

# The Sacred Cow

May 2016





# The Sacred Cow

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## FICTION

- 10 **Gone**  
*By John Grindstaff*
- 13 **Before and After**  
*By Charissa Rabenstein*
- 18 **Obituary of Marvin J. Furskin**  
*By Chuck Kramer*
- 19 **Virginia: A Tale of a Virtuous Vegetarian**  
*By Gershon Ben-Avraham*
- 20 **The Knowledge of the Queen, Chapter Two**  
*By Juan Ersatzman*
- 28 **Gunpowder Trails, chapters Two to Five**  
*By Andrew Sharp*

## NONFICTION

- 5 **A History of Repeated Injuries and Usurpations**  
*By Traci Foust*

## NONFICTION

- 8 **Three Worthwhile Space Films You Probably Haven't Seen**  
*By Ben Herr*
- 14 **Penny and Tom**  
*By Terry Barr*
- 18 **The Pulse**  
*By Justin Charles*

## POETRY

- 7 **Applebee's Hotel Bar, Boca Raton, Florida**  
*By Michelle Brooks*
- 11 **Procurement**  
*By Elise Malecki*
- 12 **Like Father, Like Son**  
*By Beth Boylan*
- 15 **Giving Up for Lent**  
*By Kirk Weixel*

## POETRY

- 16 **Where Credit Is Due**  
*By Jada Yee*
- 17 **I Captured the World in Mason Jars While Drinking From Scooby Doo Jelly Jars**  
*By C.Z. Heyward*
- 19 **The Exposed Nest**  
*By Robert Frost*
- 22 **West of Harlingen**  
*By Clyde Kessler*
- 23 **Minding the Gap**  
*By Aidan Chafe*
- 25 **Havana, 1957**  
*By Carl Boon*
- 27 **Death of Their Child: August 7, 1958**  
*By Eliza Callard*

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### May 2016

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**Terry Barr** (“Penny and Tom,” page 14) is an essayist and teaches creative nonfiction at Presbyterian College. He lives in Greenville, South Carolina, with his family. His essay collection, “Don’t Date Baptists: and Other Warnings From My Alabama Mother,” is available on Amazon.

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**Carl Boon** (“Havana, 1957,” page 25) lives and works in Istanbul, Turkey. Recent or forthcoming poems appear in Neat, Jet Fuel Review, Blast Furnace, Kentucky Review, and many other magazines.

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**Michelle Brooks** (“Applebee’s Hotel Bar, Boca Raton, Florida,” page 7) has published a collection of poetry, “Make Yourself Small,” (Backwaters Press), and a novella, “Dead Girl, Live Boy,” (Storylandia Press). A native Texan, she has spent much of her adult life in Detroit, her favorite city.

**Eliza Callard** (“Death of Their Child: August 7, 1958,” page 27) was born, raised, and now lives in Philadelphia with her family. Forty years of managing — and occasionally mismanaging — her cystic fibrosis have given her perspective on loss and endurance. A product of Skidmore College, she enjoys family time, hiking and camping, and playing the piano.

**Aidan Chafe** (“Minding the Gap,” page 23) writes poetry to experiment with perspective and to savor the beauty of language. His writing has appeared in “CV2” magazine. He lives in Vancouver, British Columbia.

**Justin Charles** (“The Pulse,” page 18) describes himself as a peripatetic Canadamerican. He attends Rosedale Bible College in central Ohio, where he lives with his wife Diana and three children. He’s an Edmonton Oilers fan, word junkie and peruser of books.

**Juan Ersatzman** (“The Knowledge of the Queen, Chapter Two,” page 20) grew up in the green heart of the United States, but was born on the far side of the border. Always a bit of an outsider on the inside, he started writing terrible fiction at age ten. He takes his name seriously, and strives to embody all that it means.

**Traci Foust** (“A History of Repeated Injuries and Usurpations,” page 5), is a writer whose first memoir, “Nowhere Near Normal,” was published by Simon and Schuster in 2011 and was featured in Marie Claire magazine, NPR and MSNBC Today. She is a memoir instructor for the workshop series Hardcore Memoir. Her second memoir, “Love and Xanax,” will be released by Summertime Publications (Summer 2016). A form of the essay printed here will appear in her forthcoming third memoir, “American Bitch.”

**Robert Frost** (“The Exposed Nest,” page 19) is originally from San Francisco, and now resides in Old Bennington, Vermont. He is the author of numerous books of poetry and has enjoyed some critical acclaim.

**John Grindstaff** (“Gone,” page 10) is a self-described hermit writer who lives in Jonesborough, the oldest town in Tennessee. He’s an avid reader, a hiker and likes to camp as much as he can.

**C.Z. Heyward** (“I Captured the World in Mason Jars While Drinking From Scooby Doo Jelly Jars,” page 17) is a native of Harlem, New York, who cherishes his summers spent on the coastal isles of Charleston, South Carolina. His work has appeared in a variety of print and online journals. He has also presented his work at the Nuyorican Cafe in New York City, and the Art Links Festival in Athens, Greece.

**Ben Herr** (“Three Worthwhile Space Films You Probably Haven’t Seen,” page 8) lives in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, where he works as a dorm adviser for international high school students. He writes short stories, humor and opinion pieces about whatever current ideas and projects interest him.

**Clyde Kessler** (“West of Harlingen,” page 22) lives in Radford, Virginia, with his wife, Kendall, and their son, Alan. They have an art studio in their home called Towhee Hill.

**Chuck Kramer** (“Obituary of Marvin J. Furskin,” page 18) taught reading and writing in Chicago’s public schools for thirty years. He has also worked as an advertising copywriter, a public relations writer, and the theater critic for the Oak Leaves newspaper. He currently co-hosts the Weeds Poetry Open Mic in Chicago every Monday night and freelances as a photographer and reporter for Windy City Media.

**Elise Malecki** (“Procurement,” page 11) is a gastroenterologist in upstate New York who enjoys removing polyps from colons and writing confessional poetry.

**Charissa Rabenstein** (“Before and After,” page 13) lives in West Liberty, Ohio, with her husband, Bill. Her work days are spent at Marie’s Candies, and her leisure time involves books and baking. When she has a writable thought and takes the time to jot it down, she sometimes ends up with a bit of poetry.

**Andrew Sharp** (“Gunpowder Trails,” starting on page 28) is a journalist who works for a small-town newspaper on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He lives in Harrington, Delaware, with his wife and two sons.

**Kirk Weixel** (“Giving Up for Lent,” page 15) is an English professor emeritus at Saint Francis University, Loretto, Pa., where he continues to teach courses in literature and creative writing. He and his wife, Mary Jeanne, a former reference librarian, have three children.

**Jada Yee** (“Where Credit is Due,” page 16) says if she hadn’t been introduced to free verse poetry in high school, her voice might still be the quietest whisper. More of her work can be found in “Vine Leaves Literary Journal,” “Mad Swirl,” “Crack the Spine,” “The Write Place at the Write Time,” and others.

# Mail

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**Dear Cow,**

I love your magazine, and I wanted to let you know how much I'm looking forward to your political coverage as we enter the full election season this fall. As you know, this election is crucial to the future of the American republic, and so I am eagerly awaiting to hear from your editors as they provide some sane perspective on what has become a truly insane election dialogue. I am especially eager to hear your nuanced take on the Trump phenomenon and its implications. It will be very interesting to see you navigate the potential pitfalls in this divisive subject.

**Bob Fleischman**  
Poughkeepsie, N.Y.

*Bob,*  
*Uh ... of course. We certainly would never back down from a challenge like that.*

**Dear Sacred Cow,**

I've noticed that the people who write letters to your magazine have strange names and often come from towns nobody has ever heard of. Is it possible that you are not appropriately vetting your letter writers to make sure they are real people?

**Wilberforce Eggspuehler**  
Burgdorf, Idaho

*Wilberforce,*  
*We have no explanation for this phenomenon.*

**Dear Cow,**

I'm a young writer and hope to someday write fine works of literature. Do you have any advice?

**Elizabeth Mitchell**  
Swenson, Texas

*Elizabeth,*  
*Indeed we do. Avoid at all costs cheap tricks like fascinating plots, actions scenes, or happy endings, which will automatically degrade your work to bestseller "pop" status, thus erasing any literary credibility.*

**Dear Cow,**

I am impressed that you are able to stay in business in these tough times for the publishing industry. It seems like every week we hear of another newspaper or magazine going bankrupt. What is your secret?

**Mary Ann Monahan,**  
Plumstead Township, New Jersey

*Mary Ann,*  
*While we can't divulge our secret formula, we can tell you that it involves adjusting the amount we pay our writers and editors based on our income. We are happy to report that our profits have remained steady since our founding.*

# From the editors

We are glad you are reading this PDF edition of the May 2016 Sacred Cow, which you will notice has many features not available in our Web edition, such as this editorial, page numbers, Gill Sans font and a table of contents.

If you are looking for a theme that ties the pieces together, you'll notice it jumps around a little. The articles and stories cover such ideas as formative childhood experiences, despair, space films you may not have seen, and the harvesting of donated organs. And that's just the first four pieces.

If you pay close attention, you'll see the logical thread that ties all these pieces together, which is that either authors sent us the work or we solicited it. So the common thread is our email account.

Our authors in this issue are a widespread and diverse bunch. One of the delights of the digital age is the ease of sharing information at a long distance, and you'll see that reflected in these pages, with pieces from people in the U.S., Canada, Turkey, Israel and Detroit. They also vary in experience, from authors with many publishing credits after their names to those with just a few.

One poet in this issue with quite a few publishing credits to his name is Robert Frost. We were able to get work from him on account of he is dead and has very few copyrights anymore.

As time goes by, you will see our poetry getting even better. Hang on long enough, and we'll have Maya Angelou for you.

So ignore the sunny spring weather outside, take your laptop to a comfy chair, and enjoy the stories and poems in this issue. And, if you would, share it with your friends before you go back outside.

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# A History of Repeated Injuries and Usurpations

WHY THE FATHER OF A WRITER HATES WHAT SHE DOES FOR A LIVING

By TRACY FOUST

**T**he American son has no idea he will grow up to hate books, and be a maker of them. Right now he is thirteen. He needs to write a poem. He loves a girl named Sylvia.

Work and work and please no talking and work and shush Papa's resting his eyes. This is what his house of grown-ups is made from.

This has nothing to do with the poem the son needs to write.

The German parts of him have not yet developed fully. There is no functional purpose of quiet endurance. A boy in love does not know how to turn off his noises. He does not care if Papa needs to rest his eyes.

For now, the American son is his Sicilian mother. He is hot white skies and olive trees. He is a goat on a steep mountain side. He is tender and strong-willed and romantic and cunning and pretty. Girly pretty. His eyes are the color of Terra Cotta churches and bullets.

He knows he is skinny and small for his age, so he laughs the loudest, jokes the funniest. He has never called a woman a broad. He picks fights because he is wiry and quick and can run like hell from anyone who is not his German father.

When the son grows up and has a family of his own, when the work and the work and the work comes, and the children who make sure Papa never gets to rest his eyes, it



is then he will learn the strength of his muscles. He will make sure everyone around him learns it too.

The girls at school like his thick wavy hair. Some of them are jealous of his eyelashes. They like his full lips and that

he smiles when all the other boys are trying to be greaser tough. They like that on Valentine's Day he makes his own cards out of construction paper and sketches the faces of the girls he gives them to. The girls he draws have flowers in their hair. He writes: Love Theodore. All the other boys write: From ...

This is a special Valentine's Day. Special because Sylvia Banchemo is the only one. She has long black hair and over the summer she shaved her legs and her boobs rose up firm and round like the Jell-O molds his mother makes on Sundays. She spent her vacation in New York. When she came back to California her lips were red. They make words the American son does not understand.

He is a hyper child. His mind is getting to that age where he can no longer say what he feels. So he says everything. He talks and talks. When he plays baseball in the field behind the Texaco he runs the bases just to run and gets sent home with the words "drip" and "showoff" flying over his middle finger.

People have always told him to sit still. People have always told him to shut up.

Lately he has been thinking.

In his Sicilian and German house of plastic furniture

*Next page*

## Usurpations continued

covering, of garlic and pipe tobacco walls, there is only a small shelf for books. Encyclopedias. He is not allowed to “fool around with them” because his sisters need those books for their school work. The sisters are smart and effortless. They have library cards and read movie magazines and when the son was caught with his father’s National Geographic under his mattress they made him hide in their bedroom closet until the German father stopped banging on the door and promised to cool his jets already.

The son doesn’t care about the encyclopedias anymore. He needs a special book for his poem to Sylvia. He wants to say long black hair in a different way. A way that will make everything about him different. Like that English fancy pants who wore knee socks and wrote the plays his sisters recite when aunts and uncles stop by for cannoli and cappuccino. He knows the book he needs is better than a dictionary, but he has forgotten what it is called.

He will not ask his sisters: They are studying in their room and listening to Frank Sinatra. They will know he is in love. He will be tickled until he wets his pants.

He will not ask his mother: She is standing in front of their open icebox writing down all the things that disappear faster than the money can keep them.

What then? He has been banned from taking school library books home because he never returns them. Twice he was almost caught reading Jack London on the front porch. In the middle of the day. He was finishing one of those paragraphs that can float a young boy all the way up to a world beyond his stupid boy thoughts. It was then he saw his father’s television repair van rounding the corner. Both times he threw his book into the bushes before the German father could catch him, before he could tell the son to pull his head out of his ass, remind him that reading was for people on vacation.

When everyone in the little white house on Army Street was asleep the son snuck outside in the rain and pushed those books way down deep into the neighbor’s trash can.

Dumb waste of time. Same as the encyclopedias.

Yesterday he found out he can get that book with all those New York words at Woolworth’s. He saw it there when he and Travis Malone went to buy shoe polish and a Charleston Chew to split between them. Travis Malone was nose deep in Hot Rod while the American son flipped the pages of the book, inhaling all those guarantees.

There was exquisite and comely and ardor and fervency.

He knows now the book is called a thesaurus.

He has already decided implore.

On the walk home the son practiced the pronunciation of the book. He will tell his father he needs it for school and not because it’s the book that will make Sylvia Banchemo love him in a grown-up way: tha-saw-us. the-sore-us. Travis Malone kept saying, “What? Huh? Is that a dinosaur?” The American son laughed and hooted and hollered even though the sticker on the book, the one that said \$3.25, made his throat tight and his hands sweaty.

He is trying to feel thirteen. He knows getting Sylvia Banchemo to see things other than his girl eyelashes will take a different kind of trying. He does not want to be like his stupid friends forever. Like Jimmy Camacho who says, “Oh yeah, baby. I got what you need right here baby,” to pretty much anyone in a skirt who passes him in the hall. He does not want to be Fat Manny who’s too old to wear a Davy Crockett hat but does anyway and says “Huh? Huh? What’sit now?” a million times a day and probably needs a hearing aid. He does not want to be his German father who can fix wires and antennas and glass tubes and calls him a sissy when he covers his face because all the things the father knows have blue fire and a hiss to them and makes the son think of dragons and makes him get the hell out of the garage if he’s just going to stand there like a fraidy cat, goddamn it.

Three dollars and twenty-five cents will buy those words. Sylvia Banchemo will have no choice but to understand the son is on his way to being everything in that book.

Implore.

The German father has been quiet on the matter for two days now, but tonight he will speak. He has prepared a list for his son. The list will show the son all the things he can buy for the entire family for the price of some silly book of words he doesn’t even understand. The list will show the son all the extra jobs he can do, and in two short weeks,

the son can save enough for that silly book of words he doesn’t even understand.

Valentine’s Day is next Friday. Sylvia Banchemo is not the kind of girl who will wait to be loved.

For the American son the answer is not no. He is good at calling up the spirits that hover over his mother’s head when she is angry or praying, or wearing her bright red dress to church even though the German father tells her not to. These are the taking parts that will remain in the son for the rest of his life. Men with dark, dirty faces whisper to him in machine gun accents. They tell him rules are helpful, sure Buddy, but are meant for other people.

When he gets caught, the voices have nothing to say.

The book belonged to him for as long as it took to almost walk out of the store. His timing was off, his fast wasn’t fast enough. Not for the giant mirrors that hang in high corners. Not for the stock boy with the acne on his neck who knows an opportunity for advancement when he sees one.

The American son is sitting in the manager’s office waiting for his father. He is lying and lying and lying. He wipes his eyes and nose with his sleeve. A woman with fat arms and a cameo necklace gives him a gold paisley handkerchief.

The German father is not an apology father. But here he says how sorry he is that his son has disrespected their entire family. “Faithful customers for eighteen years.” The German father gives the manager a fix-it coupon and tells him to come into his shop. “Bring a friend if you’d like.” The German father can fix anything.

There is no way for the son to pretend he doesn’t exist when Sylvia Banchemo walks into the store with her mother. Because he is a sharp kid he thinks, bee sting. He’ll tell her at school tomorrow he got stung on the cheek and that’s why he was red and puffy. He will tell her his tears weren’t the crying kind. For the rip on his collar he will need another story.

The book with the ugly, disgusting, stupid waste of time, not needed anymore words stays on the manager’s desk.

This is how you build a boy who learns how to lie. This is how you make a man who knows the importance of pretending he does not care. His children will grow up to be liars too.

## Usurpations continued

Good ones. Liars and coveters and takers. His sons will steel their muscles over bed posts and learn to throw their spirit at the crack of a belt. His daughters will spend their lives rearranging themselves into the words the father will never understand.

One day the American son will take his youngest daughter to the printing press where he works. He will show her how he makes books. He will open the door to where his complicated six color press waits for him every morning. "I'm the only one that can use this baby," he will say. "The only one that knows how." He will knock his knuckles against metal knobs and slicer blades the size of a man's arm. The sound will make the daughter remember the things she is trying to forget. "Look at all these," he will say as he runs his papercut finger over the spines of what he has made. When the daughter reaches up to grab a book he will slap her hand away. Hard. She will suck at the red mark on her wrist when the father tells his daughter those books are not for her.

This is how you make girls who hit back.



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## Applebee's Hotel Bar: Boca Raton, Florida

By MICHELLE BROOKS

A man walks into a bar.  
He tells me this isn't a joke,  
that he wants to obliterate  
the past week. The week no  
longer exists except in himself  
so that's where he begins. He  
forgoes the chicken quesadillas  
for shot after shot of Jim Beam.  
He means business. I don't know  
what went wrong, and before  
long, neither does he. He's not  
from here. None of us are. This  
is the river from which we drink  
and wonder how we can sing  
the songs of Zion in a foreign  
land. People call this place God's  
waiting room, but isn't everywhere?



# Three Worthwhile Space Movies

## You Probably Haven't Seen

By BEN HERR

### No. 3: Sunshine (2007)

*Rated: R*

*Director: Danny Boyle*

*Starring: Cillian Murphy, Michelle Yeoh, Hiroyuki Sanada, Rose Byrne, Chris Evans*

#### What it's about

The sun is dying, and the spaceship Icarus II is the only chance humanity has of reigniting our star and saving planet Earth from becoming uninhabitable. "Sunshine" joins the crew, already en route, as they deal with the stress of such a long voyage, attempt to solve an increasing number of problems the mission faces, weigh their moral responsibilities as our planet's last hope and try, at any cost, to keep the mission moving forward.

#### Why it's worth it

When a film sets such high stakes, I've come to expect to be underwhelmed by the result. However, "Sunshine" handles the stakes perfectly, focusing on characters early on while the mission is still going fairly smoothly. By establishing their concerns, problems, hopes and personalities first, the audience is more likely to get sucked in based on the crew, not just the enormous stakes. Then, when more and more goes wrong and the decisions faced have less clear answers, the audience is still attached to the fate of the crew. Because of this, the stakes feel real and experienceable, unlike a lot of disaster movies which focus primarily on the widespread catastrophe. The mission to save earth factors more into the themes of the film than its dramatic tension, serving up ethical and philosophical issues for the crew to wrestle with.

Additionally, the visuals and sounds of "Sunshine" distinguish it from other space travel movies. Minimalistic score and sounds (apart from a few spectacular pieces of music) create a vastness to the shots of space, and the sun is shown as a thing of incredi-

ble beauty as well as immense power for destruction. The sun is more than the destination, it is a constant danger to the mission, factoring into the plot, and its depiction captures both the sense of awe that it inspires and its immense danger.

#### Other thoughts

For the first two-thirds of "Sunshine," it is easily one of my top three favorite space films. The final act, however, serves up a plot twist that turns a beautiful, visionary, philosophical film into almost a horror flick, filmed like the slasher genre. The transition is so sudden and such a jolting derailing of everything that had been building up beforehand, that the negative effect it has on the film as a whole can be difficult for the viewer to move past. Therefore, the biggest benefit of this review is that if someone watches "Sunshine" expecting one of the worst climaxes in recent memory, then it will not have such a jolting, crushing impact on all of the great things about the film. And rest assured, the final five to ten minutes rights the course and concludes the story in a way that is at least fleetingly on par with the great ending "Sunshine" deserved.

### No 2: Contact (1997)

*Rated: PG*

*Director: Robert Zemeckis*

*Starring: Jodie Foster, Matthew McConaughey, William Fichtner*

#### What it's about

Dr. Ellie Arroway's lifetime of passion for what lies beyond our own skies has led her on a hopeful search for alien life. When her scanners finally pick up a cryptic radio signal from an unknown source, her formerly scoffed at body of work receives the international spotlight. Just when her life's efforts are about to yield rewards, however, Ellie's systems

*Next page*



## Movies continued

and their use become controlled and hindered by government, public and even religious opposition. After the message is decrypted and appears to contain plans for a spaceship designed to carry one human, the media frenzy goes completely off the rails and Ellie's struggle to maintain a role in her own project becomes a battle.

