went by though, before I wound up at the end of my rope. By this time I was a half-starved rail of a man, dressed in rags, and sufferin' from premature old age. I looked old and frail—bait for the

wolves. And inside myself I felt even older. By this time my life wasn't even worth one old Confederate dollar to me. I just felt totally worthless and was ready to put an end to it all.

I went for my last walk on this cruel earth the evenin' of October 17th, 1866. Walked on over to a little bridge that spanned Fetchtoe creek. The waters of Fetchtoe rushed furiously through a big maze of rocks, so I figured by jumpin' in, it wouldn't take long for me to be dashed to pieces and die.

There was a clear, starry sky that October evenin', and it made me happy to be under it, in spite of my dreary self. The constellations were beautiful—shinin' so brightly up there. So when I reached the bridge I paused for a few minutes to take the great sparklin' sight in. It would be the last good thing I'd see, so I figured I should enjoy it while I could.

But then, while lookin' to the east, I all of a sudden saw somethin' real strange. It looked to me like one of those night stars out there was bustin' apart and explodin'. It kept gettin' bigger and bigger and bigger, and kept throwin' off all kinds of different colors. It looked red and gold and yellow and green and blue, and shined so bright it took up almost all the eastern horizon.

So I watched with my eyes and mouth a'wide-open at this grand celestial display and began to ask myself why this was happenin'.

And then I thought, perhaps it's a lucky star. Perhaps it's one of those stars you hear-tell you can wish upon and things will come true.

Well seein' that star, and how unusually bright and colorful it was gettin' to be, anythin' was beginnin' to make sense to me. So I figured I'd try it. I figured I'd just make mahself a wish and see if anythin' come of it.

"Star," I said. "Star, if you be my lucky star, then I'd like to make me a wish. I wish you could make my crippled arm well again."

I felt a little silly after makin' the wish, 'cause I knew I was just indulgin' in child's play. But then all of a sudden I felt a warm sensation in my elbow. The same elbow that Yankee soldier put a ball into.

So I tried movin' my arm up and down, and as sure as catfish live in the mud, it began to work. I swung it up and down with no problems a'tall. There was no stiffness, no pain, nothin'. Just freedom of movement, the way I used to have it.

I looked back up at that star and began cryin' with happiness. "Thank you star," I said, "thank you."

Didn't kill myself that night. Instead, I went to bed and fell asleep playin' with my arm. I was a happy man that night, and slept very well.

The next day I started to walk into town. I was no longer a crippled man, so now I figured I could look my fellow brethren straight in the eye and ask 'em to let me do an honest day's work for an honest day's wage. I felt like a respectable man. An upright respectable man, now that I was a whole man.

But before I got to town a temptin' thought hit me. I thought, supposin' I should stay out of town for jist one more night and see if that lucky star comes out again. Then I could wish for enough money so that I wouldn't even have to work. I could go into town and be not only respectable, but also rich.

Shore enough, that night the lucky star did come out again, fillin' up the eastern horizon with all its brilliant shinin' colors.

"Lucky star," I said, "I wish I could have a thousand dollars in gold, right here in my pocket."

My pocket suddenly ripped, and the weight of a thousand dollars in gold fell down my pant leg and hit my foot.

So I wished that my foot would stop hurtin', and it did. Amazingly, the pain just went away like blowin' a candle out.

That night I also wished for a new suit and a fine horse. I got both, and rode into town the next day a rich and respectable man, who only two nights earlier had been standin' on a bridge contemplatin' suicide.

I turned the heads and eyes of a lots of folks, especially a lot of women-folks. But not too many of the younger, more attractive women were lookin' at me, and I realized it was because of my age. I was 48 years old and had the kind of wrinkles an 80-year-old might have, due to all the misery I'd been through the past few years.

But I was a man with a lucky star, so that evenin' I wished I could be twenty years old again.

The next day the young women were finally lookin' at me, and I told 'em I was the rich son of that old galoot who'd come through the day before.



Soon I had it all. I had a pretty young wife, a mansion, fine horses, lots of money, and lots of respect from the townsfolk. I was a rich, respectable young man, far from that old white trash dirt farmer who'd been burned out way back in Georgia. I was a man who owned a lucky star. And all of my wishes were comin' true.

But after awhile I learned not to wish for too much. I learned that havin' too much money, too many possessions—too much of anythin', in fact—was dangerous. It got people to talkin'. And talk about a wealthy man attracted thieves. Thieves have been known to kill for money, and I did not want to die for what I had wished for.

You see, my lucky star was no good to me by day. It was only good for me at night, when I could see it. And if it should happen to be a cloudy night, then it still worn't no good for me. If I couldn't see my lucky star, I could wish 'til my lips turned blue and it wouldn't do me no danged good. I had to see it, to wish on it effectively.

So I learned to be careful about my wealth. I learned that by jist bein' borderline rich I could feel safe enough from thieves, or from jealous poor people, or the like.

I learned to keep a low profile and not to make much of an impression on people. That kept the talk down, and helped me feel more comfortable with my wealth.

Somethin' I refused to do was let myself age. I loved bein' twenty years old. For one thing, it made thieves think twice about attackin' me—young, strappin' and healthy as I appeared. Also, I was afraid that by aging I would be more susceptible to ill health. I didn't want to suddenly get sick and wind up dyin' before I could get a chance to see my lucky star and wish myself back into good health. That was a great fear of mine.

But unfortunately I had to let my wife age. Wishin' her to stay young would eventually lead to some questions bein' asked, and then a lot of talk that could become harmful. Perhaps people would accuse her and me of bein' in league with the devil or somethin'. I was afraid of that kind of talk, and what it could lead to.

But after about ten years, people did begin to talk. They talked about *me*, and why *I* wasn't aging. They wondered aloud, and even joked half good-naturedly with me about it. The handwritin' was on the wall, and I

knew the time had come for me to leave. Leavin' seemed to be my only option.

My wife was a nice enough person I guess, but the time had come. So one mornin' she woke up and I wasn't in bed next to her. I had moved on.

I wound up in another town a thousand miles away. I took on a new identity, with new looks, to keep from bein' recognized by someone from my past who might come travelin' through my present. I wished myself new wealth, and began courtin' young women.

Soon I was all set up again, just like before. And for another ten years I was able to live the life of a comfortably rich, but quiet man, with a beautiful young wife. No one talked about me much or bothered me very often. In fact I think I was hardly ever even thought about.

And the cycle continued. Decade after decade I would pull up stakes and start a new life somewhere else. The years were like a gentle breeze on a summer day—they just seemed to slip by without me noticin' anythin' but a pleasant good time.

The years rolled on into the twentieth century. And on they went, through World War I, the Great Depression, the Second World War, and the Korean War. And on I went, with my lucky star as my guide.

But somethin' was a'changin' inside me. I guess I was goin' through a kind of a personal crisis. I was feelin' kind of hollow inside. More and more all the time. I would look back at all my wives and all my lives and ask myself if it had been worth it. I would ask myself if I was really happy. I would want to know what the meanin' of life was. And I would want to know if I was fulfillin' the meanin' of life.

But when I boiled it all down, I decided I was just plain old lonely. Here I'd had so many wives and I had left them all, each time just when I was beginnin' to know and appreciate them. And they had never gotten to know me. I had lied to each and ever one of 'em about my past and the source of my wealth, because I didn't want 'em to know about my lucky star. I was afraid they wouldn't believe me. Or that if they did believe me they would talk about it to others. Talk seemed to be the most dangerous enemy I had. And so to prevent talk about myself, I had to keep from *talkin'* about myself. And that meant remainin' lonely, even with my wives.

The Vietnam War busted loose on a lonely world for me. I had just left another wife, who was beginnin' to wonder how I'd kept my young looks

for so long. This time, I vowed, I would not get married again until I met a woman who I could trust. A woman who I could tell the truth to about myself, and who wouldn't talk it around to others. A woman who I could get to know, and who could get to know me. A woman who I wouldn't feel lonely with. This time I would wait until I met such a woman.

In 1969 I met Penelope Frooze. She was 25—a little older than what I was used to. But she was a darn purty woman. Beautiful both on the outside and on the in. She was someone I could talk to in confidence, and who I knew would keep the cats in the bag. She just had that special kind of personality that could make a believer out of anyone who came into contact with her. Includin' myself. She was sympathetic, humorous, happy, gregarious, fun, and interestin' to be with.

An' I loved her.

She was a waitress at a diner. That's where I met her. Her husband was over in 'Nam, fightin' commies. Well, that was his problem. I had me a lucky star and he didn't.

And I was determined to make Penelope my wife.

But Penelope had to volunteer to be my wife. I wanted someone who I could trust and talk to, not someone I had to force and be afraid of.

One night it was closin' time at the diner, when Penelope sat down by the counter beside me. She had been a faithful wife up until now, but this time she really seemed interested in me, like I'd caught her special attention. She studied my face for a few moments an' was quiet an' serious in her looks as she sat there. All solemn-like 'n all. There was just she an' me an' some old guy hunched over a cup of coffee way down the way. A little cigarette smoke was rollin' around in silver-blue river patterns up aroun' the fluorescent lights.

The whole atmosphere gave me a lonely shake. Made me think of that-there famous painting of another diner. A haunting painting called "Nighthawks" by a feller named Hopper. An' the empty barrels at the bottom of my soul were ready to pour out my lonely heart.

Suddenly, for the first time in my life, I told someone about my lucky star. Penelope listened with big, round wonderin' eyes. I told her everythin'. I told her about the Yankee attack on my farm. The attempted suicide. The first time I saw the star. I told her about my wives, about the

decades I'd lived in, and about my loneliness. I just broke down an' told Penelope everythin'.

And then I popped the big one. I asked Penelope to be my wife. I told her it was possible with my lucky star. All she had to do was say yes, and I could make it so. I told her that I loved her, and that she could cure my loneliness. And in return I could make her young forever, and give her everythin' she wanted. All she had to do was be my wife.

To please be my wife.

Penelope was an angel, she truly was. First, she said she loved her husband too much to leave him for anythin'. An' she said she could not be unfaithful to her weddin' vows.

Then she said that I had a problem. She said that she cared for me very much—as a friend—and she thought that I needed some professional help. She told me I should see a psychiatrist.

She urged me to please seek psychiatric help.

For a couple weeks after I did not see Penelope Frooze. Instead I spent my time wonderin' how I could convince her I was authentic, and not some nut with mental health problems. And how I could convince her to accept my marriage proposal.

Then one day Penelope got a visit from the U.S. Army. It was very bad news. Her husband had been killed in action. She was now a widow.

And a free woman.