### Why it's worth it

"Contact" holds the distinction of being an alien contact movie that focuses on earth and on humans. It doesn't look at what the discovery of another species could mean for space travel or intergalactic relations but examines how we humans would respond. Fear and borderline hysteria sweep across the public, religious extremists take it upon themselves to try to stop the "ungodly" efforts to reach out to the possible aliens, military leaders in the government want to shut down the whole operation due to the potential risk of attack, and all of these decisions are placed in the hands of those in power, not those who are actually educated on the matters. The efforts from different groups to obtain control of the situation result in a chaotic, yet totally believable, political standoff.

The main theme of "Contact" also makes it unique as it devotes a lot of time to the discussion of science, religion, and their places within the other. In many instances, these conversations feel like clunky efforts to cover all the bases, which only scrape the surface of deep theological issues and scientific perspectives (most hilariously when two characters raise broad new points, have the conversation interrupted, and never revisit the topic). By the end, however, "Contact" presents a fairly balanced view of each perspective (though the exclusion of a single line would have left things perfectly balanced and made for a better film) and resolves science and religion as not mutually exclusive, a refreshing change from most equivalent films that masquerade as fair and balanced before trying to bludgeon the opposing side with the conclusion.

For a bonus plug, famous astrophysicist Neil deGrasse Tyson has named "Contact" as the science fiction film that was most impactful to him, so fans of his may want to check it out.

## Other thoughts

Before sitting down to view "Contact," keep in mind that it is a two and a half hour, slow moving film that is, at times, a disorganized mess. It's a great example of a film that would have been much better had it tried to do much less, as several subplots pull the emergency brake on momentum and challenge our suspension of disbelief. If the previous paragraphs seemed fascinating, it is still worth a watch, but will probably lose the attention of those only casually interested.

### No. 1: Moon (2009)

*Rated: R*

*Director: Duncan Jones*

*Starring: Sam Rockwell, Kevin Spacey (voice)*

### What it's about

Lunar Industries has become Earth's No. 1 power supplier by harvesting the sun's energy from the surface of the moon. Their efficient robotic systems only need a single human to make repairs and operate each station, keeping costs to a minimum. Sam Bell (Sam Rockwell) is nearing the end of a three-year contract and is anticipating the end of his solitary employment and reunion with his wife and child. With just two weeks to go, however, a string of incidents has Sam wondering if he can make it to the end of his term, and questioning whether he's already lost his sanity.

### Why it's worth it


"Moon" delivers a down-to-earth, smart science fiction thriller that doesn't rely on a big budget, action, or elaborate and imaginative settings. The colors are bleak but beautiful and the sets are simple yet engaging. The film's success hinges on Sam Rockwell's performance as the only person on screen (for most of the movie), and he entertains the audience and makes them care. Almost everything that the bloated, flashy, big budget sci-fi flicks that fail every summer do wrong, "Moon" does right.

With much of the film being "one guy in one place," "Moon" could have been a dull, plodding story. Instead, it

creates a captivating aura with unique visuals, striking music, and a masterful revealing of the plot. The story of Sam living alone and discovering, little by little, how much more there is to his world becomes captivating and offers plenty of twists and turns without getting too far fetched.

It might not be possible to discuss what makes "Moon" interesting in a spoiler-free format, but don't just take my word for it. "Moon" can be found on lists of underrated science fiction films all over the place, and is a must-see for fans of the genre.

## Other thoughts

The big disappointment accompanying "Moon" is that the 2013 film "Oblivion" shares certain key plot points (by coincidence). With Tom Cruise and Morgan Freeman headlining the picture, and a much bigger marketing campaign, it gained wider exposure and more viewership. Thus, a lot of people (like me) who saw "Oblivion" first will feel like it spoiled "Moon's" plot twists, making it more predictable and diminishing its impact. Still, both films are unique enough that they can be appreciated separately. 



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Fiction

## gone

By JOHN GRINDSTAFF



Warm and cozy as a creaky old man can be under the thick blanket, Hoover doesn't feel like crawling out of the big comfortable bed he bought for his wife even though he knew the furniture store overpriced the thing and called it a bargain. Geraldine wanted the bed and he couldn't argue with her. He wasn't afraid of losing the argument. He couldn't stand the thought of winning on logic and denying her something she wanted and deserved to have. He rolls from his stiff back onto his aching hip. Might have to pee. Sometimes his plumbing's iffy. He takes his eyeglasses from the nightstand and nearly pokes himself in the eye with the end of the earpiece trying to put them on. He groans as he slips his feet into waiting house shoes then limps one small step at a time to the half bath off the bedroom.

After he pees a weak stream that takes longer than it should, Hoover shuffles to the sink and runs the water until it's warm. He washes his hands then dries them on the pink towel hanging next to the sink, frowning at the old man with wild, messed up white hair in the mirrored sliding doors of the medicine cabinet, scrubbing a hand over white stubble on his cheeks. Looks like he hasn't shaved in a couple of days. Strange. He has shaved every morning of his life for longer than he can remember. Until now.

Geraldine tried to talk to him about something important last night after they went to bed but he was exhausted and fell asleep. She's usually up by this time, the smell of breakfast and coffee wafting through the house, but he doesn't smell anything. He is a little congested. A cup of strong hot coffee would do an old man good. He takes his robe from the hook on the back of the bathroom door, wincing as he slips each arm into a sleeve, and ties it in front. There's room left inside for another one of him. Geraldine should be happy about that. She's been on him to lose some weight, afraid for his ticker.

Crumpled sheets on his side of the bed tell the tale of tossing and turning in his sleep. He does that when his joints hurt worse than usual. Geraldine's side of the bed looks like she didn't sleep there long or maybe not at all. She must've been up all night with one of those stomachaches again. She worries herself sick about everything and nothing. Worries about their daughter even though Judy's a grown woman with a husband and she works in the family business, doing a fine job, healthy as can be. Geraldine worries about people.

Next page



## Procurement

By ELISE MALECKI

We board the van, coolers in hand  
to perform our modern ritual,  
no mention of the soul.

Hers was troubled.  
She took pills intending never to wake up.  
We meet her in the OR.

She has padding for her pressure points,  
tape for her eyelids,  
supplied out of habit, I guess.

The anesthesiologist keeps the vitals stable;  
the cardiac surgeon secures the vessels and liberates the heart.  
They both bid us good evening.

We continue with the harvest:  
liver, kidneys, no pancreas today.  
I silently thank her and close the wound.

Our patients are waiting.

## Gone continued

She can't help it. When she's not worrying about her family, it's something she heard on the news or neighborhood gossip about who done who wrong. She's spent too many sleepless nights in her lifetime.

He does that zombie-like stiff limp shuffle walk down the short hall, but the pain in his joints is nothing he can't handle. It's all part of the morning routine these days. He steps into the living room. One of those mystery books Geraldine likes lies face down on the table next to her chair. Reading glasses lying on top of the book. Sky blue shawl folded across the arm of the chair. She was probably reading all night, trying to ignore the pain in her stomach. They should hear from the doctor soon to find out what he found. Hoover hopes they can do something to make her feel better. He told her for years she was going to worry herself into a stomach ulcer.

He zombie walks on into the kitchen. The room's cold and feels empty without Geraldine performing her cook's ballet. His favorite coffee mug sits on the counter next to the coffeemaker where he must've left it yesterday morning. If Geraldine weren't feeling awful, she would've washed the cup and hung it in its place on the hooks above the coffeemaker where the rest of the mugs hang. There's no coffee made. Geraldine always makes a pot of strong black coffee first thing in the morning. Even when she feels bad.

Hoover looks in Judy's old room, now Geraldine's craft room. Everything's dusty, as if she hasn't been in there for a long time. He pokes his head into their bedroom. It doesn't look like she slept in bed last night but he remembers his wife lying next to him. The gaunt, scared expression on her tired, beau-

tiful face terrified him. A cold wave breaks through his body. He shivers. She doesn't go anywhere without letting him know where she's going and kissing him goodbye. Maybe she went outside to read on the porch swing. She doesn't do that as often as she once did. Warm sunlight streams through the sheers over the big window in the living room. It looks like a beautiful day outside.

He opens the front door and steps out onto the porch. The empty white swing hangs motionless. The sweet smell of mown grass tickles his nose. He doesn't recall mowing yesterday but the lawn's fresh cut. He hurries inside, forcing down the odd urge to cry, and closes the door behind him. There's something scratching at the back of his mind he should remember. Something that would explain his missing wife.

Panic quickened strides wobble his heart in his chest and numb his head as he walks through the house faster than he thought he could, struggling to breathe air into his tight, burning lungs. He holds onto the back of a chair at the kitchen table as the room spins for a few seconds, slows, then stops, leaving him lightheaded and trembling. Geraldine might've gone to the grocery store without him, thinking he needed the extra sleep. They usually make the list together and he doesn't recall doing that. He doesn't remember mowing the yard either, which he obviously did.

She goes to the grocery store every Saturday morning unless a big snow traps them at home. She has done the grocery shopping on Saturday mornings since they were first married. Hoover checks the digital clock on the counter. The fancy thing has the date on it because apparently it's too hard to look at a calendar on the wall for most people nowadays. It's Thursday. So she's not at the store. She wouldn't leave without telling him.

Geraldine's gone.

*Next page*

## Like Father, Like Son

By BETH BOYLAN

Each Sunday they come at noon,  
all four of them in a sharp line  
marching up the stairs to my front door like soldiers —  
clock hands, wound up and forced forward.

In the kitchen, she unearths the sandwiches from their containers  
and sighs, digs out pickles from the fridge,  
while the two little ones float to the corner, attached to their books and whispers.  
Over lunch, they sneak each other smiles as I bend back the foil lid that seals the cake.

He and I resume position in matching worn-down chairs  
and speak as though we are familiar,  
circling the weather, the Church, the Times,  
as though we have new things to say since last week.

I drift  
on a bus to the city  
a merry-go-round by the sea  
the cracked volume of Arnold Bennett waiting upstairs.

My son rises, the same time as each Sunday before,  
announcing their need to depart. And so I place the jar of candies  
and two Ziplocs in front of his daughters, who exude feigned surprise  
once more. They are well-rehearsed, these two little cadets.

I'm curious over their sad eyes and perfect little waves  
back at this old stranger in the doorway. Is this what little girls do?  
Or should it be a birthday party, a movie, hopscotch or dolls?  
Something to ask him perhaps — tomorrow night during my 9:18 call.

## Gone continued

Hoover can't remember the last time he saw her.

It was last night.

She was here last night. They went to bed at the same time.

That doesn't sound right, but why wouldn't she have been here?

It feels like he hasn't seen her in a long time.

He shuffles to their bedroom. Pauses inside the door and stares at the big empty bed, feeling the answer so close if only his mind would stop skipping like an old scratched record that plays memories instead of music spinning under a bad needle. Not only is the record scratched, the turntable in his head runs too fast for a few seconds then too slow, back and forth, blocking any clarity. He sits on the edge of the bed and looks at her side of the mattress. He lies down and scoots close to where Geraldine sleeps. His hand rubs slow circles over the spot where she would be if she were in bed with him.

A sound like a giant cricket startles him. His body is stiffer again and sore like it is when he's been in bed a long time. He rolls over, picks up the chirping landline phone he refuses to give up and pushes the button, hoping it's Geraldine.

Hoover clears his throat. "Hello?"

"Mr. Galloway, it's Penny."

"Hello Penny." His face droops when hears her voice instead of his wife's.

"Judy asked me to call and check on you," Penny says. "She tried your cell but it kept going straight to voice mail."

Hoover picks up his little flip cell phone lying on the nightstand where it charges every night, unplugged charge cable curled up next to the phone. He tries twice before he flips open the phone. It's dead.

"Are you still there?" Penny asks.

"I'm going to take a day off," he says.

"Yes, Judy, this is your dad," Penny says. "He's taking a day off. Mr. Galloway, are you there?"

"Still here." He hates when someone calls him then talks to someone else, even if it is Judy.

"Judy wants to know if you're feeling okay," Penny says.

"I'm fine," he says. "It's Geraldine. She's not feeling well."

*Next page*



## Gone continued

I'm staying home with her today. Do what I can for her."

"Judy," Penny calls across the office. "I think you need to come here, talk to your dad."

"It's nothing to bother her about," Hoover says.

"He says Geraldine isn't feeling well," Penny whispers.

"Daddy? Are you okay?" Judy sounds scared.

"I'm fine," he assures his daughter. "Your mom will be all right. She doesn't feel well today. I'm going to stay home with her, be a good husband for a change."

"Daddy, hang on a second. Penny, I'm going to take this in my office."

"Hang on, Mr. Galloway," Penny says. "Judy will be on the line in a sec."

Hoover sighs. He didn't mean to worry his daughter.

"Are you there?" Judy's voice quavers.

"I told you, I'm fine. Going to stay home with your momma today."

"Daddy. You're not staying home with momma."

"You don't need me there." Hoover growls into the phone. "You run that place as good as your momma did. I don't need you to pretend I'm still important to the business. I know I'm in the way there."

"Think what you're saying about momma," Judy says. The phone is quiet for so long she starts to ask if he's still there.

"She's gone." He chokes on the words, unable to hold back flash flood tears. "I don't know what to do."



*Fiction*

# Before and After


By CHARISSA RABENSTEIN

Father stopped breathing. Still, I followed his instructions. What else could I do? I sat at his big, oak table, quite alone. I ate my supper properly. I sat on the edge of the hard chair in the parlor for thirty minutes. Then I blew out the candle and went to bed.

The next morning, a crowd of the town women called. They walked up the steps of the porch, and they rang the bell. I told them that they were not needed. I told them that he was sleeping. Then I shut the door. They were not needed. Why would they think that they could take him away? Even now he would not allow that.

More town people came after that. I don't think they believed me. They were persistent.

After three days of this, I noticed that Father was dead. I did not understand. I didn't realize that was possible. But I let them take him away.

I ate my supper properly. I sat on the edge of the hard chair in the parlor for thirty minutes. Then I blew out the candle and went to bed. Quite alone. 



# Penny & Tom

By TERRY BARR

Penny, our neighbor's cat, always looked both ways when she crossed a street. I know because once, when these neighbors — the Shaws — went on a camping vacation, they asked me to feed Penny for them. I was surely no older than five at this time but old enough to be trusted with my first off-site chore. For the first couple of days, I walked down to the next block, found Penny curled up on the porch, and served Penny her tin of food, which she accepted with all due grace. The third day, however, I got involved with my baseball cards and didn't head down to the Shaws until late afternoon, not believing it really mattered to anyone what time Penny ate. When I opened my front door, though, I found that it truly did matter to someone. To Penny, who was sitting right on our porch waiting for me. We strolled down the sidewalk together, and when we got to the corner, I watched as Penny first looked up the street and then down. And when she stepped off the curb, so did I. Such a wise cat.

I hoped that she would rub off on my cat Tom, but her discretion didn't interest him. Maybe that was because as an adult male living in those days before TV game show hosts admonished us daily to control our pet population, Tom interested himself mainly in Penny's body. We never knew for certain that he was the father of the multiple litters she produced, or, for that matter, whether he was also the father to his own grandchildren. For the kittens kept coming, and at any one time, the Shaws had twenty or twenty-five cats roaming their grounds. Parenting issues aside, Tom seemed happy and content, and at least half the time came running from under shrubs or from the neighbor's backyard when I yelled, "Here kitty, kitty, kitty."

As he got older, he liked sleeping on the heated pipes of our basement, so most often all I had to do to find him was open the basement door. He'd casually slink from the upper pipe right into my arms. My father referred to Tom as a "mangy, burpy thing," but once I caught Dad stroking Tom's head right down to the shoulders in that way I knew my cat liked.

Like his two predecessors, Happy and Happy II, two all-white cats who disappeared in succession before I turned three — and I don't know who named these two Happy, though it could have been me — Tom finally vanished one day, the victim of a fight over the children, I suppose. Or maybe it was his refusal to take Penny's safety tip that ultimately did him in. One of the good things about pets is that they often go off to die, and by the time you've noticed them missing, someone just tells you that they've "run away"

or perhaps found a better home. Maybe ten miles from our house on lonely Oxmoor road there was an antique shop called Happy's. That's where I thought my first two cats had found a place of their own. As for Tom, he went just like he came: out of, and to, nowhere.

Actually, I do know where he came from. I was outside one late summer day, and a young cat walked right up to me and sat down beside me on the grass. He meowed, loudly and distinctly, and before either of us knew it, I was begging my mother to let me keep him.

"I guess so," she said, "but we'll have to ask your Daddy first." But by the time Dad came home, Tom had already devoured two bowls of milk, set right on top of our kitchen washing machine for him, and had secured his name. At first, I wanted to name him "Sammy," after an old cat of my mother's, but he just looked like a Tom. Black, gray, and white: a typical tomcat. So when Dad arrived that night and looked right at Tom, asking "And who are you," I had a good feeling. Though Tom would always be that mangy burpy thing to Dad, the two maintained a healthy and respectful space within our house.

The day after Tom arrived, Penny's owners, Steve and Carla, walked by our house with another friend, Janet Hall, who lived on the next street up from us.

"Hey, look at my new cat," I yelled to them. They walked up our sidewalk to admire Tom, but as Janet got closer, she said, "That's my cat!"

Before I could panic, she added with a resigned wave, "Oh never mind. You can keep him."

I didn't know then that people gave away their pets, that love could be transferred that easily. Years later my wife and I would give away a cat I found one day when I was looking to buy a car from a private owner. The Honda Accord had no rearview mirror, and after I test drove it and declined, the lady who was selling the car said, "Well, maybe you'd like the cat instead."

A solid gray, "Russian Blue" cat whom I eventually named Annabelle, she developed a bad habit of spraying our furniture. So a few years later when one of my daughter's friends kept telling us how much she loved Annabelle, we decided to give the Russian Blue away.

I still dream about her, too, as I do all my other long-gone cats. In these dreams Annabelle's in the basement somewhere with Hugo, Angela and Alice, staying warm and ready to come to me if only I'd call. My therapist says that since



## Penny & Tom continued

in these dreams the cats are always there and OK and come when I call, it proves how much I loved and cared for them: how much they're always with me.

I haven't told him about giving Annabelle away, so I think I still have some work to do.

It's not exactly that I feel guilty about taking someone else's cat or giving mine away. But I do wonder about the moments of these decisions, how we make them, and how we react to and live with what comes and goes from our sight, in our limited sphere of protection.

How we react to what is lost and what is found.

Not too long after I took Janet Hall's cat, she lost something even more dear: her father. I knew her father. He was my first dentist. I don't remember him well, whether he was fat or thin, tall or short, black-haired or gray. I think he was nice, even gentle for a dentist. The one thing, however, that I do remember all these decades later, is that it was Dr. Frank Hall who introduced me to the scent of death.

How I could have had so many cavities in my baby teeth though I brushed them every night — swallowing the salivated paste instead of spitting — I'll never know. How many times I visited Dr. Hall and smelled that odor of drilled enamel and bone, I can't recall either. It might have been only twice, but once would have been sufficient to know forever that smell, your own body burned. Still, it must have been twice at least because I remember knowing enough to hold my breath that second filling. Or maybe I'm just confusing this with my next dentist, because even with a new dentist, they kept finding cavities.

I think Dr. Hall was the first person I ever knew to die, and he died so suddenly and soon in my life that I hardly knew he'd lived.

We learned of his death through the Shaw children. Breathlessly, one summer afternoon they entered our house, Steve and Carla.

"Dr. Hall had a heart attack and died," they yelled as one. And before any of us, but especially my mother, could ask a question or react in any way, they continued:

"Janet was at our house. They called our mother, and Janet

heard. Then when her mother came to get her, we tried to keep Janet from running out to tell her. But that's what she did. 'Mama! Daddy's had a heart attack. He's dead!'

"And then she got in the car and they drove off. We could hear Mrs. Hall screaming and crying!!!"

I had been outside before Steve and Carla arrived, and I saw the Halls' beige Cadillac careen around the corner of Eighteenth Street, heading up the hill toward their house. I don't know anymore whether I actually heard the screaming and crying or whether Steve and Carla's description simply entered me, became my memory. I know Mrs. Hall's voice, though, everyone who knew her did. She had one of those voices that I can only describe as sounding like she had a frog in her throat, only without the hoarseness. If she was on the other end of the telephone and you were in the most remote part of the house while your mother was speaking to her, you could hear every word she uttered as plainly as if she were a staff sergeant giving you your orders for the day. Her car, as it rounded the corner, would have been a half-block from me. And whether or not I truly heard her crying voice then, I definitely still hear it now.

Though it registered with me that Dr. Hall had died, that I had lost my dentist, as a boy of five or six I couldn't go too deeply into what else this meant: what it meant for Mrs. Hall or her five children. I couldn't think of what it would be like to have your daddy die suddenly, to never see him again. So I don't know what our neighborhood did afterward. Surely someone went to the Halls' house. Surely someone took the smaller children — Janet, Julie, and John, the baby — and cared for them while Mrs. Hall attended to her husband's arrangements. Surely Mrs. Shaw, Mrs. Terry across the street, and my mother lent aid and comfort wherever they could. Of course there was a funeral a few days later and of course a community mourned its treasured son, another soul dead and gone to heaven.

Over the subsequent years, the Hall family survived and went on with life as competently and successfully as any other family in our midst did. Just this past year in fact, Mrs. Hall died. She was eighty-nine. Her children, all grown and married decades ago, survive her. I hear that they're doing well, that Janet even reads my stories via Facebook, which makes me happy.

Is it strange or funny that no one ever says, "You'll always remember your first dentist?" I wish that when I think of Dr. Hall, I wouldn't always smell death, but that's the way of memory, of life.