I waited about a week, until I thought she was over the worst of her grievin'. The funeral was past, an' she had just returned to work. So I figured now would be an appropriate time to approach her.

It was evenin' when I visited her at the diner. I waited around 'til closin' time, then asked if she'd like to go out for a walk with me.

The sky was clear, and full of bright, twinklin' stars that evenin'. We walked for a few minutes, and then I stopped and held her arm. I pointed to the east and said, "Penelope, do you see that big star that fills up almost the entire horizon?"

She says, "Is that the lucky star you think you see?"

"I *know* I see. Don't you see it?"

"No." she says. "Listen, I really do think you need some help. It can't hurt to go and see one of those doctors. There's nothin' to be ashamed of. And they can help. They really can."

"You can't see it, Penelope, because it's not *your* lucky star. It's *mine*. But I bet I can help you see it. Just watch.

"Lucky star," I said, "I wish she could see my lucky star, too."

I looked over and saw Penelope's eyes get wider and wider. Yes, now she was seeing it, too. Now she could believe me.

"I see something!" she says, "I really do see it! Oh, it's beautiful!!!"

"That's my lucky star, Penelope. That's what I've been tellin' you about. Now do you believe me?"

She looked over at me with wonderment in her eyes. The same look I prob'ly had the first time I saw the star. "Yes," she slowly says, ". . . yes, I guess I do believe you. I do believe you now."

"Penelope, I'm tired of bein' a lonely man. So I have to be honest with you if I expect to truly win your heart. Penelope, I have a confession to make. Whenever I wish upon that star my wish always comes true.

"After I proposed to you, you said you could never break your weddin' vows. But weddin' vows say, 'until death do us part'. So last week, Penelope, I made a wish upon that star. I wished that your husband would be killed in the war. That's how much I love you and want you. I wished your husband dead. I'm sorry, Penelope. Will you please forgive me?"

Penelope's face just seemed to twist up like a wrung out washrag just then. She suddenly looked up into the sky and began to cry. "Please tell me you didn't do this!" she said over and over to me.

I felt like I had to be honest. It was the only way I could end the loneliness that was torturing me so, and begin an authentic relationship with someone.

"I can't Penelope, I *did* do it. I'm sorry."

For a few more minutes she cried.

But then she suddenly looked back up into the sky, and I should have been warned by the fire in her eyes.

Slowly, and with trembling lips, she said, "I wish it was *my* lucky star, and not his."

I quickly looked up, but only in time to see my star quickly shrink down to nothin', just like the picture would shrink down to a little dot on the old TV sets, after you turned 'em off. It vanished, and for the first time in over a hundred years I saw a night sky without my bright lucky star in it.

I grabbed Penelope and pleaded, "Please, please, bring it back!"

"No." she said. She was like a rock.

"Please Penelope, please! I must have it back! I can't live without it! Bring it back! Please! Wish it back for me Penelope." I demanded! "Wish it back!"

She looked at me and said, "The only thing I should wish is that you were dead."

"Oh no, no! Please don't wish that!" I got down on my knees. I'd never felt so helpless and vulnerable before. "Please watch what you wish! Please be careful!"

I'm ashamed to say that I then began squealing in a high voice. "I'll die if you wish that! Please don't wish that! Please! *Please!!*"

She didn't wish me dead. But I never saw her again, either. The next day I went to her house to beg for my star back. But she was gone. She'd moved out overnight.

I've been lookin' for her ever since. From town to town, city to city I've traveled. Searchin' the phone books for a Penelope Frooze. Prowlin' around the advantaged homes of the upper-middle class for a glimpse of her.

I suspect she's made herself somewhat rich with my lucky star. I suspect she's also changed her identity several times. And I suspect I'll never find her, in spite of how hard I search.

She'll be forever young, forever kind of rich, and forever lucky, just the way I was.

I'm gettin' kinda old now. In about ten years or so I'll prob'ly die of old age, if it don't get me sooner. Still, it's not bad for a guy who was born in 1818, don't you think?

I doubt if I'll ever see Penelope Frooze again. But I'll bet about now she's startin' to get a bit lonely herself. And maybe by now she's lookin' for someone *she* can trust. Someone *she* can share her true self with, just like I thought I could with her.

Perhaps you'll meet her one day. And perhaps one evenin' the two of you will go for a walk under some starry night sky.

If she should start talkin' about some lucky star of hers, tell her you won't believe it 'till you see it. And when she shows it to you, you know what to do next. Don't be shy or hesitant, just do it. It's yours for the takin', jist like she took it from me.

And you'd be a fool to pass it up.

But if you do take it, I'd like to ask one thing of you. Some evenin' while you're lookin' at your lucky star and makin' a wish for somethin' you've always wanted, I'd like you to think of me.

And then maybe if you would please, wish a little luck my way, too.

# *Story 15:*

## *The Devil And Sagittarius*

### *Rolfdown*

#### *Backstory*

I felt nervous. It was my first day of college. And I was in English class. I assumed English professors were tough, dry, and dull as a stale bagel. And I wondered if I could survive this class. I even considered walking out and dropping out of college right then, rather than undergo the tortuous mental discipline of a rigorous academic education.

Professor Rolfdown resembled a gray Abraham Lincoln, although his grizzled beard was even longer than Abe's, extending below his Adam's apple. His tall figure and wizened face came across imposing and intelligent as he began our first lesson, with chalk to blackboard, screeving descriptions of nouns, verbs, and adjectives.