*Next page*

## Giving Up for Lent

By KIRK WEIXEL

When I used to do it  
it was stuff like  
cigarettes and candy  
or when I was smaller  
candy cigarettes  
girls on the rocks  
not shaken but stirred  
movies with Bogart or Bergman and  
Winstons and whiskey and wine  
things I was addicted to then  
or would be later  
forty days of learning how to sin  
of loving a vice postponed  
waiting for the devil to rise  
a coffin nail in one hand  
and something amber over ice  
in the other as he grinned and said,  
"We'll always have Easter."

## Penny & Tom continued

The other thing I remember about the day Dr. Hall died, though, is that after Steve and Carla Shaw left, I sat in the front yard for a while by myself. At some point, Tom the cat joined me, sitting right beside me in that way cats have of being always present, of being always in the moment of their being. I petted Tom's head and shoulders, felt the two ridges of his shoulder blades, and then hugged him to me. He'd be mine for another few years. Like I said, I don't know the circumstances of his leaving. Of his passing. But I do know that though he's been gone for fifty years now, I've never stopped remembering the day he found me waiting for him. Just him.

Nor will I ever forget the girl who gave him to me, though of course I'll never understand why she let him go, or how, in the only girlhood she ever knew, she adjusted to his loss.



### Contribute to The Sacred Cow

We welcome contributions. Email short stories, poems, or essays to [tscmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:tscmagazine@gmail.com) for consideration. If you must choose between making your story interesting or artistic, go with interesting.

Artists who want to do illustration work or editorial cartoons are welcome to submit proposals. We will also consider standalone artwork and photography.

## Where Credit Is Due

By JADA YEE

Today, our words aren't as thick  
no matter the slice, they come from a loaf  
that's barely enriched.

Today, their words remain a concrete rain;  
levels our heads and dishevels the hair on our arms.

Our words, today, live  
only to be underlined  
by a discernable red.  
Aspiring to be bold,  
but hardly authentic.  
Guilty of plagiarism  
long before  
fingertips learn to  
take their first steps.

Let us keep practicing to think before we speak.

Practice,  
knowing we can't touch them,  
knowing we can't thank them.

But, even when they were alive,  
the knowing was mutual.

We are one and the same.

We are all waiting to feel like we made it.  
In the end, hoping that the last thing we hear  
is confirmation from the world,  
telling us, that, out of every decade,  
ours left the most lasting impression.

And, maybe we don't stay long enough, while alive,  
to hear what comes after polite applause.

Fearing there will be accusation and indifference,  
the instinct is to abandon our hearts;  
to abandon every part of the past.



## "I Captured the World in Mason Jars While Drinking From Scooby Doo Jelly Jars ..."

By C.Z. HEYWARD

My pecan brown mother raised me to fear only one thing  
failure.

It wasn't hard for me to understand this  
hopscothching the needles and junkies painted along the sidewalks  
like they belonged there and I was all wrong.

She sent me to my grandmother's farm during the summer so I'd know what was right  
in me.

As the curtain rose  
on many a cerulean night  
along the Bohicket River  
the reverberations of crickets' altos  
beckoned a response from the bass  
of the bullfrogs under our porch.

They were the old deacons giving their guttural approval for the release of my dreams.

The sound of the chorus ricocheted off  
the pitch of night  
bringing the stars closer.

James Brown was right

Black is Beautiful.

By morning I'd set free the frogs I'd caught  
and placed in Mason jars.

They were replaced by

Dragonflies.

Red ants.

Black ants.

And fiddler crabs.

It didn't come easy 'cause I got

Bit.

Stung.

Pinched.

And pissed on.

"Boy what you learn from all that chasin'?"

my grandmother Evelina would ask.

With bowed head I'd question her question with

"M'am?"

"You heard me boy."

"Dreams don't come easy," I told her, "sometimes it hurts chasing them. Sometimes  
they die."

"Come ya'. Have something to drink before you catch monkey next," she'd chuckle.  
Her honey toned skin beaming.

As I sipped her too sweet red Kool Aid out of my Scooby Doo jelly jar

I smiled

thinking about what I was gonna chase next.

Squirrels.

Raccoons from grandma's garden.

Hogs in my uncle's pen.

It was my world to conquer

my choice to make

because pecans and honey

made it so.

# The Pulse

By JUSTIN CHARLES

The house is gone; its pulse has moved.

Come with me across the days and years. From '79 to '79. Find the softness of the long orange-brown shag. The edges of our vision fading from view, but bright in the middle, the boy's red plastic lamb has fallen among its flock. You watch the glasses go into their place above the bar. The bar separates you from the kitchen but not from smells of chicken broth. Outside, the wind shrieks against the eaves. "Danger!" it cries as it rattles the windows. "Danger!" as it shakes the house. "Danger! Change is coming!" The boy won't understand. Down falls his green lamb as well as the yellow.

Change is yet a tender uneasy feeling. He feels afraid as the wind shakes the house. But Joe will come and bring his comfort. Pleasant purple curlicues of sound waft through the evening. The wind dies down. Joe, forever young, appears for a time, and then vanishes away.

The cold white wall is desecrated with fresh blue wax. She doesn't expect it and it makes her tired. Our new home with long brown shag. It's empty still, the door propped open. The air is crisp and promises snow. White fumes waft out as the wind sighs in. "Take him," she says, "I'll take care of it. I'll finish."

Across the yard and up the stairs. In the living room on the floor lies Joe. You see the green rug shows the path of our cars. The green John Deere tractor cultivates the rug and the edges fade into oblivion. Waking in

the afghan on the green couch, the boy hears the pulse. "Safe," it whispers, close to his ear, "Safe in here, with me and Joe."

"Come," she says. It's time to go. To the cold new house with the new white wall. The brown space heater snaps and pops to life. The new brown shag still feels cold. The autumn wind whispers around the door. October 2, 1979.

A new young woman and the boy's family gather. The kitchen is loud with celebration. His birthday cake, his birthday tears. The boy finds solace behind the green couch. The pulse beats softly. The house whispers, but the boy is fast asleep.

"Where is he?" she says. It's time to go. To the new white house with the new white wall. The father comes in from the dark outside. His green coat hangs on the brown entry wall. A cold blast comes in with the birthday skates. We try them on, on the warm brown shag. The space heater in the kitchen snaps its tune.

A year goes by. The telephone rings in the little white house. The mother runs out through the door. "Come!" she says from across the yard.

The boy doesn't remember the yard or the stairs. Joe lies cold upon the bed. In the cold spare room where we never go. Our afghan wraps him. It's red and warm, but it won't warm Joe. I touch his hand, but he's not there. The boy hears the house call from down the hall. In the living room, where the memories are. The afghan is gone with Joe. But behind the green couch he feels the pulse. "Safe."



## Obituary of Marvin G. Furskin

By CHUCK KRAMER

Marvin G. Furskin, noted animal rights activist, passed away last week, poisoned while liberating an enraged and uncooperative black mamba from the city zoo.

Through his pet adoption service, he found homes for the homeless and brought the joy of animal companionship to the aged, the lonely and the forlorn. His motto was, "A pet is just another mouth to feed."

Mr. Furskin began his career volunteering for SPCA, but moved on to more radical work with the local chapter of PETA. After serving his sentence for firebombing a butcher shop, Mr. Furskin worked as a groomer and dewormer at Petland Spas. He was renowned for his magic finger.

He later opened his adoption service which specialized in rescue animals, service dogs and therapy canaries. His service also spared thousands of goldfish a final flush down the toilet, enabling them to live long, happy lives in the aquariums of caring families. "Marvin was such a gentle soul," Helen Trawler said, "so concerned with aquatic life. He personally delivered Jules and Jim, my twin pet goldfish, in a clear Tupperware container. That's rare for a man of his stature."

Sandra Simpatico, local PETA chairperson, noted, "This is a great loss for our community. Mr. Furskin provided a much needed service with respect, empathy and remarkable sensitivity, and was able to counter both actual and imagined animal mistreatment with justified outrage and occasional cold-blooded violence."

A memorial service will take place next Thursday evening in the lobby of Petland's Grand Spa. The family is requesting that all animals attending be leashed. PETA will host and provide refreshments — iced bitters, mock turtle soup and soyburgers. The eulogy will be delivered by Kathy Robyn Warbler of the Audubon Society.

Mr. Furskin will be laid to rest the following morning at Mammal, Fish, and Fowl Memorial Park in the Friends and Allies Protected Preserve, Rev. Daniel Fang of the Holy Spirit Barking in Tongues Congregation presiding.

Mr. Furskin is survived by his wife, Smoothie (nee Velour) and his golden retriever, Marvin Jr., his flock of merino sheep, and the three dozen fleas that performed in his renowned Insect Circus Spectacular which entertained both handicapped children and wounded veterans at hospitals throughout the area. In lieu of flowers, donations may be made to Mr. Furskin's favorite charities—Those Misunderstood, better known as PROUD (Protectors of Rodents Occupying Urban Dwellings), and the Society for the Prevention of Battered Chickens.

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Fiction

# Virginia:

## A Tale of a Virtuous Vegetarian

By GERSHON BEN-AVRAHAM

When four years old, while eating a piece of chicken on a family picnic, Virginia Coleslaw ingested a chicken claw. It didn't chew well, and had to be surgically removed from her throat, where it had lodged itself on its way to joining the rest of the chicken leg. Virginia decided that that was it for her with meat. Going forward, she would eat only grains, vegetables, nuts, and fruits. Her mother tried to reason with her, but Virginia was stubborn. She would hold her breath until she turned purple, at which point her exasperated mother would concede and make Virginia a peanut butter and jelly sandwich.

When she started school, Virginia graduated into what might be called the activist stage of her vegetarianism. It was then she learned that her older twin brothers took packed lunches to school. At night, Virginia would sneak downstairs, replace her brothers' meat sandwiches with tofu, and feed the meat sandwiches to Poindexter, the family dog. Later, thinking more about it, she felt guilty and decided Poindexter shouldn't eat meat either. From then on, the sandwiches went into the toilet. The next day her brothers would complain to their mother about the tofu. She would simply smile and say, "Dears, I didn't pack you tofu." Eventually the brothers gave up and set up a sandwich exchange program at school where they cornered the market on ham. Both died at twenty-two of massive coronaries. The doctor's report said simply, "Chests exploded."

In high school, Virginia started a vegetarian club. It nev-

er had more than three members. Even so, the meetings were always extremely passionate. People walking by the club's door would think there was a much larger club in there. She received a full scholarship to a college in Mississippi where she posted a sign on the door of her dorm room saying only vegetarians could enter. This allowed her much quiet study time. However, Jimmy Mullins, a heavy, lifelong vegetarian from Itta Bena, would occasionally stop by with chocolate. This, Virginia would find irresistible. Her physics book would be shut immediately as she and Jimmy pondered the wonders of the cocoa bean.

Virginia dated only vegetarians. She even went so far as to develop a questionnaire boys had to complete before asking her out; not that she was pretty. In fact, Virginia was rather homely; but being a woman of principle, boys found her irresistible.

After graduation, Virginia and Jimmy married and moved to Hershey, Pennsylvania, not a place one ordinarily thinks of as a watering hole for vegetarians. The air appealed to her husband, though, and the countryside appealed to Virginia. "A good place to raise children," she said. In time, Virginia and Jimmy had eight daughters, none of whom ever ate meat, and never had acne. Once, visiting their grandparents in Ohio and being told that being a vegetarian was "unmanly," the girls replied, in unison, "Pawpaw, that's wonderful!" Jimmy smiled, and handed each girl a dark chocolate Hershey bar.

Virginia, wiping her eyes, beamed. "There's a whole new world coming," she said. 

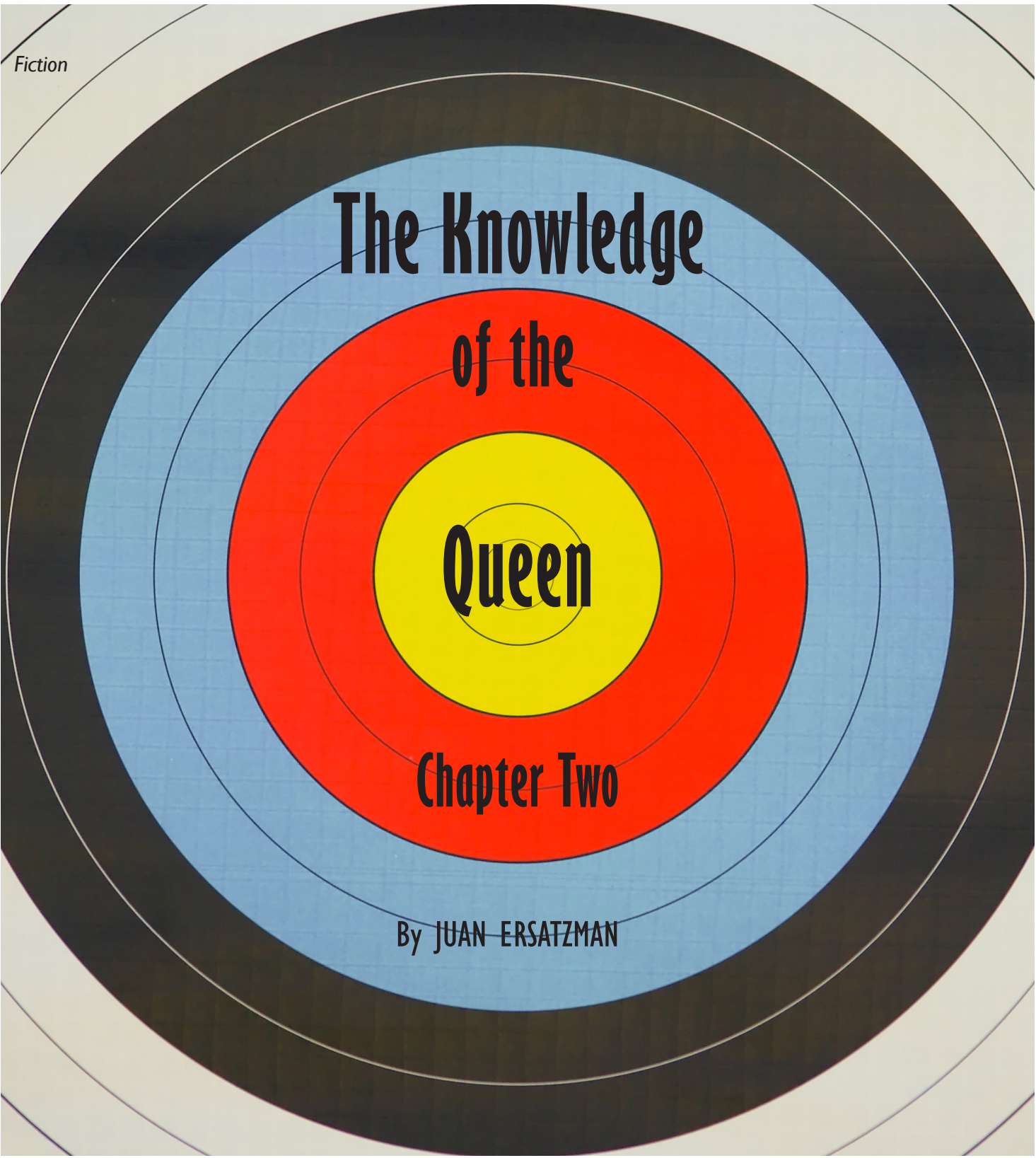
# The Exposed Nest

By ROBERT FROST

From "Mountain Interval"

You were forever finding some new play.  
 So when I saw you down on hands and knees  
 In the meadow, busy with the new-cut hay,  
 Trying, I thought, to set it up on end,  
 I went to show you how to make it stay,  
 If that was your idea, against the breeze,  
 And, if you asked me, even help pretend  
 To make it root again and grow afresh.  
 But 'twas no make-believe with you to-day,  
 Nor was the grass itself your real concern,  
 Though I found your hand full of wilted fern,  
 Steel-bright June-grass, and blackening heads of clover.  
 'Twas a nest full of young birds on the ground  
 The cutter-bar had just gone champing over  
 (Miraculously without tasting flesh)  
 And left defenseless to the heat and light.  
 You wanted to restore them to their right  
 Of something interposed between their sight  
 And too much world at once — could means be found.  
 The way the nest-full every time we stirred  
 Stood up to us as to a mother-bird  
 Whose coming home has been too long deferred,  
 Made me ask would the mother-bird return  
 And care for them in such a change of scene  
 And might our meddling make her more afraid.  
 That was a thing we could not wait to learn.  
 We saw the risk we took in doing good,  
 But dared not spare to do the best we could  
 Though harm should come of it; so built the screen  
 You had begun, and gave them back their shade.  
 All this to prove we cared. Why is there then  
 No more to tell? We turned to other things.  
 I haven't any memory — have you? —  
 Of ever coming to the place again  
 To see if the birds lived the first night through,  
 And so at last to learn to use their wings.

Fiction



# The Knowledge of the Queen Chapter Two

By JUAN ERSATZMAN

*The Knowledge of the Queen* is a serial novel, debuting with chapter one in January 2016 and slated for release chapter by chapter over the coming months. Find all released chapters online at [www.sacredcowmagazine.com](http://www.sacredcowmagazine.com)

Both Hiram's reign and his personal life were marked by flaws of personality and the influence of senseless tragedy. As is often the case with great tragedies, it began with tremendous optimism.

Taking the crown from his father at the tender age of twenty-four, Hiram made the perfunctory public statements of intent to rule with wisdom, impartiality and benevolence, as he perceived his father and forebears to have done. Indeed, newspaper reports surrounding both the funeral and coronation remark that Hiram was a particularly subdued figure, "notable for the new-found soberness and humility of his bearing."

He was also commended for his diligent attendance on the widowed queen. The editors of the *Embrettiton Chronicle* wrote in a glowing editorial that "there was evident in our prince's carriage, and precisely his compassionate attentions to his bereaved mother, a transformation of character which speaks well of his abilities to govern the nation. A good son is a good king."

The Earl of Maltin, with the tactlessness that was his wont, wrote to a confidant that "The way this louse has pulled himself together, there might be hope, yet."

The Earl was regarded for his candor, not his prescience. This prediction was characteristically straightforward, and just as characteristically wrong.

— From *A History of Trevendland: Chapter 3, "Hiram I, and the Dissolution of the Monarchy"* by E. Kodrave

"PUT IT AWAY!" The second scream broke from Ma Gnowker like a deluge from a dam and shook Marigold from her stupor.

Hivelgott was frozen in front of her, eyes fastened on the glowing amulet in her hand. The amulet itself was smooth, and cool against her fingers. The light of the letters winked up at her. She shuddered.

The moment she moved, Hivelgott came unstuck. He flung himself down among his piles of trash with a happy squeal,

Next page



## Queen continued

and began to thrash, rolling over and through the mountains of his merchandise, kicking his legs and howling.

None of the events of the day thus far had prepared Marigold for a spectacle on this scale. She stumbled back, away from Hivelgott. All around the square, villagers were sitting and standing in dumbfounded silence, knitting needles frozen, cigars dropping from slackened jaws.

They were not staring at Hivelgott.

Marigold's chest felt tight, and she could hear her own throat gasping for air. The amulet was too wide for her pockets. Marigold pushed past her mother into the vegetable stall. She slipped the amulet into one of the plastic bags Ma Gnowker used for her vegetables. She let go of the amulet, and the lights went out.

Ma Gnowker had stopped screaming, and was now mewing and whimpering, clutching at her daughter's arm.

Marigold was gripped by a loathing for Valeview with its shrieks, and madmen and popeyed villagers. She thought of her apartment in the city, of tiles under bare feet, of the quiet, cool, darkness of her living room with something like thirst.

She would take the produce she needed for the week and go. She did her best to ignore the stares of the villagers, picking up carrots — turning them over, putting one down and selecting another — and finding a head of cabbage and a cucumber. She slipped them into her bag, and spun it shut without looking up. After eight years of unceasing embarrassment, she had no intention of letting anyone see her humiliation.

The attempt to preserve her dignity proved costly. When she looked up, she found that Hivelgott had staggered to his feet, and was standing before her, a vision of apoplectic malice. His hair jutted out in all directions. His lips were pulled back into a snarl, and his eyes were bulging out.

"SEIZE HER!" he roared, pointing at Marigold.

No one moved. The villagers stared. Marigold speculated bitterly that none of them had blinked nor breathed since the amulet lit up in her hand. Nor had Ma Gnowker ceased to weep and wheedle.

"Ma," she said, pushing her mother away, "Ma, I need to go, now."

"SOLDIERS!" screamed Hivelgott, beckoning to the guards at the gate. "Soldiers!"

He turned his gaze around the whole of the square as though unable to believe that no one was rushing to apprehend her. Marigold stepped out the side of the booth.

Hivelgott bent down, plucked a rusty bolt from the sea of his rubbish, and hurled it. Marigold was too stunned to move, and the missile caught her just above her left eye. She fell back against the post of the veranda with stars in her eyes. Her mother screamed again, and so, it seemed to Marigold, did everyone else in the village.

Regaining her balance, Marigold saw Hivelgott rushing at her with a clay pot raised above his head. As he swung it, she stepped sideways, and the pot shattered against the post.

For an instant, Marigold found herself peering straight into Hivelgott's eyes. They were yellow, and the veins stood out like rivers on a map. His pupils had grown until there was nothing left of his irises — only black pools of nothing. It occurred to Marigold — in much the same way it would have occurred to her that she was out of milk — that he wanted to kill her. Indeed, he was having a go at it, right now.

Her body moved without the volition of her mind. It extended both its hands, grabbed the old man off balance from his swing, and flung him headlong into the ground in her mother's vegetable stall.

As Hivelgott crashed down, her body stepped into the alley between the Municipal Music House and the Valeview Carpentry, and ran. As she ran, she heard a sudden swelling of yells behind her, and redoubled her pace.

At the end of the alley she turned right, away from King's Avenue and the guards. One block down, she cut left toward the carpark, then left again, back in the direction she'd come. She was breathing hard, running through a neighborhood of empty houses and walled gardens in the direction of King's Avenue when her foot caught on a cobblestone. She fell headlong, crashing down on her elbows and her chin. She scrambled up and tried to run, but wobbled back to her knees. The gash on her forehead was bleeding freely, and blood and sweat were dripping into her eyes. Marigold swiped at her eyes with her free hand, and succeeded only in grinding dust from the street into the paste of blood and sweat. Her eyes were on fire, but she forced herself to her feet, and took two halting steps.

"Marigold!"

From the obscurity of the world, behind the red wall of

agony in her eyes, someone was shouting. Marigold staggered toward the voice, and back into the shadows of another alley. She reeled against the wall for a moment, then forced herself on, propping herself up with her left hand.

She could make out sunlight ahead, and guessed that whoever was shouting at her was standing across from the alley. As she approached the street, she saw that someone was standing in the open back door of the Hotchkiss dry goods warehouse, directly across from the alley. The figure raised a hand in warning, and Marigold stopped.

Tears and blinking were beginning to clear the sand and sweat from her eyes, and she could see that it was a young man who had called out to her. He was of medium height, wiry and dark. His face was familiar, but not enough to know him.

He was staring down the street, off to his right toward where Marigold assumed her pursuers would be, if her gambit of reversal had succeeded. His jaw twitched.

Then, without turning his head, he beckoned to her.

Marigold darted across the street, and tripped on the threshold of the warehouse. She would've sprawled on her face, but the young man caught her shoulders and pulled her upright. He smelled of flowers and scented oils.

His hands were still on her shoulders. Marigold blinked. The shelves that ran along the walls, lined with bags of seeds and flour were reduced to smudges in the gloom of the warehouse, and she couldn't make out the face of her rescuer.

"Thank you," she said, though it sounded more like a gasp. He might've nodded, but Marigold couldn't tell. He was guiding her by her shoulders across the room, past two waist-high stacks of seed bags on wooden pallets, toward the shelves along the eastern wall.

"Behind these," he said. Marigold crouched down between the stacks. The young man stepped away toward the shelf, and a fresh profusion of blood from her forehead rolled into Marigold's eyes and set them stinging. She closed her eyes, and felt her heartbeat shaking her whole body.

"Come on," said the young man, looming up from the shadows, "in here." Marigold opened her right eye. He had pulled open a small space between bags piled up beneath the bottom shelf along the eastern wall. As best she could, she pulled herself across to the shelf, and eased feet-first into the space behind the bags, where she lay down on her back.

"Stay quiet," said the young man. He pushed the bags back flush with the other stacks and Marigold was swallowed up in darkness.

## Queen continued

Marigold lay in the niche beneath the shelves, soaked in sweat and blood, caked with dust and flour stirred up by her and the young man's movements. The flour caught in her throat, and she fought the urge to cough, until her whole torso was shaking with the effort. But she kept still.

When at last the shaking subsided, Marigold lay still, staring up into the darkness, exhausted.

And the darkness held its peace. For a long while, she heard nothing. Then, after a while, there was a loud but confused trampling of feet. Marigold lay taut while footsteps clattered around the room, but soon enough they clattered away. Whoever they were, they were gone. She felt secure enough to take stock of her situation. She was already sore from the unexpected strain, marveling at how far she'd regressed from the lissome, durable farm girl of yesteryear. Although the blood had dried to a paste, the wound on her forehead and the scrapes along the base of her hands still ached.

What did it mean?

In the span of one day — one morning almost — she'd gone from dozing on the train to being hidden behind bags of flour by strangers to protect her from — what? Soldiers? A mob? She couldn't decide which was more improbable.

This much was certain: Either soldiers or villagers had come after her, and Hivelgott had set them on her. But why?

That was easy enough; the amulet. Marigold sat up in the dark as far as she could, gingerly raising her head until her hair was brushing the underside of the shelf above her, and slid her hand into the bag. She worked through the carrots and the cucumbers, and found the amulet at the bottom.

As her fingers slid around it, the lines of script glowed out through the bag. The flour still suspended in the air shone in its light. With painstaking care, she slid the amulet out of the bag and held it up. The amulet bathed the whole niche with its inexplicable luminescence.

The slick-dressed trio from the city and the slim little man who followed them must have been aware that Hivelgott was running some scheme with the amulets. But who were they, and why resort to subterfuge? Was it illegal to sell imitation amulets? But why would Hivelgott hide the amulets if it weren't?

This one glowed in her hands — the other two had not glowed in the hands of the customers. Hivelgott hadn't touched any of them. So was hers real and were the others fake?

That seemed like nonsense — the real amulet would glow in the hands of the rightful king or queen. Not in the hands of an exiled village girl.

Why had Hivelgott handed her the amulet, and then attacked her when it glowed?

It occurred to Marigold that she didn't even know what the glowing letters said. Hivelgott had called them the "dread words of destiny," but in her haste to escape, and through the chaos that followed she'd never stopped to read them. She blinked, and squinted into the light.

"Stay quiet, stay calm," said the letters. She checked to the right, and to the left. The sentence was repeated over and over through the swooping lines of the amulet.

Marigold couldn't restrain a giggle. The idea that she was hiding from a mob led by a maniac, because of an amulet inscribed with platitudes was too preposterous.

But the mob was real enough, she supposed. The maniac certainly was.

Marigold eased down onto the floor again, folded her hands across the amulet in the center of her sternum, and stared up at the underside of the shelf. Could this ever blow over? How big must a misunderstanding be to change person's life? Could she crawl back out, return to the market, and show everyone that the amulet was a fake, have a laugh and go back to life?

She thought again of her apartment, and the back of her throat ached.

Marigold wasn't aware that she was asleep until the sound of the flour bags being pulled away, and a trickle of yellow lamplight falling across her face, woke her up. She yawned, blinked, coughed, and squinted into the light. There was a foul taste in her mouth, and her head, shoulders and hips ached as though someone had taken to them with a hammer.

The light, pale as it was, hurt her eyes. An indistinct number of silhouettes were hovering over her hiding place, jostling to get close. Marigold stared at them, unable to grasp their significance.

"Get back," hissed a voice. "Give her air."

Marigold recognized the speaker. It was Almira Hotchkiss, barging into view through the wall of silhouettes. Almira set her hip and shoulder against the stack of flour bags, and pushed them further back so Marigold could escape, clicking

## West of Harlingen

By CLYDE KESSLER

I ain't traveling through fires,  
ain't strutting across an ember bed,  
singing righteousness, and heaven  
take me. I ain't skinning storm warnings  
from the radio, just slugging all the stations  
wanting a blues song, wanting this three a.m.  
to razz some lightning across the eyes of toads  
in the irrigation ditch, where some kooky child  
drowned, and whisked his ghost into the news,  
even when I don't want to learn more, even  
when  
the ditch is dry and a mile of thistle stalks rares  
up  
in flames. I ain't ever traveling there.

her tongue at the rest of the company while she did so.

"If you're going to let her out, let her out."

Marigold felt the now-familiar weight of strangers' eyes as she took Almira's hand and crawled out of the niche and into the warehouse. Almira helped Marigold onto one of the stacks of seed bags she'd hidden between earlier, and took a seat across from her while the rest of the silhouettes pressed in close, and stared at Marigold.

"Water?" Almira asked, holding out a clay mug. It was faded with age, and a chip was missing from one side of the rim. Marigold took the cup and drank a deep draught. The chill of the water spread along her collarbones and down to her stomach, tickling the nerves beneath her skin and clearing

Next page



## Queen continued

the fog from her mind. She looked around the room.

All of the light came from oil lamps, with wicks trimmed low. Most were set on the shelves, but a man near the door, and the young man who had hidden her, were carrying lamps. Shadows shifted and flickered as the men with the lamps moved through the room. In the shifting light, Marigold could see the water jug and a kettle next to Almira on top of the stack of bags, and a poker leaning against the side. She was a trifle puzzled not to see a fireplace.

"Marigold!"

Her youthful savior — he was about her age, even — shouldered his way into the inner circle. For the second time in the day, Marigold was taken aback by his familiarity.

Almira reached out and caught him by the wrist. "Give her half a second, Harrison."

She stared up at him in staunch disapproval. Harrison furrowed his brow, started to speak, then thought better of it and slunk back into the ranks of the shadow-folk. Almira turned to Marigold.

"Made you some soup, if you want," she said softly, and held out another mug. Marigold set down the water, cupped the mug in both hands and drank the soup straight from it. It was more of a stew than a soup; the carrots and potatoes burned the roof of her mouth, and the broth savored of goat. Marigold couldn't recall the last time she'd enjoyed a meal so much.

Minutes passed before she spoke again. As she ate, the shadows muttered to one another, and watched her with great care, as though they were taking notes for an exam.

"Thank you," she said, lowering the mug. "Thank you, that was lovely."

Almira smiled and looked down at her hands.

Marigold surveyed the room again. The shadows made counting heads a guessing game but she estimated that there were fifteen people in the warehouse. Beyond her and Almira they were all men, and mostly villagers. She noticed that Almira's husband was missing.

Harrison was sulking on the edge of the circle, just beyond Almira. There were two other plains-dwellers with him, and Marigold wondered why they had come. For her? For a silly girl and an imitation amulet?

Shame rose in Marigold's chest, and she felt nauseous.

"I'm afraid I don't know what's going on," she said, more or less to Almira, but also to the murmuring mass arrayed throughout the room, "at all."

"You know all you need to know," said Harrison, unable to hold his peace. He stepped forward and stood next to Almira. His brown eyes glowed in the light of the lamp.

"I promise you, I don't," said Marigold. She added, "Thank you for saving me, though."

Harrison's face stayed stern.

"You know how badly we need change," he said.

"Um," began Marigold, "I —"

"You know the prophecy," he went on, raising his voice for the benefit of the room.

She didn't, and wished for an unostentatious way to say so.

"I'm awfully, awfully sorry," she said, "But I —"

"You know how the backs of the people bend under the weight of corruption," said Harrison, who was almost shouting, "how the people of the plains and the mountains are sacrificed for the whims and appetites of the wealthy, how the —"

Marigold strove not to broadcast the blank astonishment she felt, and hoped the shadows would hide what she couldn't. She

*Next page*

## Minding the Gap

By AIDAN CHAFE

On the  
crowded train

A woman sitting  
across from me

is wearing a  
baseball cap

with the acronym  
GAP.

(God. Answers.  
Prayers.)

I explore the  
imaginary theatre

of this scenario,  
praying to have

mine answered.  
Summoning his

spiritual highness  
like a late night

drive thru genie,  
wishing for that

hat to disappear.  
Instead, a man  
wearing spandex  
appears, interjects,

his front bike tire  
treading my bare

knee. I mutter  
A curse mid prayer.

God misinterprets  
the message.

The bike man  
exits the train car.

The hat sits scoffingly  
on her head.

I stare dejected  
another five stops

before the woman  
selects her divine

moment to leave.

## Queen continued

glanced at Almira, who was staring at her. Marigold shifted her eyes away.

Harrison may have gone on without end, but he was interrupted. There was a muffled crash, and then the door from the dry goods store to the warehouse was flung open with a bang. A stocky white woman with a shock of unevenly-cut gray hair hove into view in the doorway, clutching a wooden staff with ornate designs carved into its head. She was scowling a jowl scowl.

She pointed at Harrison. "You!"

He flinched. She stomped a foot, and glared at him.

"Me?" he asked, recovering himself. "Who are you?"

Now the woman smirked, advancing into the room, shaking her staff at the silhouettes, which scurried out of her path.

"I'm the prophetess," she announced, "And I'm here to help."

There was a pause.

"When you say 'prophetess' ..." said a middle-aged, white farmer — Floyd Witmok — stepping closer, "Do you mean —"

"No," said the prophetess, plopping down on the seed bags next to Marigold's, sending up a cloud of dust. "No, I'm not the woman behind your ridiculous prophecy. Not at all."

There was a general sigh. The prophetess turned to Marigold.

"Believe me," she said, puffing out her cheeks. "If I were the woman behind your prophecy, you'd know it. I don't do these mumbo-jumbo riddle-me-this, wide-open nonsense prophecies. If you say you can predict the future, predict it, dammit!"

She gave her staff a rattle, and the villagers shied away from it. She didn't seem to notice, but began to cast her beady eyes around the room.

"So," she asked, "who's the holder of the amulet?"

Almira, unspeaking, pointed to Marigold.

The prophetess smiled, exposing a mouthful of huge, square teeth. "Wonderful!"

"Almira!" exploded Harrison, having once again maintained silence for as long as he could. "What are you doing? We don't know her! We don't know who she is, where she's from, who's she's working for —"

The shadows — nervous as they were about the prophet-

ess and her staff — muttered in concurrent disapproval.

The prophetess shrugged. "It's a question I can't answer," she said, "but I'm as trustworthy as anyone here and I'll prove it soon enough. In the meantime," her voice dropped to a growl, "I'd invite any of you to try to throw me out."

She shook the staff, and scanned the room, locking eyes with Harrison until he turned away.

Then the prophetess's flat face wrinkled into a smile. She leaned into the lamplight and peered at Marigold.

"What do you know, and what don't you know?" she asked.

"I don't know what I don't know," said Marigold, feeling befuddled. She peered around the room. Across from the prophetess, Almira and Harrison were staring at her. Beyond them was the shadowy ring of the others also staring at her. "And I don't know anything, actually."

The old woman narrowed her eyes and pursed her lips.

"OK," she said, slowly, "OK. You live in the city, yes?"

"Yes," said Marigold.

"You used to live here."

"Yes."

"And how did it happen that you went from living here to living in the city?"

"The people chose me. I was a Oneness Student. It's an integration and diversity program," said Marigold. "An exchange. They take children from the plains and the mountains to the city for school and training."

There was a rumble around the room. Marigold stopped.

"Go on," said the prophetess, "what did they tell you was the point of all that?"

Something fluttered in Marigold's chest, "To make us a stronger country. It's — it's the slogan — 'Strength as one.' Combining the people from the plains and the mountains and the city — they — um, it brings us closer as one."

The prophetess nodded. "Why do you think they chose you?"

Marigold shook her head. She didn't know why they'd chosen her, but she could remember the day they'd come for her. It was late spring, and she was done with chores early, so she had been out in fields, running barefoot through the sloping meadows. Warm grass rustled against her calves and water froze the soles of her feet. She was just that age when boys and girls begin to feel that there are things they are too old for. She felt a whisper that she was too old to spend the afternoon running through meadows, but it was spring, and she ignored the whisper.

When she straggled home, all muddy feet and ruddy cheeks,

she found her mother and father in the kitchen talking to three strange men in suits. Her mother was crying, and her father, still wearing his work boots, caked in mud, was looking around the room like he didn't recognize it.

Ma Gnowker had swiped a forearm across her eyes, taken a deep breath, and told her daughter that the people needed her. She was to leave with the men, and go to the city. Tonight.

"I don't know," Marigold told the prophetess.

There was a murmur of surprise around the room.

"WHAT?" hissed Harrison. Almira turned sharply to face him, and he went silent.

"We took a test," said Almira, leaning in, "you might not remember. You only took it once. A month from the end of the school year, we took a test with colors and shapes and words and patterns. And they gave us a medical exam."

Marigold nodded. She had a hazy memory of it.

"That's why they took you," said Almira. "That's always how they choose."

The prophetess grunted, "They take the best and the brightest from the mountains and the plains to the city, and they turn them into cityfolk. The mountains, the plains and the coast? They lose their leaders. The power, the money, the smarts — it's all in the city, now."

She locked eyes with Marigold. "They say it's about oneness. When was the last time the city sent their best and brightest here?"

Marigold shuddered. Through the ache in her hip and her back, she felt the same hollow feeling that had come over her when she drank the Hotchkiss coffee in the morning.

"When was the last time anything good happened here?" asked Harrison.

"The road," said Almira, "they repaved the road."

"Right. Certainly," said Harrison, leaping at the chance to retake the floor, "The road! Of course. One road." He turned to Marigold.

"Her husband is gone!" he said, his voice rising, gesticulating at Almira. "Went off to find work, and disappeared. Probably dead. No one notices, no one cares. No one cares!"

Marigold bit back a gasp, and was ashamed. She hadn't noticed his disappearance.

"Hell," said Harrison, his voice dropping, "Tad never liked the government, so they probably don't want to look for him. Better if no one thinks of it. She's having a baby! In the city, she'd be fawned over by gangs of doctors; she'd be tethered



## Queen continued

to a thousand machines in a sterilized room. Instead, she'll have her baby in the bed of her own home, festering in blood and dirt."

He seemed to be raging at Marigold specifically, and she wasn't sure why. Because she lived in the city? Because she'd been taken?

"The taxes go up, and up and up. Every year we pay for our children to be kidnapped by the city! We're getting poorer, we're getting weaker, and the city takes it all. All we have left is our anger."

"You're getting poorer?" asked Marigold, looking around the room.

"Sure!" said Harrison, sweeping onward, "They repaved the road. They repaved the road and built a train. Now they could come and gawk at us like we're monkeys."

"That's — that's awful," said Marigold. "I'm sorry. I had no idea — I had no idea that things were so bad —"

"That's the problem!" interrupted Harrison, "Cityfolk —"

"— but I have no idea what it has to do with me," finished Marigold, raising her voice and channeling the vocal power of her Gnowker heritage to drown Harrison out. She finished, and the room was still.

"I'm sorry that things are so bad," she said in the silence. "I truly am. I'm sorry that I didn't know. But I don't know what it has to do with me, and what you expect me to do about it."

The farmers and villagers and day-laborers stared at her. Harrison furrowed his brow and stared at her. Almira only looked down at her hands, caressing the baby bulge beneath her dress.

The prophetess snorted. "You're bright," she said. "Obviously you are. So stop being silly. What do you know?"

Marigold blinked. "I know you think there's something special about me and the amulet."

The old woman nodded. "But what you don't know," she told Marigold, "is the prophecy. A couple of years back, some whispery nymph slinking around the forest moaning about spirits tossed out a so-called 'prophecy' about how a new monarch would rise unexpectedly from the ruins, clutching some sign of his or her right to the throne, and lead the people to peace, prosperity, and triumph over the city's regime."

She turned her beady eyes around the room, and smirked at the would-be revolutionaries.

"These little children believe it," said the prophetess, gesturing to the watchers.

"You don't?" asked Marigold, who would have believed a prophecy ten years ago, wouldn't have ten hours ago, and couldn't make up her mind, now. "You're a prophetess."

"I'm a prophetess," said the prophetess, "which doesn't mean some hussy half-dressed in deer-hide is. The prophecy's —"

She was cut off by another crash from the dry-goods store, a sound of splintering wood, shattering glass, and seeds and flour cascading onto the floor.

Two of the men — Floyd Witmok and a young plain-dweller — who had been standing in the circle, anxiously listening to the interchange between the prophetess and Marigold, sprang for warehouse door first. As they approached it, there were pops and flashes, and another crash. Witmok spun sideways, and crashed to the ground. More villagers rushed forward.

Marigold turned back. Almira was sitting frozen on her stack of bags, staring straight ahead. Someone in the press of men around the door shouted suddenly, "Get down, get down!"

Marigold leaned forward, snatched Almira's wrists, and dropped down behind the stack of seed-bags, dragging Almira with her. Almira twisted as she fell to protect her abdomen, and landed hard on her hip.

Above them, the prophetess stood up, and produced from beneath her robe a revolver resembling in form and size a cannon better than it did a handgun.

"COME ON YOU BASTARDS!" she bellowed, pointing it in the direction of the hubbub at the door and setting off the gun.

There was a sound like the end of the world, and an accompanying flash of approximately equal magnitude. The prophetess staggered back from the recoil. Over the ringing in her ears, Marigold heard screams, bangs and clattering from the direction of the door.

The assembled would-be revolutionaries had remembered themselves, and were surging either bravely toward the contested doorway from which the pops, flashes and sounds of dispute were coming, or somewhat less bravely toward the freight door at the back.

Marigold glanced in the direction of the fighting. The men in the room were crowded around the door, but trying

## Havana, 1957

By CARL BOON

On her honeymoon, she gambled  
with Batista coins, danced,  
drank rum, made love. It was then  
she stopped taking sugar in her coffee.

What's abundant one no longer needs,  
as the cane fields stretched village  
to village and the rich and the poor  
walked the low road home.

I don't know when the Cadillacs came,  
nor if the church at San Pedro  
was as lovely as she described,  
with the sun of late September  
masquerading among its gates.

She was known to exaggerate,  
which happens when the past  
confronts us. Memories are attitudes,  
like the melodies of schoolgirls  
who claimed El Calle de Francisco

as their own and sipped Coca-Cola  
while the boys passed photos  
of Marilyn Monroe, dreaming of Pelé  
and fútbol fields instead of sand.

Next page

## Queen continued

not to stand in the line of the gunfire. They had stopped jostling for a moment to stare at the prophetess and her enormous gun.

“DON’T STARE!” boomed the old woman, cocking the pistol. “FIGHT!”

She fired again, but Marigold had no idea what she was aiming at — there was no one visible in the doorway. The blast blinded Marigold.

Behind her, the freight door rattled open and cold air swirled into the room, accompanied by shouts and screams. The group that had surged to the back door now came surging back to the middle of the room, driven before a wave of black-clad figures that had come rushing in out of the darkness making efficient use of sticks and cudgels.