But about five minutes into the lecture, he set down his chalk, removed his wire-rimmed spectacles, and solemnly informed us that this concluded our English lesson for the day.

He then had us form a circle with our desks, asked us to hold hands, and then led us in a meditation session. And that's how we spent the rest of our class that day.

I felt relieved, because English never seemed so easy before. But I also felt a little puzzled and annoyed. I signed up to learn English, damnit, and



not some weird eastern religion. Why, I thought I had matriculated into a community college, not some hippy-assed California commune.

And as my anger smoldered, I strongly considered transferring out of this class and replacing it with fuck, who knows, badminton maybe. But I needed credits in English. And this seemed like an easy way to get them. Hell, Professor Rolfdown had turned English into a gut course. So I stayed on for the easy ride.

But not without remonstrance. A pattern developed. Every day of class began with a simple, five minute lecture about English. Basic shit I already knew all about, from elementary school lessons. And after that the bearded professor would segue into lessons on eastern religion, meditation, psychic phenomena, and the paranormal. Then he'd have us write a short essay about what we'd just learned. And every time, I wrote something sarcastic and satirical, expressing skepticism about all this bullshit, and lampooning it as New Age nonsense.

He would chuckle at my essays and gently tell me that God loves humor. But such reverse psychology never dissuaded my skepticism.

One day, after I'd written an especially sharp satirical rebuke of the lesson he'd just taught, he asked me why I hadn't dropped out of his class. I told him that I needed the credits. He then ordered me to visit him in his office after class, for some counseling.

I sat cornered in the tiny cubby of his office. His beard strands were inches from my face. And his breath reeked of coffee, as Professor Rolfdown referenced my need for credits. And then he said something incongruous. He told me that he didn't think I would be very good in bed.

Strange. And then it occurred to me. He might be making a pass at me. I suspected that if I reacted by defending my sexual prowess, he would have told me to prove it. In other words, this professor seemed to be implying, in a weasely sort of way, that if I didn't suck his cock or let him fuck me in the ass, I might not get those English credits I was hoping for.

Now I felt even more nervous than my first day of college. He truly was a tough English professor.

I didn't take the bait. Instead I quickly changed the subject, and told him I was running late for my next class. And then I excused myself and got the hell out of there.

But I continued my defiance and sarcasm, in my essays. In fact I stepped it up. And I determined that if I failed this class, I'd raise a holy row, and expose this son-of-a-bitch for what he was, to the school administrators.

On the last day of the semester, our final exam consisted of us writing an essay explaining how we had changed after attending this "English" class. You can bet I laid the satire on thick and heavy, and lampooned the hell out of Professor Rolfdown.

He returned the paper to me, with the superscribed comment: "God loves humor. But God also loves change. So what grade do you think you deserve?"

I didn't fall for it. I left that class giving him no response, and no final chance to try to mulct a sexual favor out of me. And his little smarmy, written question provided just the evidence I needed, in case I had to protest a failing grade.

He gave me a B. So I let the matter go, since a B was sufficient to get the credits I wanted.

But I also felt a burn, having to go through such bullshit, and having to learn the hard facts about professors with hard-ons.

About a year later, just to get all this bullshit off my chest, I wrote one final sarcastic essay about this pervert professor and the eastern religion crap he tried to shove down his students' throats. And I changed his name to Sagittarius Rolfdown. I thought that name was more fitting.

I submitted it to my Creative Writing teacher, and she read it to the entire class, then asked if anyone felt offended by it. To my great disappointment, nobody raised their hand. I don't remember what grade she gave me but here, I humbly submit my essay now, for your grade. And please, if you feel offended by it, be sure to raise your hand.

## *The Devil And Sagittarius Rolfdown*

**T**he bearded man was eighty-five when he finally died of old age. He was in the middle of a meditation session when he went into his first chakra and had a heart attack.

On his death bed, he said the cosmic experience from the first chakra was so powerful that his heart began palpitating with excitement, only to become completely exhausted a moment later.

After he died, the bearded man expected to become a cosmic part of the great universe above him. But instead he felt himself being hurled downward, downward, downward until he finally fell on his ass before the burly gates of Hell.

The gates were a sooty black color, and had a sinister, gothic look to them. A red sweaty figure stood behind these gates, sneering and jeering at his newest arrival. "This is not my idea of becoming a piece of a great cosmic dustcloud in some ectoplasmic galaxy far away," the bearded man mumbled in a low, confused tone of voice.

"Shutup!!" the red devil roared, "Just who the hell do you think you are to talk without my permission?!"

"Wait a second, I think I know who you are," he continued, playing with his pitchfork thoughtfully, "Why, you're that space-cadet who fell heads over tails for eastern mysticism and such garbage as that.

"I've been waiting quite a long time for you, Sagittarius Rolfdown. I'm glad that goddamned God finally gave up and let you into my clutches. What foolish thing have you to say for yourself?"

"Where the hell am I?"

"Foolish enough." Lucifer chuckled. "You are now exactly 450 miles beneath the surface of the earth, sitting in the bowels of Hades. Is that cosmic enough for you?"

"They say the inside of the Earth is like the outside of a star."

"Goddamnit, one more reference to this place being like a heavenly body and I'll root you in the butt through a volcano and *send* you to the heavens!"

"And now, before I allow you the privilege of entering through these gates, let me explain how things will be while you're down here, which will be forever.

"I will be your father and your mother, your brother and your sister, your godmother, godfather, and even God himself. You will be my slave and I will be your master. You will follow my orders to the letter and punctuation mark. What I say goes, even if it means jumping into a sea of

boiling hot lava. Yes, life will be tough down here in Hell. Almost as bad as a Marine Corps training camp.

"But before you can pass through these burly gates, I am instructed by the Jesus Peace Convention in Heaven to allow you a few questions as to why you're down here instead of up there with Simon Peter."

"My first question," the bearded man asked, "is why have I been sent to Hell if I spent my whole life on earth devoted to learning how to go to Heaven?"

"Because you're a sucker!" Satan screamed with delight. "And God hates a sucker! It was God, you know, who first said 'never give a sucker an even break.'"

"I thought that was W.C. Fields."

"It *was* W.C. Fields. He stole that line from God, though."

"B-But I still don't understand," Sagittarius stammered, "h-how am I a sucker?"

"Ha Ha Ha Ha Ha!" the devil roared. "My computer readout for your life on earth shows that you spent over a hundred thousand dollars on psychic phenomena books, religious cult magazines, astrology and biorhythm charts, and other such useless things, during a sixty-year span of your life. You were so easily conned out of your money, in fact, that God almost rated you as bad as those foolish churchgoers who tithe. What suckers they are! But still, you'll be getting harder labor than most of them down here!"

"Why is that?" the bewildered Sagittarius asked.

"Because of your actions!" the devil ranted, pounding his pitchfork on the ground and switching his pointed tail furiously. "You stupidly devoted three hours out of every day of your life in worthless meditation (which amounts to one-eighth of your life). You wasted the average of another hour of each day reading that lousy literature you bought. And worst of all, you wasted a total of over one thousand weekends as a Hare Krishna disciple, walking around busy airports and pestering weary travelers with your ridiculous eastern religion philosophy.

"Being suckered out of your own physical actions by doing things slick con-artists like gurus and preachers want you to do, is a crime more heinous than wasting money. Money can be replaced. But the short time you have to enjoy life on earth, cannot.

“You could have spent your time doing more enjoyable and worthwhile things like procrastinating, bar-hopping, or stealing, but instead you gave your life away to enduring hardships like meditation (very boring) and mind reading (very futile) for a bunch of fat gurus. For this reason you have been sent to Hell instead of Heaven.

“But enough of this talk—it is now time for you to learn coal shoveling for my vast furnaces. They must be kept very hot if I am to maintain this Hell of mine.”

Beelzebub then opened the burly gates and began prodding the bearded man through with his pitchfork.

"Oh no, oh no, oh no!" Sagittarius began to cry. "I'm doomed to live in this burning Hell forever and work beside evil people, like whores and heathens!"

"Whores and heathens?! Shit, they go to Heaven!" the devil exclaimed.

# *Story 16:*

## *Not Randy's Day*

### *Backstory*

I signed up for a creative writing class during my sophomore year of college. But I don't think it helped me be creative. After all, how do you teach creativity? And how do you judge creativity? Seems impossible to me. Therefore, how can someone truly teach "creative" writing?

Creative writing classes subject students to the biases of their teachers. And sometimes even the teachers don't know what they like. Or in the case of my teacher, they won't admit it. I don't remember my professor's name, but I do remember she had a fungiform shape. So I'll call her Mrs. Mushroom.

One day, Mrs. Mushroom assigned us to write a story on the theme of a very intense, personal, and emotional, experience. I had a lot of fun with this. I liked to make a lark out of Mushroom's assignments. I'd turn and twist them around into utter nonsense.

Because to me, that's what creativity was all about. It was about jumping out of the box and taking matters into forbidden areas. It was about kibbling convention, stomping stereotype, and discomfiting the reader with uncomfortable dalliances into roguish rulebreaking.

She graded my paper and superscribed some comments at the top. But before she handed it back to me, she decided to read it aloud to my fellow

students. I don't know why, unless it was to instruct the class on what not to do, with her assignments.

As she got into the thick of my story, she started to giggle. She suppressed it. But a few paragraphs later her giggling returned, and with greater intensity. She tried to suppress it again. But it kept coming back like percolating coffee.

Suddenly that coffee pot boiled over and she melted down into hysterical laughter. She lost complete control of herself for about a full minute, howling so long and hard she became almost cataplectic. And that must have caused her to suck some saliva down her windpipe.

A fit of coughing and choking ensued. She struggled for her breath, while gasping and hacking. Her face turned red as the marks she made on our papers. She struggled to her feet, staggered between our desks, then rushed out the door, coughing and choking the entire way.

She returned about 20 minutes later, looking haggard but breathing normally. She composed herself at her desk and resumed reading my story, slowly, with a strained, straight face. And somehow she was able to finish while maintaining her normally somber demeanor.

Then she handed the paper back to me, with the comment she had superscribed at the top before her near-fatal decision to read the story to the class. The comment read, "Not sure if you were trying to be funny, but if you were, the humor didn't come across. B-."

Yep, that's what it said.

And this illustrates why it is impossible to judge creativity. Sometimes we think we don't like something, when we actually do. And sometimes we very much want something to not be funny, because it blasphemes every fiber of the principles we hold dear. And yet for some damned reason, we can't stop ourselves from laughing.

Creativity follows no rules, knows no bounds, and cannot be captured in a jar, bucket, or classroom. It just is what it is, and it's constantly changing all the time. To appreciate creativity, you must recognize the value in change, unknowns, and surprises. And if Mrs. Mushroom had been that way, she would have never written that comment on my paper.