“Oho!” howled the prophetess. “Another country heard from. Come on! Come on! Come and get yours!”

She wheeled to face them with another ear-popping report from the gun.

Marigold fumbled in the shadows between the stacked up seed bags until she found Almira’s hand and the bag containing the amulet. But Almira shook off her hand, struggled onto her knees, and picked up the poker she had leaned against the stack of bags. She looked at Marigold and tilted her head toward the back door. Marigold nodded.

The prophetess’s pistol went off yet again behind the girls as they stumbled to their feet. Everywhere around them was flickering pandemonium. Everyone who — less than a minute before — had been staring at Marigold in silence as she protested that she didn’t know what they wanted from her had been stricken down, or driven toward the center of the room, where they grappled with assailants in dark knots of writhing limbs and heads. Near the back door, an oil lamp had shattered on the floor, and sooty flames were licking at the underside of the shelf.

Marigold picked up the water jug with her free hand, glanced again at Almira, and darted out from between the bags, making for the back door. As she ran through the chaos in the warehouse, one of the black-clad invaders wrenched free from the villager he was fighting, and snatched at her.

Marigold twisted away, staggering off-balance, and Almira,

one step behind Marigold, brought down the poker on the man’s head with a clang.

He reeled just long enough for Marigold to swing the water jug, catching him in the head and knocking him back. Water from the jug splashed across Marigold’s shirt.

Marigold and Almira charged through the melee for the back door, hearts pounding, striking out with the jar and poker in desperation and fear. They careened through the oil fire, and broke clear of the building.

It was cold, and the air hurt their throats as they gasped for breath. The moon was almost full, and Marigold could see every detail of the street etched out in sharp relief. There was a sentry at each end of the block, and what appeared to be a child’s body, lying at the foot of the warehouse wall, thirty feet to the right of the door.

Almira gasped, “NELL!” and ran to the little heap of a person. Marigold went stumbling after her, unsteady on her legs. Almira knelt down, hiccupping and gasping.

Standing behind her, Marigold’s head swirled. Both sentries had seen them, and both were coming toward them at a run. Prompted by Almira’s scream, both sentries were coming toward them at a run. People were scrambling and falling out of the door behind them, some still fighting, others fleeing into the night. Flames were licking up the doorframe, and the shouts from inside had taken on a desperate tone.

“Nell!” repeated Almira, turning the girl over and staring at her face.

Blood was still oozing from a long wound that ran along the side of Nell’s head, and a small pool had collected on the cobblestones beneath her. Almira drew a sharp breath.

“Almira,” said Marigold, as evenly as she was able. “Almira, the sentries.”

Almira slapped at Nell’s face. “Nell! Nell, wake up!”

The first sentry was on top of them. Almira made an attempt to stand and strike him with the poker. It was a late response, and too slow. She flailed at the man, but he stepped sideways around her swing and lashed out with his cudgel.

The swing hit Almira in the side of her head, just behind her temple. The blow was glancing, but it was enough. She fell, dropping the poker and rolling on the ground.

While his arm was still extended, Marigold drove her jug into his face. He stepped back, stunned. Marigold gritted her teeth and swung the jar upwards as hard as she could into his chin. The jar cracked in half, and fell away, and the man sagged downward.

Marigold flung the remains of the water jug aside and

turned back to face the warehouse door. Without moving her eyes from the mob, she stooped and picked up the poker. She smelled smoke, and her mouth was full of the taste of blood. She could feel the pulse in every inch of her body.

The skirmish at the back door was over. Three villagers were splayed out in the street at the feet of two tall figures enveloped in black. They turned toward Marigold.

“Come on,” she said.

They came, steady and businesslike, sweeping aside her pitiful swing with the poker, and wrapping iron arms around her, pinning hers to her side. Before Marigold could process or respond to this development, a squat, robed figure plunged out of the fiery warehouse and barreled up the street.

“Let her go,” roared the prophetess, arriving with a flourish. She fetched the man on the right an almighty blow to the temple with the butt of her gun, then spinning the weapon in her hand, placed the muzzle to the ear of the other attacker.

“Let her go,” she repeated, “or I’ll speckle the wall with bits of your brain.”

The man — still steady and businesslike, released Marigold and backed away with his hands in the air. She tumbled down to her knees, gasping. Beside her on the ground, Almira was moving, pressing a hand to her head and moaning.

The prophetess had turned to face the crowd spilling out of the burning warehouse,

“NO ONE MAKES A MOVE,” she admonished them, brandishing the pistol, “OR YOU DIE WHERE YOU STAND.”

The crowd paused. They were unenthusiastic about the prospect of running toward the prophetess’s revolver.

“Hmm,” said the prophetess, turning to Marigold. “We’re going to have to run.”

“But Almira,” said Marigold. “Harrison.”

“They’ll be all right,” said the prophetess. “We need to get gone before the boys with guns get out here.”

Marigold gaped at her.

“Go,” moaned Almira, who had raised herself into a seated position and was staring at the flames consuming her family’s warehouse. “Go,” she repeated.

Marigold nodded and picked up the vegetable bag, and they went, inching into the shadows of the nearest alley while the prophetess covered the crowd with her pistol.

As soon as they were in the alley, as Marigold had that afternoon, they ran.

This time, though, there was no attempt at misdirection,

*Next page*



## Queen continued

just flight. They pounded through streets and alleys, heading south. In the distance behind them, Marigold heard a spattering of gunfire. Lights blinked on in the houses they passed.

They crashed into the scrubby wall of brush that divided the town from the carpark, and turned west along its length. They scrambled along the thick center of the fencerow, panting and casting glances up at the moon and back toward the town.

They heard no sound of pursuit, and saw no sign of danger. After an eternity of running, when Marigold was more tired and sore than she could ever remember being, they reached the border of the woods that lay to the west of the town. The prophetess, wheezing and coughing, led Marigold under the shadows of the trees. In the shadows, they proceeded more slowly, but did not stop until they were well into the trees, out of sight from the wood's edge.

"Well," said the prophetess, sinking down on to the forest floor with a groan, "That was not what I expected."

Marigold said nothing. Her clothes were drenched with melted frost, and she could not feel her feet. Her lungs ached, and the wound on her forehead had opened again. Warm blood was running down her face and neck.

"Aren't you a prophetess?" she asked at last, roused from silence by curiosity.

The prophetess shrugged, "Sometimes you see the beginning and the end — or at least you see the end — but not what's in between. I don't decide what I see."

"Do you know what comes next?" asked Marigold.

"Sure don't," said the prophetess, and sighed, "We're still in between."

Marigold sighed as well. "Between what and what?"

The prophetess said nothing.

"Between what and what?" asked Marigold again.

"Hard to see," said the prophetess. "Harder to say." She gave her staff a little shake, and the beads rattled.

"I don't think prophecy'll help us tonight," said the prophetess sadly. "Sometimes, you just have to figure it out. Sometimes, even that doesn't work."

She gazed into the darkness for a moment, lost in thought, then shook her head. "Still, figuring it out's worth a try."

The prophetess leaned back against the trunk of the nearest

tree. "Let's start with what we do know," she said. "What did all those overgrown children in that seed-store believe about you?"

"I told you," said Marigold, "I don't know."

She said it harshly, and hoped it would end the conversation. She was too cold and miserable to be polite.

"No," the prophetess was undaunted, "I think you do. You told me that they thought there was something special about you and the amulet."

"Oh," said Marigold. "Yeah, yes. Apparently."

"Well," said the prophetess, "what is it?"

Marigold found she had no ready reply. She stared into the shadows of the woods at the bright pools of moonlight dappling the blackness. Her tongue was thick, and her throat was dry. It was cold.

"What is it?" repeated the prophetess.

Marigold swallowed.

"What. Is. It?" asked the prophetess, rising to her knees, and fixing her eyes on Marigold. "Say it."

"They think I'm the queen?" asked Marigold.

The prophetess leaned back and chuckled, "Seems they do."

"But I'm not," said Marigold, "I'm not — this amulet's a fake." But saying it brought no relief, and she heard in her own voice a telltale lack of conviction.

"Is it?" asked the prophetess. She leaned forward, "May I?"

"Of course," said Marigold, and reached into the bag. The lettuce and cucumbers were bruised and oozing cold, sticky liquid over everything. She grimaced, dug to the bottom, and lifted out the amulet. The words glowed golden in her hand and lit up the face of the prophetess, staring at it.

The prophetess took it. As soon as it left Marigold's hand, the light inside the disc went out. The prophetess laughed.

"Sure, it's a fake," she said. "Give me your hand."

Marigold held out her hand, the prophetess placed the amulet in her hand again, and the lines glimmered to life.

"Doesn't seem it's a fake," said the prophetess. "Does it?"

"I don't understand," insisted Marigold, who didn't. She blinked. She could feel tears welling up in her eyes.

The prophetess looked at Marigold and held her gaze, her tiny black eyes boring into Marigold's.

"By now," she said, "I think you do. Not the in-between, but you understand the end."

"How do you mean?" said Marigold, shivering.

"Maybe you don't know why, or how it came to be this way, or what will happen next, but we both know now that the amulet's not fake," said the prophetess. "And it won't lie. I think we both know what that means."

Marigold's hand tightened on the amulet. She felt a shiver pulsing through her core.

The prophetess studied her face for a moment, and sighed. "I don't want to say it," she said. "I don't want to ask it, even. I don't want to think about what comes next." She exhaled slowly and deeply. "But it has to be asked."

"Marigold, are you the rightful queen?"

Marigold's eyes spilled over. A cold sweat broke out on her forehead. Her pulse raged in the wound from Hivelgott, and the many bruises and scratches on her aching frame. Her whole body shook.

And then the tremors died away, and her eyes were dry. She was cold, and clear, and calm, and Marigold said, "Yes."



## Death Of Their Child: August 7, 1958

By ELIZA CALLARD

She wakes up early to put her face  
on for him. Last night, in the dark,  
into his shoulder, she shook, convulsed

with silent sobs, wailing  
without noise while he held her. This  
morning she hops out of bed to jump

in the shower and use her magic wands  
to pull, pluck, highlight, and cover.  
She will allow him to "sneak" an extra

piece of bacon, despite what they  
both know the doctor said, and she will  
lift her hand to his face for an extra moment

while he kisses her cheek goodbye. They  
will not speak of it, and she believes  
his gift is not to remember.

Fiction

# Gunpowder Trails: Chapters Three to Five

By ANDREW SHARP

*Gunpowder Trails is a serial novel. It debuted online with chapter one in November 2015, and is slated for release chapter by chapter over the coming months.*

Trying to look on the bright side, Charles considered whether the heat wave was all bad. The smoldering air and sizzling rocks that baked his feet helped distract him from his moaning stomach, after all. He also had to drink constantly, giving his stomach something constructive to do besides chew on the rest of his organs.

Logically, hot and thirsty and hungry were not a major improvement on hungry, but Charles did not let himself dwell on the fine points of the reasoning. In the wilderness, where rain, heat, cold and bugs offered a constant reminder of why houses were invented, learning to ignore basic facts of misery was key to contentment.

All the smugglers relied on their canteens to keep from wilting with the plants around them. When the group didn't cross a stream for a few hours, the "water run" cries would start up, and George would call a halt and send the slaves downhill in search of water, hauling along bundles of empty canteens.

On the first day the smugglers fled Scranton, dark clouds blew over and Charles was all set to complain about hiking in the rain. But it was a dry heave of a storm, an empty wind that filled the air with dust and left the ground more parched than before. The skies stayed relentlessly clear in the days that followed, and the wilderness, already brown from summer, turned crackling and brittle.

On water runs, the slaves sometimes had to scrape out mud from springs to make a puddle deep enough to dip the canteens into. Sometimes the spring or stream was simply dead. That was bad news for the slaves, because when they brought empty canteens back to cranky and thirsty smugglers, they

were treated to a vivid demonstration of the "blame the messenger" phenomenon.

"Dammit, don't bring me back an empty canteen!" John shouted once. "You didn't even go down to the stream, did you?"

Charles just nodded, but Marguerite wasn't taking it.

"Yes we did! It was dry."

"Then dig a little," John said. "Or keep looking."

She glared at him. "There's some." She pointed to a small cloud off near the horizon.

John probably would have slapped her, but slapping another man's slave brought with it more trouble than it was worth. So he walked away.

And so after all the smugglers had gotten their complaining in, everyone simply had to move on for as many miles as it took to find water, or what passed for it.

Despite these miseries, the leaders set a rapid pace for the first few days. George refused to stop and hunt until the band had put more miles between them and Scranton, so the smugglers resentfully nibbled a dwindling pemmican supply, only eating enough to keep off the worst pangs. The hunger was bad enough, Charles thought, but worse was opening an almost empty food pouch, smelling the pemmican inside, and forcing himself to scrape out only a mouthful or two while his stomach, reminded of its emptiness, roared for more.

The band did not follow a worn footpath like the many forest trails optimistically called roads in the kingdom of Easton. No such path existed. Instead, pushing through spiderwebs and thickets, and towering groves of ancient trees, they stuck to certain ridge lines and avoided others, steering clear of swamps, dead ends and dropoffs.

They would have made much faster time had they been able to follow a preordained route, cleared of branches and brush. But the band had no time to repair trail erosion, clear brush or saw fallen logs. Even if they had, following a sharply defined trail each trip would have been suicide when it was well known that smugglers were us-

ing the mountains to transport the most coveted black market commodity.

Even their vague route did not fool the Appalachies, who coveted sulfur as much as anyone, and who recognized trees in the forest like civilized people knew their own furniture. The Appalachies could not have helped but note the entails from game animals the smugglers killed, the broken ferns, the disturbed leaves and the remains of campfires, not to mention the smoke of the live fires and the loud voices through the trees. The Appalachies, George told Charles once, knew the route about as well as he did.

George had drawn secret maps of the routes. Between trips, the leaders gathered several times in George's study, correcting the maps and filling in details, tracing out springs and streams, good places for game and bad places for predators, and listing notes on major landmarks. They also fine tuned their plans for the next trip. The authorities from Easton and Scranton would have liked very much to acquire these state secrets of the smugglers.

Another advantage of the uncertain route was that it gave any band members who might be inclined to make trouble incentive to reconsider. While almost all smugglers had enough navigation knowledge to know more or less where they were, and could probably make their way out of the wilderness on their own eventually, a precise knowledge of the route certainly increased the odds of getting out. Only the seasoned, proven veterans knew the trails well, and only George had the maps.

Charles knew the route as well as anyone. But he was not in demand for navigation decisions, and as he hiked along behind the leaders he was free to think less of the route and more of bread with honey dripped all over it, and hot gravy over potatoes, and oyster stew, and pan-seared rockfish. During one painful interlude, he hiked for several hours with vivid images of hot crab cakes he could nearly smell but could not dispel. He tried to get back to thinking about the heat.

He walked fast enough to stay close to the front, near George and the other leaders. In the past, Charles had preferred to hike on his own, near enough to George that he could technically respond to a summons, but far enough away that George might find it too much effort and leave him alone. But now, when the smugglers passed him on the trail, they wouldn't look at him, even the ones he had been on friendly terms with in the past. Once or twice, one of them clipped his pack or cut him off on the trail, but did not

Next page



## Trails continued

apologize. He noticed one evening as he carried wood for the fires that people lapsed into silence when he walked by, and started muttering when he was out of earshot.

The next morning, the slaves found a tepid stream to fill the canteens in. Usually, the smugglers gave some kind of brief "thank you" when the canteens were full, but this time, one after another simply snatched the canteen without thanking them.

One evening, after a couple of days of hiking, George summoned Charles away from the fire he was staring into. This was unusual, because after the fires were built Charles was usually free to do what he wanted, which was usually staring into the fire. But now George called him over to the fire where only the leaders sat in the circle, in a voice loud enough for the whole camp to hear. Charles' face flushed as he got up and the talk died down, the other smugglers turning their heads to watch him go by. One of them laughed.

He took a seat in the circle and looked around at the faces, searching them for clues. John, grim. James solemn, maybe a hint of sympathy. Or was it contempt? Warren, a brief smile. Old Harry, the friendly stare of a wet cat. George, stern.

"I think you know what this is about, Charles," George said. "You've served faithfully for many years, but some in the band have raised questions about you and the other slaves. If you're innocent, you have nothing to worry about. If you're not, don't try to hide anything. If you're honest, it will go better with you. Much better."

Charles' stomach flopped. He could not lose George's trust. If he made a mistake now and said something stupid, or worse, if he had too many enemies in the circle, he might have had his last good meal. If only he could have had one more piece of juicy venison before the end. It was strange, he thought, what went through your mind when disaster loomed.

"So why don't you just start by telling us everything you know about what happened the day of the ambush," George said.

Charles could see band members at the other fires looking over in their direction, whispering. "I don't know anything," he said.

George frowned. This did not seem to have been the right answer. "You don't remember anything you did that day?"

"I got up, filled the canteens, and hiked, just like any other day," Charles said.

"You didn't see or hear anything unusual?"

"No."

"Did any of the other slaves say anything to you around that time that you didn't understand, or that sounded strange?"

"No."

"You aren't going to do yourself any favors by refusing to cooperate with us, Charles," John said. "Give us details."

"I don't have any details! If I did I'd give them to you." Did that sound too defensive? He hoped not.

And so it went on. Was he happy in the band? Had he seen anything unusual before the trip began? Did he suspect anyone else? Had anyone approached him with any offers? The circle of questions drew tighter around the central, unasked one: Are you a traitor? As Charles tried to answer in an unsuspicious way, he wondered if that made him sound suspicious. Did he sound too eager to convince, and thus guilty? How could he sound innocent, but not like he was trying too hard to sound innocent? How could he think straight when he couldn't even concentrate on what he was saying?

Now Old Harry jumped in. "You've been unhappy for quite some time, haven't you Charles?" he asked.

"No, I mean, no more than ..." Charles struggled to find the right response. "No, I feel fine. Just like usual." That, he thought, was not the right response. Lame. So lame!

"Are you planning to stick with the band when you're done with your service?" James said, poking the fire with a stick. A cloud of sparks few upward.

"Well, I ..."

Old Harry jumped in again. "Would you have been happy if the ambush gave you your freedom?"

"Well, no," Charles said.

"No?" Old Harry said. "You prefer slavery?"

Charles glanced at George. "I've been treated well."

"Ha," Old Harry said. "That doesn't answer the question. You're not answering many questions, actually. But you'd better answer this one, and answer it straight: Did you help set up that ambush or did you just stay quiet about what you knew?"

"That's enough," George said. "Let's stick with the facts, not with trap questions."

"I was under the impression," Old Harry said, "that we were going to question all the slaves the same way, without any favoritism."

"I have no problem with hard questions," George said.

"None whatsoever. What I have a problem with is you fishing for the answer you want."

"Fine," Old Harry said. "Fine. As long as when my slave is questioned we play by the same rules."

"If you have a problem with the way I'm handling things, you should say so now," George said.

Old Harry held up his hands. "Oh, no. No, just clarifying."

They glared at each other.

"Hrm," Warren said. "I think Charles has told us everything he knows. There's really nothing else to ask, except 'Are you a traitor?' And I've heard nothing from him that would make me believe that." He pinched a mosquito that had gotten stuck in his beard.

Charles felt a rush of hope.

"I've heard nothing," Old Harry said, "that would make me think he isn't a traitor. All the usual stuff they all say. 'I don't know anything.' 'I have no idea what you're talking about.'"

That was too much.

"I ... am ... not ... a ... traitor." Charles fired out the words. "I fought back that day. I could have been killed like any of you. A traitor had no reason ..." he stopped, a little embarrassed. "No reason to, ah, to run."

They sat in silence. James threw a branch on the fire.

"We all ran that day," Warren said softly. "You don't have any reason to feel ashamed of that, Charles."

George cleared his throat. "OK, Charles, you're dismissed." That was it. No thanks for his cooperation. No apology.

John went to get Gary for his interrogation. Well that was good at least, Charles thought. At least he hadn't been singled out alone for humiliation. But he might not be off the hook, either, especially if Gary said something stupid or tried to make up a story to clear himself.

Back at his fire, as Charles cracked branches to feed the blaze, the other smugglers didn't say anything to him. Or much of anything to each other, when he was within earshot, although a group at a fire out toward the edge of camp was laughing loudly over something. Charles looked over to where Gary stood in the flickering light of the leaders' fire; James pointing, Gary shaking his head.

Charles wished he had known about the ambush. Then he could have made sure it was a success and those ungrateful bullies had gotten what they deserved. After all his service, to treat him that way. He snapped the branches as if they were necks. With all those bullets flying, how had those idiots missed Old Harry? How had

## Trails continued

Big John died and those other smug bastards survived?

As he got absorbed in his task and the fire leaped up brightly, burning off the chill, his rage began to die down and smolder. He was going to turn into Marguerite, if he wasn't careful: silent and resentful and everyone waiting for him to explode one day.

Still, there was another emotion, too, that was tugging at him, poking at him, demanding attention, rising out of the relief, anger and shame. What was it? He was tense, and his breathing was fast. Then he recognized it. Rising terror.

If George turned on him — or needed to sacrifice him to satisfy an insurgency — Charles would have a better chance with the cats. Would George sacrifice him? Charles thought he might. He realized his hands were shaking. Stop it, he told himself. Stop. Here he was with a fire warming his hands, instead of a rope binding them tight against the bark of a tree. Things could be worse.

Warren came by as Charles was setting up his bedroll, and stood beside him, holding his hands out over the fire and shifting from one foot to the other. Now what, Charles wondered.

"Hey," Warren said. "I wouldn't worry too much about all the questions."

Charles was not about to offer up his fear and anger for Warren's inspection. He shrugged. "It's no big deal."

"Everyone is hungry, and tired, and sick to death of all this heat and not having enough water. And they're scared. Don't blame them too much, Charles."

"Thanks," Charles said, a sheen of sarcasm floating on the word.

Warren sighed. "You have to remember, too, George is getting pressure about you. He has to go through the motions and show that he's taking this seriously, or the band will turn on him."

Charles wondered just how much pressure George was under, but didn't feel it would be a good idea to ask. And he wasn't entirely sure he wanted to know the answer.

"Just be careful," Warren said. "Stick with George. I don't know of any threats against you but I wouldn't want you to get hurt."

And with that comforting remark, he crunched away through the leaves.

Whatever the leaders had decided about the slaves, they took no immediate action, a result Charles could live with. Action meant hot knives or coals, small bits of flesh sliced off a little at a time, a rope around the neck, or a stake at his back with wood piled high around him. In a smuggling band, a conviction on charges of being a traitor did not come with the possibility of parole.

Mindful of Warren's advice, Charles was even more careful to stick close to George. He could still feel hostility from the smugglers, but it remained at a stalemate with a grudging cease fire, and everyone settled down into the routine of mountain travel.

Each morning at daybreak the slaves woke up, or if they didn't, were shaken awake by their masters. The slaves kept any complaints to themselves, rolled out of their bedrolls and wrapped them up, threw more branches on the fire and stood, blinking in the smoke and stretching their aching muscles, as the trees emerged from the darkness and bird songs filled the silence. Then they grabbed the canteens, and staggered downhill to the closest water.

The clang of the canteens, the crunching footsteps in the leaves and the splashing water jarred away the last sleep. It took several trips to fill all the canteens, by which time Charles' muscles warmed up and started to hurt less.

Eileen and her group of slave suspects had quickly wearied of rising early to send someone to accompany the slaves to get water, as it defeated the purpose of having a slave do their work for them. So Eileen just warned the slaves they were being watched, and that they had better keep that in mind, news the slaves received solemnly until her back was turned.

While the slaves hauled water, the smugglers up at the camp stretched and complained about their sore muscles, analyzed the weather, compared blisters, bug bites and tribulations and talked about how that was always the way, wasn't it, and how they were going to take up something easy like blacksmithing so they wouldn't have to ever put themselves through this again, ate small mouthfuls of pemmican, drank from their newly filled canteens, laced up their boots and began eyeing their packs unhappily.

When George gave the command to move out, the band heaved on their packs, with the help of groans when necessary.

The slaves' last chore was to put dirt on the fires, a job they did with extra care because the drought had parched

the woods into kindling. Nobody cared for the idea of trying to outrun their own campfire later in the day.

The band waited for the leaders to move out, and then followed them in tight bunches that gradually trailed back into a thinner and thinner line, with lone hikers or knots of people in conversation. Any who fell too far back, however, hurried to catch up. Getting out of sight or earshot of the others might be mistaken by the Appalachians as an invitation to appropriate a pack of sulfur.

From Scranton, the smugglers had traveled south and east, and were well into the Appalachian mountain chain now. They followed the mountaintops as much as possible. Once they had reached these heights, the ridges often ran mostly level for miles. Sometimes the band threaded over sharp summits only a few feet wide, like the peak of a roof, with sides dropping steeply out of sight, and other times they walked through broad grassy meadows. Although the meadows were treacherous in a thunderstorm when hikers were alone and walking almost among the clouds, Charles would have welcomed the cool rain washing the air clean and resurrecting the streams.

Eventually, the ridges gave way, sometimes hastily, where the rivers had worn away the bank for eons, and the smugglers had to pick their way down the diving slopes, searching out footholds and trees to hang onto as they dropped toward the increasing roar of the water.

Once down, they faced the steep climb back up the other side. Some attacked the hill dead on, scrabbling straight up the face, while others angled back and forth, trading speed for a more gradual climb until the slope grew less severe. As a reward for their climb, they faced the mountaintop still rising ahead of them through the trees, always just up over the next rise, and the next rise, and the next rise, and the next rise, until finally the next rise was the last rise. On good days, another gently undulating stretch of even ridge lay ahead at the top. On worse days, the mountains were relentless, taking them thousands of feet down and back up repeatedly. The miles went slowly on those days, and the hunger bit harder.

These elements repeated daily, but not monotonously. Each mountain dressed in forest, but some donned mostly oak, others hickory, and others pine or hemlock. Each had its own rock formations and new patterns of gullies. Some were benevolent and gentle, others rough and grudging.

Frequently the smugglers passed overlooks, where rock



## Trails continued

cliffs dropped hundreds of feet down. Sometimes they paused there to rest, swinging their legs out over the emptiness. The mountain range ran in rows, long waves of peaks side by side for miles, fading purple into the distance. Often the travelers saw eagles or hawks below their feet, riding the updrafts along the mountainside.

Despite the vistas, the route was harsh. Rocks waited under every weary step to pummel Charles' feet and turn his ankles. Only a fool would travel this way, over the roughest, worst possible route, instead of down in the valleys where the terrain was gentler and the water more plentiful. That was what made the mountains the ideal smuggling route, though: They were lonely.

Even the ancients, it seemed, had found these places too tough for habitation. Artifacts were everywhere in the valleys — rusty steel doorknobs, frozen rusty hinges, crumbling plastic, scattered bricks. Up in the mountains, the smugglers rarely found such leavings of a vanished civilization. Only the ghost roads. These flat lines of gravel and black earth ran for miles where the ancients had somehow cut straight through the mountains, leaving behind perfectly sheer, impossible cliffs. They had used these routes to get across the mountains, not to arrive at them.

It was on one of these plateaus that the smugglers dropped down, groaning, when George called a halt after the fifth day out of Scranton. Some slumped forward, heads on knees, and others stared off over the valley ahead, not really looking at it. They began to rummage in their packs for a bite of food.

"Get your rest, everybody," George said. "Tomorrow" — smugglers watched him without enthusiasm — "we're going hunting."

Smiles spread around the group now, and a couple of weak whoops, mixed with some murmuring about it being about time. A few of the smugglers took out their bows and started waxing their strings.

Dan, the hunt organizer, had wandered along the plateau some distance, and after poking around the leaves, he called George over and pointed at the ground. George bent to look closer, and then straightened and put his hands on his hips. Soon they called over the rest of the leaders. A few of the

band, Charles among them, wandered over for a look as well. "What is it?" one of the smugglers asked.

"People have been along here very recently," Dan said, pointing to the rumpled trail in the even surface of the leaves. He pulled the leaves aside in a couple spots. The ground underneath was powder dry, but still soft enough to show the outlines of moccasined feet.

The smugglers considered the tracks in silence for a while. "Appalachies," Dan said, unnecessarily. No civilized trappers or hunters would ever venture this far out.

The news got around the camp quickly and many of the smugglers came over to see for themselves. More of them began to string their bows and check their revolvers.

"All right, pack up," George said. "We've got to get farther downhill, away from that cliff wall. You couldn't ask for a nicer shooting view from the top of that."

"So are we still going to stop and hunt here, or keep hiking tomorrow?" Warren asked George.

George pondered this. "I think we have to stop here."

"We have enough supplies for one more day, at least," Warren said. "If we send out hunting parties with Appalachies around, odds are good someone won't come back."

George shrugged. "Odds are good someone won't come back if they sign up to go on a smuggling trip. If Appalachies are following us, a day's journey isn't going to make any difference. And ..." he lowered his voice, "I can't make them walk much farther. I've pushed about as hard as I can."

"Maybe the men won't want to stop, if there are Appalachies around," Warren suggested.

George studied him.

Dan interjected, "They know we're here anyway. They always know. There's no way they're this close to us and don't know. If they don't, they will soon. Harper's Ferry is too far away to try to get there and sneak in there and buy food."

George nodded. "The longer we wait, the weaker we get. We're just going to have to risk it."

"I just hate for anybody to get killed if they don't have to," Warren said.

"Better if we can avoid it, but it happens," George said. "They knew what they were signing up for. I tell them all ahead of time."

Warren cleared his throat. "Ah. But ..."

George set his mouth and began to look off into the distance as he did when he was done with a conversation.

The smugglers moved downhill from the cliff and set up a new campsite, without the flat spots to sleep, but with a clear

view through the trees in every direction. Anyone who approached would find the band waiting.

Charles joined a group throwing together a fire toward the middle of the camp. He didn't like the idea of sleeping on the edge with Appalachies prowling around.

"I wonder how many of those white devils there are out there?" one of the smugglers, Pete, a stocky man with a gray beard, said. Pete was popular. Steady and responsible, he was always ready for a friendly chat or a joke.

Dan, striking a flint to shower sparks on a pile of twigs and wood shavings, said, "Oh, hard to say, but from the sign I'd only say one or two."

"Yeah, but I mean, how many all over this wilderness? Think if they had the guts to fight and the weapons they'd be a match for us?"

John scoffed. "No way. There's only a handful in the whole wilderness. You never run across any more than just a trace here or there. If there were any big tribes of them anywhere, you'd find villages. Trading posts. All you ever see is some savage in cat skins, hoofing it away from you as fast as he can go."

"You can tell they're afraid," Dan agreed. "Slinking around the way they do. If they had any numbers they'd show a little more courage. And we'd get to pay them back for their sneaky little murders." He spat. "Knife and run, that's all they do. A bullet in the back is the only thing good enough for 'em. I'll kill the last one if I can." He blew on the small flame in the twigs to get it going.

"I'm always a little worried about shooting them," Pete admitted, fanning smoke out of his face with the battered hat he always wore. "I seen them around a few times when I'm out hunting and I'd of loved to drop them in their treacherous little tracks. But I never knew how many might be just over the hill. I'd get to thinking about how I might look with arrows coming out every which way, and just let the bugger keep walking."

"I heard they ain't really people at all," a smuggler named Jake broke in. Enthusiastic and always ready for a good time, Jake got bored if the adventure didn't keep coming. He had been bored for some time now, so he was delighted to stop and hunt, and even happier that there were Appalachies around, although he made a concerned face about it. "Yeah," he went on, "they're more than human, I always heard. That's why they survived out here when the rest of the people was dying off in the Bad Times. They don't need food. And they never got sick like anyone else. That's because ..."

## Trails continued

"Good God, Jake, enough of that nonsense," John said. "They're human all right. At least they shit like any human I've ever seen. You've never run across one of their piles? They're just a low-grade version that's more like an animal sometimes."

"But where do they come from then? They ain't nothing like us," Jake protested. "White as sheets. And skinny and sickly looking."

"What I heard," Charles began, but Jake cut him off.

"Shut up. Nobody asked you for an opinion."

Charles imagined what it would be like to beat Jake over the head with a limb. He guessed it would be fulfilling.

"My old Pop," Pete said, "used to say they were the original people in this part of the world. Legend had it new settlers came from lands over the sea and drove them out, ran them out of their villages and killed them off so they had to run up into the mountains to survive. Guess they had the last laugh when the Bad Times came 'cause they missed the whole thing."

"I've heard that story," Jake said dubiously. "But I don't know as I give much credit to it. Nobody's ever found these lands over the sea, no matter how far out they go."

"Now, I don't know about that," Warren weighed in. "There are maps and artifacts that indicate pretty strongly there really were — are, I guess — countries over the sea. Now the Appalachies being the original people, you may be right about that being just an old tale. Myself, I believe the theory that the Appalachies were just like anybody else. When everything fell apart, they were the ones living on the edges. They fled into the woods and got away from it all. Most people came back, eventually. I guess they just stayed."

"But why are they so white, then?" Jake persisted, unwilling to relegate the Appalachies to mere boring mortals.

Warren considered this. "Well, nobody really knows that. Maybe there just were so few of them they just inbred too much and it made them weak and sickly. Or maybe something else. A lot of strange things came out of those times that we can't really explain. Take the cats."

"If I was stuck up in the mountains skulking around living on cat meat," Jake said, "I'd beat my way to the nearest vil-

lage and find a nice local girl to settle down with."

"Ha," Pete said. "You'd get yourself shot. If some wild Appalachie came down out of the woods and courted my daughter, he'd settle down all right. Permanent, like."

They laughed.

"Pete's right, though," Warren said. "Culture is a strong thing. Who would accept them in now? They're outcasts." He sounded almost sympathetic, a sentiment Charles never remembered hearing in a conversation about Appalachies.

Charles wondered again about Warren and where he had come from. He talked differently. He knew a lot about a lot of different subjects, and spoke with authority. If someone challenged him, he'd start citing books most of them had never heard of, at which point his challenger would concede the field, but go on disbelieving him.

Charles remembered hearing many stories about the Appalachies around the fireplace in Easton, stories often not much more sophisticated than these homespun rural tales Charlie and Pete were bringing up. In some stories, Appalachies were true humans, just with uncanny woodcraft and an insatiable hatred of civilized people. In others, they rose to the level of mythical beings, elf-like forest people with ghostly white skin who could travel without a sound and who painted their faces to blend perfectly into the brush. Sometimes they had magical powers of invisibility or seduction. Sometimes they were the only really good people left in the world, a simpler and nobler people. Some people considered it bad luck to talk about them at all.

Parents warned their children to behave or the Appalachies would get them, a threat that children in Easton began to doubt once they became more fully aware of the flat mountainless terrain around Easton. Maybe the threats worked better in Scranton, Charles thought. For his part, he'd been terrified of them when he'd been small, afraid of even being out on the street when shadows started to get deeper.

Whatever their nature and origin, the Appalachies probably made the smuggling route more safe than otherwise. There were so many tales about travelers and capable hunters who went out too far into the wilderness and disappeared. Many of the stories detailed the unpleasant events in the lives of the incautious adventurers just before those lives came to an end, although sources were hazy. People heard from someone who knew someone who found the body or who saw it all but escaped.

As Charles sat now in the gathering twilight, watching the full moon moving upward through the tree branches,

he wondered what the Appalachies were really like. His time in the wilderness had taught him little about them. He had seen their handiwork in person: the arrow-riddled corpse of poor old Jumpy, after he had lagged behind the group one day, and the bodies of the small group of smugglers who, about six years ago, went downhill for a water refill and never came back. That's when the water job had been delegated to the slaves.

He had never actually seen an Appalachie up close, only glimpses of forms running through the woods at a distance, or flickering shadows that he couldn't be sure weren't actually shadows.

That was about to change.

## Chapter Four

**T**he meat was tough, seared outside and almost raw inside, but Charles chomped it as if it might still be thinking of running away. His stomach wavered a little at the rush of rich food, but Charles figured he would worry about the eating and let his stomach worry about its own troubles.

Those who had shot the animals got to pick their cut of meat, and then, by tradition, a couple of the leaders stood over the roasted wild boar and deer carving off chunks and doling them out. The smugglers gnawed the bones clean, and some even ate the liver and other parts of the guts raw. When they had eaten everything else, a few whacked the bones with rocks and licked out the marrow, or scraped fat off the hides.

Then the band heaped the leftover scraps on the bonfires so the smell of blood and meat would not draw bears, panthers or cats. Then they sat around the fire, licking fat and blood from their fingers and joking and laughing as they had not done for many days, although a few looked uneasy as their stomachs gurgled complaints.

"I'm still hungry," Jake said, picking his teeth with a twig.

*Next page*



## Trails continued

"Would've been nice to have a little left over. Might have if James hadn't shot a tiny little fawn." Smugglers grinned.

"Better than the one you shot," James said. "I didn't see you bring it in — where are you stashing it?"

"I was waiting for one worth shooting. Hate to waste my time on five bites."

"Wasn't any problem for James to haul this one in," Eileen chipped in. "He just threw it over his shoulder and walked back."

"At least I didn't waste a perfectly good arrow like Pete did," James said. Pete sat roasting a squirrel on a stick. "Who's still eating?" he said, waving them off.

"You should save that hide and get it tanned when we get home," Dan told him.

Pete pretended not to listen to the laughter and attempted to look blissful while grinding at the rubbery meat with his teeth.

Charles would have been flustered and defensive if the smugglers mocked him like that. But it would be nice, he thought, if they cared enough to make fun of him. The last time he had gone hunting, he had shot his arrow three feet over the deer's back. Jake had seen it happen but just shook his head and never said a word about it.

At least now everyone was in a better mood. If they went back to ignoring the slaves it would be better than open hostility. Nobody had complained when the slaves got an equal share of meat, so that was a good sign.

Tomorrow the work would begin, now that they all had food in their stomachs. If there was plenty of game and wild boars didn't gore anybody and the hunters shot straight, they could replenish their packs in just a few days. If predators were on the prowl, or if the deer were scarce, it might take a couple of weeks to stock up. They might even have to try a new area further south.

They would figure that out later. For now, the smugglers had the afternoon to rest and recharge from the relentless pace they had kept up since Scranton. Deepening their relief was the knowledge that they were far out of range of any pursuing soldiers.

They lounged against packs and trees, napping and chatting. George even let those who had run out of their own

tobacco, which was almost everyone, dip into the leftover trade supply for a celebratory smoke.

"There's plenty of it," he said. "May as well get rid of it — just more to carry, anyway."

And you can score some easy points to help them forget the way you've been driving them, Charles thought.

Smoke curled upward into the leaves, and the pungent smell of tobacco wafted through camp. Without alcohol to fuel the mood, it stayed mellow.

"A story," Jake said. "Time for a story. Who's up?"

"Eliza," James said, and others picked up the sentiment.

"Aww, I was just getting comfortable," Eliza said, but she sat up. Most of the time Eliza preferred thinking to talking. She was not shy, but had light brown eyes that looked inside your head, which made people uneasy. But everyone listened when she made up her stories, or told the traditional tales, altering the angles and adding details that made them new. Her art had already done great service many times by distracting the smugglers from their misery after the weary days.

As she began to speak now, people gathered around and dug out fresh tobacco to chew or smoke.

Long ago (she said), in the darkest days of the Calamity, people fled from the cities, leaving behind even the bodies of their friends and family. They found little safety in the countryside, because everyone else fled there too. The farmers tried to protect their land, but in the chaos the crowds burned the farmhouses and stole the grain from the barns.

Hunger stalked them long before spring came. Most of those who made it to spring had no seed for crops, and wouldn't have known how to plant it anyway. Disease had come with them from the cities, and the pestilence killed many before hunger could get them.

Whenever anybody started to get the hang of primitive life and got a nice village started, along would come more people fleeing from the cities who would wreck everything and steal their food, and so the fighting went on until the cities were empty and almost everyone in the countryside was dead too. The land finally grew quiet when only a few were left and their civilization was dead. Then like Noah and his family, they began to learn to hunt and live off the land and grow enough food to make up the difference.

The pestilence never would leave for good, but it came less often, and a few people always lived to carry on. They told stories to each other about the luxuries of the old world, the medicine that could cure any sickness, the markets full of food, and the marvelous machines that did your work

for you. Nobody ever went back to the ruins of the cities, though, where death hung like a fog, and ghosts went abroad even in the daytime.

The people in the little villages scrounged in the dirt and poked through the woods for rusting metal scraps to make into good plows and nails and horseshoes and shovels. They also began to design metal weapons, some based on memory, some on trial and error.

But they soon used up all their metal scraps, and more children lived long enough to grow up, and everyone hoarded metal like jewels.

In one of our villages, some say it was in Easton, there lived a blacksmith named Paul. Easton was just a small village on the edge of the water then, not being any greater than any of the others. Paul's grandfather had told him stories about the great cities, and the part about whole buildings made out of metal was what interested Paul the most.

Paul knew from his grandfather, and from travelers, that the cities were still populated, the ghosts of the residents drifting among the buildings. The ghosts were irritable, his grandfather said, because there was nothing to do in the cities anymore, and also they were angry at the descendants of the lucky few who still had any. The ghosts with living great-grandchildren were more cheerful, his grandfather said, and if you could find them, they would give you luck and protect you. But like as not they were resting in peace and nowhere to be found.

Paul was a skeptical man and he did not believe these ghost tales, except deep inside, in the small part of him that got worried on dark nights. But he kept thinking about the metal, and the riches and prosperity and ease it would bring him. He imagined how much food the village could grow if everyone had a steel plow. And how easy it would be to defeat their enemies if they fought wooden spears with steel swords, and could deflect arrows with their armor. Or if they had guns. Most of the guns left over from the old days were very rusty now and there was no ammunition for them, but the concept was pretty simple and he knew he could make a simple one that worked, if he could figure out how to make powder for it.

Paul thought about this for a couple of years while he worked at his blacksmith shop, until finally, finding he had almost no metal to work with, he decided to travel to the closest ghost city and see if he could spirit some away.

Nobody else would go with him, so Paul went alone, and arrived at the city as night was falling. Twisted leaning tow-

## Trails continued

ers loomed up in the twilight. Towers made out of metal.

He camped a respectful distance away to wait until morning, however, because his skepticism about ghosts was waning again.

It did not help that a ghost came to his camp that night. Paul was having a little after-supper whiskey as he sat by his fire, when he heard footsteps coming through the leaves. Before he could jump to his feet or pull out a knife, a figure in a dark cloak stood at the edge of the firelight, its face hidden in the shadows of its hood. Paul sat with his flask of whiskey still halfway to his mouth, staring, and then, pulling himself together, decided he must say something stern. "Whaaa ... whois ... ahrgh! ... he said.

The figure did not reply. Instead, it sat down on the other side of the fire, hands on its knees, and looked around the camp, which troubled Paul deeply, because there was no chair.

The figure's voice, when it spoke, bothered Paul even more. It was a sort of moan, like the wind in the eaves on a stormy night, except this wind formed words. Paul listened carefully, as he did not want to interrupt and ask the figure to repeat itself.

"Nice fire," the figure moaned. "I have not seen one of those for a long time. It makes me want to warm my hands."

"Oh, by all means, certainly," Paul said. "Here, I'll add some wood."