I can be intense. I can be personal. And I can be emotional. But when I am these things, I like to have fun with them. I hope you'll have some fun too, as you read the story that nearly killed my creative writing teacher.

This is a tale about a young man named Randy, and an intense, personal, emotional day that was not at all tailored to his liking.

## *Not Randy's Day*

**P**lip. Plip. Plip. He woke up. Ice water battered his forehead as it dripped from the top freezer section of the refrigerator. He propped himself up on his hands where he lay on the floor, and two sticks of dynamite suddenly exploded behind his nose. He groped around for something to wipe his nose with, but had to finally settle for a shirt sleeve. He was shivering, and he was sick. He had a bad cold. And there was the sound of falling water outside. It was raining.

Randy's right hand bumped against a beer bottle. He looked around and saw bottles scattered all over the kitchen floor. That's when he remembered. Last night was an awful night. Oh, such an awful night. He blinked back tears as it replayed in his mind.

His girlfriend—the lady he meant to marry—he could see her so vividly. He saw that frightened look on her face when he barged through the door. No one had answered the door when he knocked, but he'd heard some busy activity and hushed, anxious voices. He thought she might be in trouble, so he flung the door open and rushed in like a combat soldier expecting a firefight. And that's when he saw those two scared, wide-open eyes. And that's when he saw the man she was with.

A big man, half-naked, hairy chest, with a taunting sneer on his face.

His guts melted with the impact of the fist. It was like swallowing a hot gulp of water, and it took all his breath away. He fell and blacked out, lying there on his back. It took him a few minutes to gain enough strength to barely open his eyes. And then his fiancée dropped her engagement ring onto his chest. "It's over," she said tersely, as she quickly turned her back and walked away.

When he got back home he found the beer in his fridge. And he didn't care. He drank one bottle, then found another. And then another. And he drank and he drank. And when he ran out, he changed from beer to a cocktail. And for the second time that night, he passed out.



Now Randy wished for another drink, but only found empty beer bottles on the floor, scattered around like little bowling pins. And the vodka was finished. And besides, all the ice in the freezer had melted.

The refrigerator was warm and empty, both doors open—its compressor humming persistently away.

He picked himself up and staggered into a chair at the kitchen table. His nose exploded again. *Damned cold!* He wiped his face with the tablecloth. There was a balloon floating around inside his head, slowly inflating. It pushed out against the inside of his skull, and pressed harder and harder.

He held his head in his fingers and rubbed his temples. A hangover with a cold, he thought. What a great combination to go with a broken heart. And a tear erupted from his eye and tumbled down his face at the thought.

It was pouring outside. There was a low rumble of thunder, like God was muttering angrily over the stupidity of humans. A distant flash, then another low rumble. Rain tap-danced on the roof above, and tickled at the windows. Water gurgled off rain gutters and splattered into puddles on the ground below. And a hard cold wind shook his house with hammerblow gusts.

Early dawn—or it should be. His clock showed 6:13, but the storm clouds made it dark as the heart of jealousy outside. Randy massaged his skull some more and pondered over how life would be now, without his fiancée. He could only think of black loneliness.

An unfair loneliness too—for after all, he had been such a good friend to her and had not done anything to deserve this desertion. Why did she treat him so ungratefully? How could one person do this to another? And what had made him fall in love with such an unfaithful girl anyway?

He pondered over love, hard-won and lost, as so many have pondered before. And in the midst of his thoughts there came a vigorous rap on the front door. Could it be? Could she have returned, with sorrow for her betrayal? Two palms on the kitchen table, Randy pushed himself out of the chair. He sneezed and staggered sideways. Then he found the door and opened it.

"Telegram for a Randall Dreenk," the man spoke with a shiver in his voice. Rainwater dripped over the brow of the courier's plastic yellow hat. Randy signed for the telegram then fought back a gust of chilly wind as he closed the door.

Telegram. He had never received a telegram before in his entire life. He opened it and read the contents. It said, "We regret to inform you that your parents, Egan and Elsa Dreenk, died in an airplane accident here last night." It had been sent by some sheriff from a place called Mountain County.

Randy held the paper in his hands for a full minute, staring at the words with disbelief. No no, this must be a joke, he thought desperately. You get a phone call—a police chaplain comes to your door—something like that. You don't ever get this kind of news this way. Do you? Oh no, oh God! he thought. Then he backed into a wall—slid to the floor, slumping forward with hands in his face.

He thought of his parents and the last time he'd seen them. They were waving goodbye inside the cockpit of their Cessna. He had always felt unsure about that plane. He'd always had a premonition that one day they might not complete a flight with it. And now . . . and now it seemed that his premonition had come true.

Lightning flickered close, and thunder immediately followed the flash. It crackled. It roared. And Randy Dreenk's parents were dead.

Randy remained on the floor, unable to gather strength against the force of the blows that had most recently struck him. He remained on the floor and thought of his parents and cried and cried and cried. And there he stayed in a pool of misery for several hours, until the phone rang.

It rang again, and Randy decided that this could be a good sign. Perhaps some sort of mistake had been made and someone was calling him now to correct the problem. Perhaps his parents weren't dead after all. That person on the phone was trying to reach him to let him know. Randy stood up, squelching a sneeze, and found the phone.

"Randy, what the hell are you doing?!!!" his boss's screaming voice invaded his ear. "I told you not to be late anymore. Well, you're damn near an hour late now and you're still sittin' on your ass at *home*! No more excuses Randy! You're fired!!!"

The phone hung up before Randy had a chance to speak.

"You're fired!!!" the words echoed in his ears over and over.

The bastard! Randy thought. Here he was, at the lowest point in his life, and his boss wouldn't even give him a chance to talk! To tell him what had

happened. To speak of his troubles. To allow him to let his emotional misery out and reach out for some consolation. Instead he was fired!

Fired. Just like that. With such quick and efficient dispatch. This job meant so much to him. It meant his career. It meant his life. He had worked and studied so hard just to get where he was at now. And now he had just been fired. His career was all over with the click of a phone.

Randy was shot with rage. He wanted to shout. To scream at someone. But there was no one in the house but him. He began to shake. His lips trembled. His hands opened and closed. His legs loosened, and he fell weakly to his knees.

Nervous breakdowns happen to the friendless. They happen to those who have no one to turn to for reassurance. And at this moment Randy was truly without a friend. His girlfriend had deserted him. His parents were dead. And he had been cut off from his fellow workers at his job place. There was no one in the world left to listen to Randy and reassure him that one day all would be well—that things would surely get better.

But then he remembered his church. Yes, yes, he could go to church. This was a Wednesday, but there was always a priest at church, every day of the week. He could go to church and find a priest to tell his woes to. He could hug a pew and feel the warm heart of God healing his spirit. He could find hope and deliverance from this personal tribulation, within the strengthening walls of church.

Randy felt in his pocket for the keys to his green Porsche. They rattled like metal bones between his fingers. He found the Porsche parked helter-skelter partway up his driveway where he had left it the night before. The driver's side window was halfway down and rain was pouring inside. But Randy didn't care. This was nothing compared to everything else that was happening to him.

He settled into the squishy seat and rolled up a barrier to the driving rain.

Randy wandered through the flooded streets of the city, in search of his church. The windshield was fogging against the rain, matching his current state of mind.

He parked his green Porsche beneath a gray-black foaming sky. Through the thick rain he ran, up to the large wooden doors that gated his sanctuary. He was home. Home at God's place. Now he could find a

friend. Now he could share his troubles with a priest. Now he could receive some consolation and sympathy and healing for all the wounds that had been inflicted upon him.

He grabbed a large, gnarled wood and brass doorknob and twisted. But it didn't twist. Something was wrong. He twisted harder, but still no give. He tried the knob on the other door next to it. It too held fast. That's when it sank in. The doors were locked. Randy had been locked out of his own church. He pulled on the knobs, but the doors didn't budge. He pushed—still no luck.

He pounded on the doors in hopes that a priest would open up from the inside. But no one came to allow entrance. He stayed in the rain, pounding and crying. He slumped against the door, and tears on his face joined the rainwater on the wood. He was hysterical. He could not believe that God would forsake him like this. He felt so alone, and so helpless, and so abandoned.

And that's when his nerves broke down, suddenly caving in under a growing weight of insanity. Like a flash of lightning, Randy saw a mad image fork through his mind, that pointed to what he must do next. He suddenly pushed himself away from the unyielding doors of his church and angrily rushed toward his green Porsche. He pushed the gas pedal like he was squashing a rotten plum, and fishtailed through the watery streets, disappearing into the driving rain.

His enraged mind set mental crosshairs on a gargantuan target. And when he saw it with his eyes he skidded to a violent stop in the middle of the street. It stared down at him, its windows hundreds of horrified eyes, wondering what this madman planned to do.

It was the office building where he worked. A monolithic gray skyscraper, scraping the even grayer sky.

Randy rushed the building, bursting through the front doors. The guard recognized him and waved him through without a challenge. But if the guard would have taken seriously the fiery look on Randy's wild face, he might have prevented a tragedy.

Randy found the elevator and pushed the button for the top floor. His former workplace was on a middle floor, but that's not where Randy desired to go. Randy wanted to rise to the top. To go above. To go high, where there is no going any higher. But where there is always a way down.

To the top of the skyscraper the elevator pushed him. To the top, where wet steel met rainy sky. And that's where he got out. A swimming pool swirled like a miniature sea in a hurricane. Executives used this pool on sunny days, to lounge away their lunch hour. But no executives could be found up there on a day like this. Just an insane figure hurrying beneath a weeping black cloud.

Randy quickly strode to a railing at the edge of the building and leaned over. There were people far below, scurrying through the rain on a narrow-banded cement sidewalk. They looked like ants to him, but he mused that soon they would be giants. And his car, his tiny green Porsche. That must be it, so distant and so small, parked in the middle of the street.

It looked to him like someone down there in a uniform—perhaps a meter maid—was giving it a parking ticket.

A parking ticket?! That heartless bitch! This stone-hearted city!! After all he was going through, couldn't someone have some sympathy for him?! Couldn't someone give him just one damned break?! Christ! His parents were dead, his girlfriend gone, his job was lost, and the only response from this unfeeling world was yet another kick in the ribs?! A goddamned parking ticket?!!

It was the last insult! He would show this thoughtless world—this cold, unresponsive Earth—just how awful it really was. He would give it a sight of poetic justice. And he would do it with his green Porsche.

He was completely carried off by his insane plan. The real Randy was gone and had no idea what was happening. But the insane Randy was right there calling the shots—and he knew exactly what to shoot next.