"Fool," the figure said. "I cannot feel it. All is cold to me now."

"What," Paul said, "can I do for you, exactly, then?" although he was more preoccupied with what the ghost might decide to do.

"Nothing," the figure said. "But you can do something for yourself. Stay out of the city. It is sacred ground. If you enter it, you will die."

"How bad is dying?" Paul asked.

"Bad. Worse even than being alive."

By this point, Paul was having trouble maintaining his lack of belief in ghosts. He had not yet drunk enough whiskey to be able to manufacture such a grouchy and cynical apparition as he was talking to now. He took another swig of his whiskey and rolled it around on his tongue experimentally, hoping it tasted different than

usual. It did not. He took a couple more gulps anyway.

He eyed the ghost, if that is what it was. It did not seem to be overly hostile, although he reflected that reading body language in a disembodied being might be hit or miss. But he was a practical man, and although the hair was prickling at the back of his neck, he realized he did not know how to fight a ghost if it did decide to be hostile, and if he could keep it talking, maybe he could distract it from whatever ghosts did to you when they decided to get on with their evening. Plus, it occurred to him that, if ghosts could make threats, perhaps they could also be reasoned with.

"Now, thanks for the warning," he said. "But it doesn't really seem fair, you all hoarding all that nice metal you can't even use, with us poor peasants scraping by on scraps."

"Baloney," the ghost said. "At least you're scraping by. Look at us — dead as doornails. Didn't even make it out of the city. You call that fair? We're stuck here, so we'll keep the metal. I'd call that even."

"But what are you going to do with steel?"

"What are YOU going to do with it?" the ghost asked.

"Make plows and drainage pipes and woodstoves and handy stuff like that."

"Anything else?"

Paul squirmed. "Well ..."

"Like swords or arrowheads or guns, maybe?"

"Not me personally," Paul said. "I'm a peaceful man myself. I mean," he added, looking away from the ghost's gaze and sipping on his whiskey, "maybe for hunting or self defense or something."

"All that apocalypse and you all haven't learned a darned thing," the ghost said. "I ought to let you have the metal and let you ruin everything again, I really should. It's not our job to babysit the living."

"It will be different this time," Paul insisted. "We've really learned our lesson."

The ghost had a good laugh at that. "Tell you what," it said. "I'll have a talk with the others. Maybe we don't care as much as we thought we did."

Paul did not go into the city the next day, thinking it might be best to wait for permission before exploring. He didn't know if the ghost could make good on its threat to kill him, but he wasn't sure he cared to experiment. He felt silly though, feeding his fire in the broad daylight, and by the end of the day, he had about convinced himself he had been dreaming the night before. Then at twilight, the ghost came back.

"Bet you thought I was just a bad dream," the ghost said.

"Oh no, not at all," Paul said. "Been looking forward to seeing you again."

"None of your sass," the ghost said. "Listen, we've been talking, and we've decided to call your bluff. We don't have the energy to patrol around here all the time trying to stop you from sneaking in and pilfering metal. We have regrets to stew on. You just take all the metal you want and put it to good, peaceful, harmonious agricultural purposes. Just don't come in here at night when we're trying to walk around haunting things, or we won't answer for the consequences."

So Paul promised again that he wouldn't make any weapons, and the ghost left, laughing itself sick. And Paul (scrupulously working only in the daytime) gathered a large load of steel and aluminum, took it back to his shop and started selling metal tools and goods at a great profit.

When everyone else saw the riches he was building from his metal monopoly, they figured out where he was getting the metal. Seeing that he was able to go unhaunted into the cities and work, they rushed to get their own. Paul warned them to stay out of the cities at night, and to not use the metal to make weapons (which he only made for personal use). The warning about nighttime they heeded with care, but they did make weapons (for their own personal use and the use of their closest and richest friends).

"And they say," Eliza concluded, "That during wartime, you can hear the ghosts laughing in the ruined cities."

Twilight had fallen while she told her story. A few people got up to get more wood for the fire, while the rest sat staring into the flames.

"Thanks a lot, Eliza," Dan said. "Such a cheerful story. Just the thing to relax on a fine evening."

Eliza laughed. "I just have to remind you guys how rotten you are, once in a while."

"It's a good reminder," Henry the tailor said, "especially of the perils of turning to science instead of God. The Calamity was God's judgment on us for ..."

Groans arose around the fire. "More stories!"

So at their insistence, Eliza moved on to lighter tales, starting with the one about the people long ago who flew to the moon, and what they did there.

But Charles rolled up in his bedroll and only half listened to the talking as he fell asleep. Tomorrow would bring a lot of work, and he was weary. He slept without the nightmares about food that never filled him, indeed, without any dreams at all.



## Trails continued

**T**he slaves and a few smugglers stayed behind from the hunting the next day to guard the sulfur. Most of the band were expert hunters, able to stalk silently through damp leaves and rustle through dry leaves like a harmless squirrel. They could feel twigs under their feet and pull away before the snap that would give them away. They knew the language of the forest sounds, and could hone in on the flicker of a deer's ear or a hog turning its head. When the time came, they could put their arrow exactly where they wanted it. Even an animal with a running start could not always escape.

The animals that kept the band alive were mostly white-tailed deer and wild hogs, which were large enough to be worth the trouble of pursuing. They were also plentiful, especially the hogs. On rare occasions, the smugglers might get to feast on an elk. They ate black bear and turkey if they could get them.

They shot cats whenever they saw them, but only ate them if starvation was the only other option. They did keep the fur as a prized hunting trophy. John had an elaborate dress hat made of cat fur at home he liked to bring out on social occasions, and many of the band advertised their status as expert woodsmen by wearing catskin caps, with the tails hanging down at the back. Cat fur also made a good bow decoration. Each color had its uses — orange and white were popular for decoration, and tabby made good camouflage.

The slaves usually stayed back at the camp to dry the meat, pulverize it and mix it with fat to make pemmican. Properly made, this mash would last months, and aside from taste and texture, it was the perfect food.

For once, the slaves had the easiest job. The hunters had to wake up in the dark, stoke the fires, and eat a few mouthfuls of pemmican before crunching off into the gray morning woods. The slaves could stay in their warm bedrolls until the sun rose up into the trees.

They did have to get up in time to prepare in the event of a successful hunt. To begin, they chopped saplings with a hatchet, then hacked them into four-foot sections. Sharpen-

ing one end of these sections into points, they drove them into the ground and cut notches into the tops. Then they looked for smaller, straight branches to run between the stakes, making a drying rack to hang the meat from. Maple shoots, straight and supple, worked well for this.

The hunters brought in two small pigs by noon. They chopped off the haunch of one of these for their lunch, and turned the rest over to the slaves.

To get started, Charles and Gary roped the back feet of one of the pigs and hauled it up to hang from a tree branch. Then, slicing the skin away from the hocks, they gripped slippery handfuls of it and hauled down on it until it peeled away, making additional cuts as needed to encourage it away from the carcass.

Once the skin was off, they cut the red meat off the bone in large chunks and handed it to Marguerite, who sliced the meat with a steady hand. She was better than anyone else at slicing the neat strips that ensured the meat would dry as evenly as possible. She then hung the strips over the drying racks.

Gary was good at skinning the animals, but his heart wasn't in it. He always looked disappointed when he wasn't among the hunters. While Charles chafed at having to skin a hog when he would rather be safe at home tinkering or reading, Gary was irritated to be skinning a hog when he could be out pursuing one, being one of the gang, an expert woodsman and a hardened smuggler.

Charles doubted Gary would ever fulfill his dream of being a hardened smuggler. He was too soft-hearted, though he tried to hide it, and he cared too much what the others thought of him. The veteran smugglers were vain, of course, about their hunting skills and ability to handle the hardships of the trail, but they also didn't need anyone to pat them on the back. They were good at what they did, and they knew it.

Gary had the powerful build to take care of himself on the trail, but his talent with weapons was marginal, and he didn't come across as very intelligent. Charles thought this was because he tried too hard to look competent, and so he talked even when he really didn't know what he was talking about. He also had thick eyebrows that gave him a brutish look and did nothing to dispel the idea that he was less than brilliant, and he had awkward large ears. But from working with him day after day, Charles knew Gary was as intelligent as any of the other smugglers, and could go far if he just quit trying so hard.

As they worked now, Gary broke the silence.

"I've been thinking a bunch about that ambush," he said. "If we can figure it out, maybe we won't have to worry about our own skins so much."

"Huh," Charles said, not really in the mood to talk.

"Now, the first thing you'd think of, of course, is maybe somebody in the band was a spy for the soldiers."

"Ah."

"Now, you ask, why would they do that? Money," Gary said. "These smugglers are outlaws. Most of them are pretty loyal, but the thing they want most is money. That's why they're smugglers in the first place. Give them enough money, they'll do anything."

Thanks for explaining to me what smugglers are like, Charles thought. I've only been around them for seven years.

"How would the soldiers get in touch to offer their bribe?" Charles asked.

"There," Gary said, "that's just the thing I've been thinking about." He stopped pulling on the pig skin and lowered his voice. "The traitor could have sold us out last trip. Made a deal — we'll be at such and so a spot when we come back, wait there."

Charles stared at him. "The only one who could make that happen would be a leader. I can't think of any of them who would do that."

"I can," Marguerite said, although she had not appeared to be paying any attention.

They looked at her. She didn't offer any more comment, just kept slicing meat.

"Or," Gary said, glancing over at the nearest smuggler on guard over the sulfur, and navigating the conversation back to safer ground, "maybe someone from Easton paid a smuggler — anybody in the band — to tip off the soldiers. Could have been either side that did the bribing, if you think about it."

Charles gritted his teeth. Once Gary got an idea in his head, he wouldn't let it go. "Listen, you've still got the same problem. How would anybody except a leader know where to set the trap? And the other thing — nobody from Easton has any reason to try to stop us. They can't get enough sulfur, trading on their own. That's why they talk big about shutting us down but never do it."

They started skinning the second hog. It slipped in the rope a little, and Charles heaved it back up and pulled the rope tight around its legs again.

"Well, all right, that's what I'm trying to figure out," Gary

## Trails continued

said. "There had to be a mole of some kind. Maybe it wasn't one of us at all. Maybe that guy in Scranton — Jeff."

"No way," Charles said. "He'd never do that. Besides, Jeff doesn't know our plans. He just waits for us to knock."

After a pause, Charles suggested, "What if there was a traitor in the band, who just sneaked out to tip off the soldiers and then hiked back?"

"Hey, there ya go," Gary said. "Coming up with some ideas for once instead of just poking holes in everything." He wiped his face with his arm, holding the knife away to keep from smearing blood on his clothes.

"I'll poke holes in it," Marguerite said, in a tone of voice suitable for explaining that it doesn't snow in the summer. "Whoever it was would have had to hike a couple of days ahead and back again, without anyone noticing. Impossible."

"Well," Charles said, "maybe they sneaked out at night. Went to a farmhouse or something to pass the message along, then sneaked back before dawn."

Marguerite sighed. "First, they would have had to sneak out of a camp without making enough noise to wake anybody up. And these are people who wake up easily. Then they'd have to walk far enough away to light a lantern, which by the way I don't think we have, and walk all by themselves all night without getting eaten by a cat."

Charles' ears were burning. "All right, all right, fine, it's a bad idea."

"Then," Marguerite went on, "they would have had to get back before morning after a night's hike, sneak back in without anyone noticing, and not look horrible in the morning, and get up and hike, full of energy, all day. They'd have to do all that, of course ..."

"FINE," Charles said. "I get it."

One of the smugglers on guard glanced over at them.

"Keep your voice down," Gary said.

There was a sullen silence for a while. Done deboning the pork, Gary and Charles switched to helping Marguerite finish up the slicing work.

"Now here's an idea," Gary said. "Carrier pigeons. All the guy would have to do is just walk slow that day, signal a pi-

geon flying overhead, attach a message, and off it would go to the soldiers."

"Signal a pigeon?" Charles said. "How many pigeons have you seen flying around in the mountains?"

"Well ... none, but I'm not looking for them," Gary said. "Anyway, maybe it would come out from the city and be trained to look for a certain color cloth or a kind of hat. Who wears the brightest hat? Any suspicious outfits?"

"Can pigeons even see color?"

"Why shouldn't they?" Gary said. "Doesn't everything see color?"

"No."

"What are you, the eye expert?"

Charles, having had his ideas demolished, now was enjoying passing the favor along to somebody else. "What if the pigeon flies over at a bad time, and the traitor is sitting there eating supper and a pigeon with a message on its leg comes and sits on his head?"

Marguerite laughed, something Charles couldn't remember hearing before. He was glad, though, that he had distracted her from remembering how bad his own idea had been.

"Come on, maybe it's a hand signal or something," Gary said.

And at this unsatisfactory juncture, they let the discussion drop, because they were done cutting up the meat. They saved the heads and livers for supper, and gathered up the rest of the entrails, hides and bones and burned them.

Not long afterward, the hunters started coming in for the evening. They did not bring any more animals with them, and Charles was grouchy to see them pull off strips of drying meat the slaves had just spent so much time preparing, to supplement their supper of heads and livers. He glanced at Marguerite to see how she was taking the destruction of her handiwork. She just sat eating the last of her pemmican, seeming not to care.

The next day, with no new meat to cure, the slaves gathered acorns instead. Acorns tasted good, kept well, and would keep you alive even if you had nothing else. The smugglers sometimes mixed them with pemmican, or ground them with stones to make a rough flour for biscuits or flat bread.

Acorns were bitter fresh, but repeated soaking in warm water rendered them edible. The slaves cracked the shells, pried out the nuts, then dropped them in small copper pots of water, where the bitterness turned the water dark as it seeped out. Then the slaves soaked them again, and again, until the water stayed clear. After that, they spread the nuts out to dry.

Some years there weren't many acorns, but this year when they found stands of oak trees, the acorns were thick on the ground. The slaves gathered them into bags and by lunchtime had a mound of them back at the camp. Picking out the ones with wormholes and throwing them away, they started cracking the rest and warming water in small copper pots.

As they worked, Gary went back to the conspiracy theories, apparently not overly discouraged by the squabble over pigeons.

"I had another idea about that ambush," he said. "Maybe it was spies." He paused as if waiting for Charles to break in. Hearing no rebuttal, he went on. "Maybe they were just patrolling around, and then when they saw us coming, they'd run off to report."

"But they'd have to live out in the woods for weeks by themselves. They'd be cat lunch way before we came along," Charles said.

"Aw, you'd risk it for enough money," Gary said. "Anyway, maybe it was a group of them. They'd make a little camp, or patrol together."

"What if we walked by on the other side of the mountain and they never saw us?" Charles asked.

"Maybe they got lucky."

That seemed far-fetched to Charles. "Anyhow," he said, "the whole bunch would have to wait until they saw us coming, then they'd have to not just beat us back but find the soldiers in time to have them be waiting at just the right spot. And we never saw any tracks or anything."

Gary cracked acorns in silence.

Fine, Charles thought. Gary didn't have to get all sulky when his ideas turned out to be stupid.

"There's always that first option, that one neither of you wants to talk about," Marguerite said. "The only one it could be."

Charles frowned. "It doesn't have to be that one."

Gary peered from one to the other. "This one? That one? What one?"

"None of your other ideas made any sense at all," Marguerite said to Charles.

"That one doesn't make sense either," Charles said.

"WHAT one?" Gary said.

"The one both of you are afraid to say," Marguerite said. "That it was George. Or Warren. Or John. Or that old bastard ..."

"Oh, that idea," Gary said.

The only sound was the cracking of acorn shells between flat rocks and the plonk as Marguerite threw the nuts into

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the kettle. Gary and Charles had stopped working and were staring at her. Just thinking that kind of idea was dangerous, and here she had practically shouted it out. They glanced at the smuggler guards. She'd be dead if one of them overheard, but they did not seem to have noticed anything interesting.

"What are you going to do, tell on me? Go right ahead."

She couldn't really mean that, Charles thought. But she didn't seem to be daring them to tell. She was simply letting them know that meeting a grisly end at the hands of the smugglers or cutting up a hog were about the same to her. It was the hopelessness he fought off at his worst moments, but she seemed to be past fighting it.

Aside from that, her treasonous theory didn't seem plausible. "I know George better than that," Charles said. Internally, he added, Well, I think I do. Aloud: "He's no saint but he makes plenty of money. He wouldn't need a payoff. Neither would the others."

"All of them," Gary said, "would take a payoff if it was big enough. But," he added, "I'm not saying George would do that."

"Maybe," Marguerite said, "it's somebody else who wants to run the band."

Charles wondered if she were spilling a secret that she actually knew about Old Harry, or just conjecturing about the leaders in general. The idea of Old Harry whispering his dreams in her ear was ludicrous, both because he didn't care for her emotionally in any way, and because he certainly knew that if he were so foolhardy as to confide in her, she would take the information straight to George and then sit back to enjoy "The Disembowelment of Old Harry" in its first and only performance.

The next day the slaves gathered acorns again, and nobody interrupted them by bringing meat. In the evening, the hunters returned with two deer, but they were not celebrating, because they also had one less smuggler and had spent the better part of the afternoon searching for him.

George stamped around camp with a deep scowl. Warren didn't say anything, but sat and stared into the fire. Old Har-

ry sharpened his knife to a fine point.

The next day, the hunters brought no deer, but had two fewer smugglers. This time, it was getting dark and they hadn't noticed in time to do any searching.

The camp that evening bristled with angry smugglers, gesturing and denouncing. The usual rumble of tired talk was replaced by an agitated buzz like a rattlesnake den.

Pete sat across the fire from Charles, not joining in the discussion. He looked more numb than angry. Both the missing smugglers had been his close friends. They'd frequently hunted and hiked together, retold each other's stories and laughed at each other's jokes. Now he was here and they were out there in the darkness, either dead or in the process of becoming that way.

Pete poked the fire with a stick, his jaw working. This, Charles realized, was as close as he had come to seeing a smuggler cry.

"Hey, uh, I'm sorry about this, Pete," Charles said. Pete didn't look up or respond. Charles went on, "If there's anything I can do ..."

Pete looked up then, and his eyes drilled through Charles. He pointed the glowing end of his stick across the fire at him. "If I ever find out you slaves had anything to do with this," he said, his voice quivering, "I will cut all your throats myself."

The next night, the hunters returned grouchy, with only a small pig and a grouse that Pete had arrowed, but with the same amount of smugglers they had left with.

Pete impaled his grouse on a stick and came over to where Charles was standing to roast it. Pete stood silently for a few minutes, shifting the stick from one hand to the other. Charles ignored him.

"Ah, hey," Pete said. "I ... about what I said yesterday. I was pretty mad, and I didn't mean it." He glanced at Charles. "I, well, I know you guys were back here at camp and had nothing to do with anything that happened. I ... well, I was a complete asshole. Sorry."

Charles could not remember the last time a smuggler had apologized to him for anything. His hostility deflated.

"Don't worry about it," he said.

Pete nodded. "Thanks." He pulled the grouse away from the fire, poked at a couple of spots, and then thrust it back over the flames. "Want some grouse when this is done?"

Charles eyed the singed gangly bird, with its blackened

stubble of feather quills. "I think I'll stick with acorns tonight," he said.

"Fine with me," Pete said. "I need my energy because I'm on firewood duty." He put on a smile but it left quickly.

As the evening cooled and the sun sank into the trees, Pete and a few others made a last firewood run, while the talk around Charles' fire turned to what to do next.

"I really think Warren might be right," James said. "I think it's time to get out of here."

John put down the pork bone he had been gnawing on and stared at him. "What are you talking about? I never ran away from a fight in my life and I'm not going to start now with a bunch of savages."

"You ran all right from that ambush," James said.

"A retreat in battle is not running," John said, jabbing a finger at James. Both the twins had quick tempers, and though James was the more diplomatic of the two, he knew how to needle John when he wanted to.

"You're an old fool," he told John. "What's there to stay and fight about? Ego, is that it?"

John stood up, his face flushing. "Maybe you're a coward, but I'm not," he shouted. "I'm not going to die with an arrow in my back!"

"I don't plan on dying at all," James said. "Especially over a miserable patch of woods with no deer or hogs in it. It's not about running. It's about strategic position."

"What strategic position? There's woods here, and woods farther along. You just want to run to Harper's Ferry and get a room at an inn."

People began leaving other fires and drifting over to listen. Nobody liked to interfere in the twins' spats, but they were interesting to watch.

"I'll tell you why it's strategic, since you won't use your own head," James said. "We're in the heart of Appalachie territory. There's a lot less of them closer to the towns. The farther from here we get, the easier the hunting will get and we can quit having people get killed for no reason."

"No reason? No reason? As soon as we let the Appalachies know we aren't willing to fight, they'll harass us every step, every trip," John said. "We'll be finished in this business."

James shrugged. "Maybe we just underestimated them all along. Maybe the only reason we ever got through is they decided to leave us alone."



## Trails continued

Watching John, Charles wondered how far veins could expand without bursting.

"You can go back to tanning leather if you want then! Not me!"

"You can go to hell if you want," James said.

John picked up a log and threw it down onto the fire, raising a shower of sparks in the gathering twilight. Then he stomped off to a different fire.

James just sat staring into the fire, jaw set.

Charles decided it would be more peaceful in bed, and proceeded to get out his bedroll. But before he finished unrolling it, Dan came over to the fire.

"Do you guys know where Pete is? I can't find him."

"He said he was on firewood duty," Charles said.

Dan frowned. "Should be done by now. It's getting dark." He walked around to the other fires, questioning. People shook their heads.

Jake walked over to the edge of the firelight and shouted out into the gloom, "Pete! Hey Pete! Suppertime!"

The woods were silent.