He cackled to himself while he positioned his body, so that the Porsche was directly in front of him. Then he climbed up onto the rail and stood straight up, balls of feet on the railing, toes of patent leather shoes dangling over the void.

Suddenly he heard a shout behind him. He turned his head and saw a security guard. The man was half-running toward Randy through the rain, telling him not to do it. Telling him that it wasn't worth it.

Wasn't worth it, Randy mused in his madness. And so much did the security guard know! Ha!! For this was a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to teach the world a powerful lesson. A lesson that the meter maid would bear to all. *This was definitely* worth it.

He turned his head back and gazed down with gunsight eyes. He focused with determination on the roof of his green Porsche. He bent his knees, sucked in his breath, then leapt with all his mad strength—forward through the air.

While his body missiled forward through space, rain pelted him from above. But after his body arced downward, and gravity sucked it toward the Earth faster and faster, he became one with the raindrops.

He kept his eyes fixed upon the green Porsche directly below. That was his target. He would show that meter maid a thing or two this day. And he would show the rest of the world, too. He would teach this world to treat people better. To be more understanding. To realize that some people have serious problems going on in their lives and need to be sympathized with, not persecuted.

He was a blurry bomb from above, descending downward in the rain, only just now being caught in the eye-corners of a few pedestrians.

Randy was halfway to his target, then three-quarters, then barely a hundred feet. And then . . . whiteout.

He suddenly entered a thick white fog. And he continued to fall, tumbling blindly, and groping around for his bearings. He could not see what he was falling into, and that enraged him, because he felt his aim had been upset.

Then the white fog grew gray, and the grayness grew dimmer and dimmer, until it was completely black. Randy felt a punch of pain in his midsection and he doubled over.

And then he wasn't falling anymore. He was lying on his back, holding his stomach, and writhing around on the floor. He opened his eyes and saw his girlfriend kneeling over him. She was crying. "Oh Randy, oh Randy, I'm so sorry Randy."

Randy stared up at her and tried to speak her name, but he had no breath. His girlfriend cradled his head in her arms and kissed him liberally, all over his face. Her tears bathed his cheeks, and he tasted their salt on his lips.

The half-naked man walked into his view and pulled a teeshirt over his chest. He snarled, "Well, if you feel *that* way about him, you can have him, bitch!" And he strode away. Randy heard a door slam a moment later.

"Randy I'm so sorry," she sniffled. "I'll never do this to you again, I promise."

Randy was finally able to suck in a deep breath, and had enough air in his lungs to speak. He whispered, "I love you."

"I love you, too, Randy!" she said. Then she embraced his open mouth with hers, and kissed him long and passionately.

And at that moment Randy emerged from the other end of the white fog. His fantasy ended instantly as his body slammed into a rain puddle, one foot away from his green Porsche parked so illegally in the middle of the street.

## *Endnote*

The comment my creative writing teacher wrote at the top of this story, read in full, "Most certainly was not Randy's day. Too many tragedies. Not sure if you were trying to be funny, but if you were, the humor didn't come across. B-"

## *ABOUT THE AUTHOR, TIPPY GNU*

The best education is a self-education. But formal education can be useful too, now and then. Like when you want to convince someone that you're smarter than you really are. To that end, I hold a baccalaureate from Regents College (now Excelsior College), University of the State of New York, where I majored in Psychology and Sociology.

I received my degree in 1998. But instead of going on to graduate school and becoming a psychologist, I continued my career as a letter carrier and union steward. The pay was better.

I applied my knowledge of psychology toward protecting myself and others from abusive postal managers. It didn't help much. Not without some good old-fashioned street fighting, to go along with it. As a union steward, I gouged eyes and kicked balls when I had to, but used diplomacy whenever I could. And this kept those cocksuckers barely at bay, like circling sharks, until such time as I was able to retire.

I'm now enjoying a peaceful, low-stress retirement, and all those postal managers can suck my dick.

I'm married to a dog-lover, and she is married to her dogs. We sleep in separate beds and bedrooms, because of the dogs. But somehow we can't stop loving each other. Same-bed sleeping is overrated. I think it's the cause of many divorces.

I've spent more than half my life braving the elements of the Mojave Desert. I've been chased by rapacious roadrunners, gored by a horny toad, and single-handedly fended off a pride of hungry ant lions. I wage constant battles keeping coon-tailed rattlers from raiding my trash cans. I



chum for chuckwallas during flash-flood season, and sustain myself through droughts by chewing the fruit of the prickly pear, and spitting out the thorns.

I find the time to write whenever nature leaves me alone.

I've been writing since my high school days, when I attended a creative writing class. Day after day, assignment after assignment, I tortured my creative writing teacher with nonsensical short stories that deviated far from the assignments' guidelines. I figured, you can't be creative if you stay within a box.

She didn't figure it that way though, and always docked my grades. Even after she kind of indirectly and grudgingly told me I had a talent for writing. Or maybe I imagined she said that. But it didn't matter. You see, talent won't get you good grades. Doing as you're told, and acting normal, is what it takes to win recognition from authorities.

But talent or no, I continued to write. At one time I wrote for fun and profit. But when I found that, like good grades, there wasn't much profit, I decided to just write for fun. It's simpler that way, and it frustrates the IRS. And that's why this book is free.

You can read other ex gratia scribblings of mine at my blog, [www.unicorniks.com](http://www.unicorniks.com).

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