They found him sitting with his back to a poplar tree. Five arrows pinned him to the tree. One of them had caught his hair just above his ear and held his head up, twisted slightly to one side, his empty eyes staring out over a gully at the rising moon. Pete's battered hat sat on his head as always, and the firewood he had gathered was scattered over his lap. His bow sat beside him, all the arrows still in the quiver.

They pulled him loose from the tree with gentle hands and closed his eyes.

"You old bastard," Dan said, his voice breaking. "What did you stop and take a break for? Always looking at the view."

Then he straightened up and faced the direction the arrows had come from.

"Come out now and fight like men!"

"Like men," his echo mocked back.

"We'll kill you for this! Do you hear me? Do you hear me?"

Back at camp, James and John had forgotten their fight in their mutual anger at the Appalachies, and James abandoned any talk of leaving.

Warren said, "I still think —"

"No way," George said. "What kind of coward are you?"

"I'm just —"

"We are not going to go running into Harper's Ferry to get away from the Appalachies."

"We ran from the soldiers, why not —"

"We were outgunned two to one!" George shouted. "We are not going to go running into town begging them to save us from a handful of wild mountain men. If we can't fight them we may as well give it up now and go into politics. Maybe you'd like to."

Warren stiffened. "You want to take that back?"

"All right, all right, stop," James said, adopting the peacekeeper's role with no apparent sense of irony. "No sense doing the Appalachies' work for them."

"We're staying here," George said. "Anyone who wants to stay and fight, can. Anyone else — he glared at Warren — is free to leave for Harper's Ferry any time."

Warren, no matter how much he disagreed, was not going to strike out through the wilderness alone, so they all focused on hunting again, this time for Appalachies. This was made more difficult because they still had to hunt for food. They stalked deer while keeping an eye out for Appalachies, and stalked Appalachies while listening for deer, and caught neither.

George set traps. One group of hunters would set out, and another group would trail them just out of sight. Any Appalachie trying to stalk the lead hunters was liable to be interrupted by an arrow. But none ventured into the trap.

George also sent out snipers to sit at strategic overlooks, but this took inefficiency to greater levels. At least two or three smugglers had to go to each spot, as nobody cared to get into a shootout with an entire band of Appalachies alone. And in a forest that stretched from the ocean in the east to nobody knew where in the west, the odds weren't especially good that an Appalachie would happen to stroll by the exact place the snipers were sitting.

"How about a decoy?" Dan suggested once. "Not like we've been doing, a whole big group. An easy target, somebody hunting alone. We can have two or three people waiting behind them."

"Who's going to be the decoy?" James asked.

Nobody raised a hand.

"We could use a slave," Old Harry said.

"Your slave?" John said.

"We don't need to go to that extreme yet," George said.

Not yet, very kind, Charles thought. He just doesn't want to lose a valuable slave. But then, maybe he was being un-

fair. Why would George care about preserving him if he were going to set Charles free after the trip? Maybe he had no such plan. Or maybe he actually did care. George would make it easier if he would just behave either like a black-hearted smuggler or a normal human being.

Finally, after several days of poor hunting on all fronts, John swaggered back to camp swinging catskin hats and sporting shell jewelry. He and Dan had shot down two Appalachies and left their bodies for the other Appalachies to find.

Charles guessed they had not taken care to leave the bodies in a respectful funerary state.

Dan kept no trophies. "That was for Pete," he said. "Don't want to even touch anything they've touched."

The hunters clashed with the Appalachies again the next day. A small group of smugglers surprised a handful of the tribesmen as the Appalachies were sneaking through the woods, apparently absorbed in stalking smugglers. The two sides sent arrows at each other and pincushioned a few trees, but the Appalachies slipped away as soon as they could, leaving their arrows behind for the smugglers to pull out of the trees if they wanted them. Neither side left bodies on the battlefield, although one smuggler claimed he had arrowed an Appalachie in the leg.

The smugglers, despite their tough talk, could not afford many more casualties. They had lost a third of their strength in the ambush, and another seven so far during their hunt, including Pete and his steady veteran influence. They were down to only thirty-four total: thirty-one smugglers and three slaves.

Of that total, about ten or fifteen had to stay in camp every day and guard the sulfur, and the slaves of course had food storing duties. George had taken away Charles' weapons when the band turned hostile toward the slaves, but he returned the weapons now, and John finally agreed to give Gary a gun as well.

"Don't get used to it," he warned Gary. "This is only for absolute emergencies."

Old Harry sensibly declined to arm Marguerite, no matter how dire the situation.

The slaves helped keep an eye on the packs of sulfur, because they had little to do at the camp besides continue to gather acorns. Nobody had shot an animal for several days.

"It's not just that we have to watch for savages," Dan told

## Trails continued

George. "Thing is, they're hunting the animals too. I figure most of the animals cleared out when they realized they were living in a war zone. But I found a great spot we can hunt tomorrow."

At the end of that day's hunt, he explained, the hunters had ranged farther than usual, and Dan had found a watering hole that, from the tracks and heavily worn trails, was drawing wildlife from miles around in the drought.

Dan planned to leave as early as possible in the morning and strike straight for that watering hole, without wasting any time hunting along the way. Once they got there, they could sit for the rest of the day at strategic spots around it to see what turned up. He was sure something would.

Dan's excitement spread to the rest of the hunters. If they got enough meat, they could leave this death trap with dignity, not retreating but calling the mini-war a draw. They wanted revenge, but they also wanted to make it home alive.

They left only a handful behind to guard the sulfur in the morning, albeit with two loaded six-shooters apiece. Charles was disappointed when George put the slaves back on acorn duty. He could have contentedly gone a long time without seeing another acorn.

"We need as much food as we can get," George said. "We'll bring the meat, and you all get as many acorns as you can. Then we'll have plenty when we leave."

So the slaves once again began the routine: Fill the bag, haul it back to camp, dump it in a pile, repeat.

This could be the last day we have to do this, Charles told himself. One good hunt, and we can head toward home again. Please, let that happen, he asked someone for whom he did not have a name.

In times of need like this, Charles found himself without anyone to appeal to. He had been raised neither pagan nor Christian. Easton was a mishmash of religions, mostly varieties of Christianity that had become popular when people found they needed help and protection. But Charles' owners in Easton had been more interested in knowledge and wealth than in faith, and though Charles sometimes wished for a powerful being to call on, he had little confidence that there was such a being and less

desire to spend his life parsing religious texts to dictate his existence.

As they worked, neither Gary nor Marguerite showed any inclination to talk, and Charles enjoyed the quiet. Nothing moved in the woods, except a pileated woodpecker that flew over giving its petulant staccato call. The wind sighed high above in the high tops of the oak trees. The weather was cooler now, though still very dry, and the leaves were turning yellow and red. Charles was glad for his blanket at night and glad for the ending of summer's heat.

He found a rich seam of acorns and followed it, his bag filling quickly. Hearing Gary's footsteps behind him, he straightened up and turned to remark about how fast they'd be done with this many acorns.

Three Appalachies, their faces painted brown and black, stood only feet away, with their guns pointed at him. Charles opened his mouth to scream, but one of them shook his head and pulled the hammer back on his ancient rusty gun. Charles closed his mouth again.

## Chapter Five

**T**he Appalachies strung their hammocks between trees on a rocky slope near the summit of a mountain, on ground Charles would not have considered a campsite at all. To call it a slope was optimistic; it was more of a dive. Had he tried to sleep there in his usual bedroll, instead of a hammock, he would have been in terror all night, afraid rolling over would put him a thousand yards downhill.

The Appalachies napped in their hammocks in the mid-afternoon sun, except for one sentry. The sentry also lounged in his hammock, but kept his bow on his lap and his eyes open.

The Appalachies did not bother to tie Charles up. To get away, he would have had to climb from rock to rock, and had he tried it, they could have cooked supper, eaten it, taken a nap and then shot him down at their leisure.

The camp was simpler than Charles had expected. He hadn't given much thought to the Appalachies' living arrangements, but he had pictured huts of some kind, per-

haps a pot of something cooking over a fire, tools scattered around, and people doing primitive activities like making arrows or daubing on face paint.

All this camp consisted of was the hammocks and a pile of wood, which the Appalachies had not lit. Each warrior had a small leather pack tied to his hammock.

There were only ten warriors, so Charles concluded they were heading for some kind of main camp somewhere. It was remarkable this handful of savages had been able to make the smugglers' lives such a nightmare.

It was almost as if the myths were true, that the Appalachies were part spirit, part body, ethereal people of the woods who could melt away when they needed to and reappear elsewhere. These Appalachies looked pretty solid though, and had not tried any melting as far as Charles had noticed. If they were spirits, they were smelly ones. And their hammocks were pretty ordinary. The one they had given him seemed to be woven out of some kind of plant fiber.

It was comfortable, which freed up his mind to worry without any distractions. What reason could they possibly have for kidnapping him? Were there any of these reasons that did not involve disaster for himself? He thought not.

His first thought, when he had turned around and seen the Appalachies standing behind him, had been, Why me?

His next thought, as they prodded him along through the woods, had been, Why am I not dead yet? He could see why the warrior with the gun hadn't shot him so close to camp, but the other Appalachies had bows, so it wasn't like they needed to take him somewhere private to shoot him without drawing attention. Why didn't they just fill him full of arrows like they had done to Pete and get on with their day?

He didn't know a word of Appalachie, and in fact had never met anyone who did, so he had no way of getting answers to these questions. The Appalachies made no effort to communicate with him, either. They just jabbered to each other in their twangy, nasally, barbaric language. Occasionally he thought he caught a word that sounded familiar, but it could have just been a chance melding of syllables in the torrent of sound.

The three warriors who captured him herded him farther into the woods, where seven others joined them. They stared at Charles and spoke in an excited and congratulatory gibberish. Then they spoke to Charles, firing one short word at him several times. When he failed to react, they repeated it several more times and jabbed him with a gun barrel by way

## Trails continued

of illustration, until it dawned on him that the proper interpretation was “move it.” He soon concluded that it meant “move very quickly,” because they kept up a trotting pace that left Charles panting. He had thought his long journey on foot had already toughened him up.

Despite the rush, Charles studied them as he got the chance. They were the first Appalachies he had ever gotten a good look at. He was disappointed they were not the ghostly white of the stories. They were more the color of fine bread, lightly burned. The strangest part about them was their eyes. In the kingdom of Easton, if you passed green or blue eyes in the street, you looked again. But most of these men had eyes in some shade of green or blue.

They wore buckskin, and catskin caps like some of the smugglers, with the added style touch of a claw dangling above each ear.

Their sickly light-colored hair was long, down over their shoulders, and straight. Their goat-like beards drooped far down their chests. One of them had painted his head a blazing red, achieving the effect of a walking fire.

By the time the Appalachies decided to make their mountaintop rest stop, Charles estimated they had already put about twenty miles between them and the smugglers. The halt was well timed, because Charles had just decided he was going to lie down soon, even if they shot him. His legs no longer felt like they were on fire, because they had settled into semi-numbness.

Charles had hung onto the hope as they fled that smugglers might come charging through the trees to rescue him any second, but that hope shriveled as the hours passed. No smuggler ever ventured this far from camp. By now, Charles was just another one of those unfortunates who had disappeared in the last few weeks and would never be seen again.

When they woke up from their naps, the Appalachies stayed in their hammocks, chatting. Charles could tell, to his annoyance, that they were often talking about him.

The one closest to Charles was the man with painted red hair. The dying beams of the day’s sunshine made the man’s beard glow, and as Charles looked at it he realized with amazement that the hair wasn’t painted at all. It was simply

red. Did any of them have blue hair, or green? Charles didn’t realize he was gawping at the man until the Appalachie imitated him, staring back at him with big frog eyes and mouth agape, and laughed. Charles quickly looked away.

For supper they ate pemmican, and handed a little to Charles. The recipe tasted about like the smugglers’ pemmican, with possibly a little more fat in it and another flavor Charles couldn’t identify, some kind of herb. The seasoning did not do much to disguise the familiar nasty taste.

As twilight deepened, Charles began to wonder if the Appalachies would ever light a fire. He imagined hanging in his hammock in the pitch black, straining his ears for the padding of cat footsteps or claws tearing at the bark of his tree. He wondered if maybe this was why the Appalachies hadn’t killed him. Perhaps they were performing some kind of religious ceremony involving leaving him there in the dark to be eaten, while they went over the mountain and started a nice roaring fire.

To his great relief, when it was almost dark they did light a fire. So that was why the smugglers never saw any smoke from any Appalachie fires. The savages waited to start their fires until the sky was darker than the smoke column would be, and probably got up at dawn to put them out.

Charles did not sleep well. For hours he stared up at the dark leaves, the glowing sliver of crescent moon sometimes peeking through. Crickets rasped, owls hooted, and occasionally a sentry coughed or stirred the fire. Eventually he dozed in and out, dreaming that the Appalachies had set up a village on the edge of Easton, where the huts were made out of giant mushrooms, and he and the other children went to play football even though the adults told them it was dangerous, and George was there, playing goalie, and then Jeff came to warn them that soldiers were coming.

Between dreams like this, he despaired of ever getting any real sleep, and was surprised to wake up a short time later and find that it was getting light, and the Appalachies were putting out the fire.

They soon set off again at what Charles was disappointed to find was their habitual rapid pace. It wasn’t as if they were in a hurry; they just strode along as if it had not occurred to them that anyone might want to walk slower. If they noticed Charles dropping behind, they poked him with their weapons to remind him that this was no time for ambling.

By noon, ferocious barking from camp dogs greeted the travelers, and then sad-eyed hounds with jutting ribs

jumped around them, growling at Charles and then yelping as the Appalachies kicked them away.

The camp wasn’t much, only a handful of skin tents ringing a central stone fire pit. Women, children, and a handful more warriors came out to meet them, jabbering their twangy speech.

Charles did some quick counting and figured there were about twenty warriors total, and maybe fifty or sixty people in all with the women and children. The small children, boys and girls, all wore skirts, and they ran around him in circles much like the camp dogs had done, jumping and shouting and pointing. The adolescent boys wore buckskin trousers like the men, though they were all shirtless. The women and girls, Charles was interested to note, wore about as much clothing as women in Easton. The rumor that Appalachies ran around half naked was mostly untrue, then.

Many of the women wore necklaces made of colored glass beads, probably ground out of the bottles and glass shards that could be found everywhere in ancient town sites. Some women wore dangling glass earrings as well.

The adults, unlike the shouting children, looked at Charles with narrowed eyes, giving him the kind of calculating look a murderer might use when evaluating the most effective spot to stick a dagger.

A tall, stocky Appalachie with a giant black beard stepped forward. He settled down on a stone by the fire ring, and another warrior grabbed Charles by the shoulders and pushed him down onto another stone on the opposite side of the fire.

Charles could not understand what he was seeing. The man was as dark-skinned as he was, with eyes so brown they were almost black, and the familiar light-colored palms of normal hands.

“Well now,” the man said in good Easton, with a rural accent not very different from the one spoken around Trappe. “What do we have here?”

After a pause, he said, “Might want to shut that mouth before something flies in.”

“But, but, who — how —?”

The man laughed. “Roger’s my name.” He seemed to be searching for words. “You will have to pardon me if I’m a little rusty with my Easton. I don’t use it very often.”

“But how, why, are you here?”

“I could ask you the same thing,” Roger said. “Me, I guess I’m one of those lost woodsmen you hear about. One of those



## Trails continued

who went out in the woods and never came back. Died a horrible death at the hands of the, uh, what do people call them, the Appalachies. To tell you the truth, I came very close to doing that, but that's another story for another time."

Charles glanced around, and lowered his voice. "So ... you can't leave?"

Roger shrugged. "I guess I could. I don't want to. By the way, you don't have to worry about them understanding you. They don't know any Easton besides 'My name is Roger and I mean no harm.' But as far as leaving goes, fact is, son, life here is a lot better than scrapping by in those disease-infested villages trying to get enough money to pay taxes and then just when you pay up, you get conscripted into the army. As a matter of fact, that's exactly why I left."

"It's better living with savages?"

Roger frowned. "You oughtn't to call them that. They are good people. But no, I didn't come out here to live with them. I came out to live on my own in the wilderness where no king can tell me what to do. Didn't think too much about the people already living here. But enough about me. What about you? You're pretty small for a smuggler. How'd you get mixed up in that?"

"I am not a smuggler," Charles said. "I'm a slave to a smuggler." This seemed to be an important point to make. Now that he was over his shock at meeting a fellow Easton out in the wilderness, thoughts of what might be in store for him came rushing back, and his pulse started pounding faster. "What are you going to do to me? Why didn't they ... why am I still ..." Charles hesitated, unsure whether it was smart to remind his captors that they didn't usually take prisoners.

"Why didn't they shoot you full of arrows and leave you for the cats to find? We'll get to that," Roger said. "So, you're working on your big dream of becoming a real smuggler someday, are you?" He said "smuggler" the way other people said "plague sore."

"No," Charles said. "No. I am going to ..." he stopped. He wasn't sure what he was going to do if he ever got free from all the smugglers and Appalachies who seemed to be lining up for a chance to hold him captive. But he did know one specific. "I'm not going to be a smuggler, whatever I do. I'm not

going to spend one more minute on the gunpowder trails."

"Right," Roger said. "And the smugglers will just let you walk away, even though you know so much about them you could get them all killed if you spill the beans on them. I suppose you'll go to town and set up as a house servant, which will be way better than being a forest servant."

"Not a servant," Charles said. "Something else."

Roger shook his head and looked at him with a half smile. "You poor little slave."

Charles tightened his fist. That was all he did, though, because Roger was pretty large and had a long knife strapped to his waist.

As he sized up Roger, Charles noticed two familiar looking packs leaning against a tree behind him, one with a tin medallion dangling off it. His stomach fell. He had seen that before. It was old Jumpy's. When they found him dead a couple years ago, he'd been stripped of his weapons and pack.

So these Appalachies had harassed the smugglers before. This man may even have killed Jumpy himself.

Roger followed his glance, and gave an ugly smile when he saw Charles' wide eyes. "You've seen those packs before, have you?"

Roger was a traitor to his kind, an Easton man who lived with the white savages and killed his own people. Charles had known, theoretically, that he was among people who must have killed smugglers. But seeing the trophies displayed here gave him a strange slurry of emotion: hatred, anger, fear and bewilderment to find himself identifying with the smugglers.

Roger said, "So you're not one of them. But you sure get upset when they get killed. And you're telling me you're just a prisoner, held against his will by the awful smugglers and forced to go on the trail, huh? Or you're just saying that so we'll let you go."

"They've treated me well," Charles said, breathing fast. Yes, he was upset about Jumpy and Pete and the others who had died, people he'd shared life with. That didn't make him a smuggler. That didn't mean he was one of them, or that he was content with being a slave.

Roger switched to chatting with the Appalachies, then turned to Charles again.

"Chief is on the way, and we'll grill you more when he comes. Until then, you can just sit here or wander around the camp. Just don't try to run away. Chief wants you alive."

"I'm not going to tell him anything," Charles said.

Roger grinned. "Oh, I think if he wants you to talk, you'll

talk," he said, holding his knife blade out over the coals and watching a small blue tongue of flame lick around it. "But we already know about as much as we need to about your bunch. Still, I hope you'll tell us the truth."

Charles was again puzzled at his emotions. He was no smuggler, so he should have no shame in telling the Appalachies what they wanted to know. Why should they be his enemies? And yet he felt somehow that he should refuse to talk, that to cooperate with the Appalachies or join their side would be treachery. He put his face in his hands.

Roger now spoke to a small boy, about ten or eleven years old, with almost white blond hair down to his shoulders. The boy's ribs showed clearly. They didn't overeat in this camp.

The boy motioned Charles to follow.

"South Wind here will show you around camp," Roger said. "He'll show you where you'll sleep. And don't try to sneak off. South Wind is pretty good with a knife."

He spoke to South Wind again, and the boy laughed, pulled a knife out of his belt, flipped it into the air and caught it by the handle again, without seeming to make any effort. Charles was impressed. It took a little of the sting out of being assigned such a puny bodyguard, although not all of it.

The boy strutted through the camp, leading Charles and a procession of chattering camp children. Charles noticed as he looked around that the Appalachies seemed to have been at the campsite for some time. The ground in front of the tents was packed down, and well-worn trails led off into the woods, among a scattering of stumps with chop marks.

The tents were large, with straight walls and sloped roofs made of stitched hides. Each tent roof had another little tent on top, which puzzled Charles until he realized it must be a cover to keep rain out of the smoke holes. Smoke was pouring out from under the covers now, along with the smell of roasting meat. A pang shot through his stomach, reminding him he hadn't eaten since morning.

Charles noted several other fire spots around the outer edge of the circle of tents, where the savages must stoke fires at night to keep the cats away. The dogs would help keep the cats away too, he guessed. Fierce as the cats were, they would usually run from a pack of dogs.

The boy came to a dingy tent with spider webs over the doorway, and pointed at it. Charles peered into its dark interior and hesitated. Was he supposed to go in there? He looked at the boy, who just stared back.

Charles remembered now how weary his legs were, but he

## Trails continued

was reluctant to enter the tent, which reeked of old deer fat and wood smoke and had who knew what inside it. So he just sat down with his back against one of the tent poles. He found himself at the center of a ring of grinning children, with South Wind seated in the center, his arms crossed, stern in his sentry duty.

They were a motley group, with long tangled hair and ragged, dirty clothing. They were light brown like the warriors, an unhealthy pale tone that looked as if they had some kind of terrible disease that had leeches the color out of their skin and hair. Where their clothes were torn, even whiter skin shone out. Many of them had yellowish hair, some had very light brown hair and there were a few more of the absurd red-haired ones too. Surely only a disease or malnourishment would do that to hair.

Tired of being the circus bear for these children, he crawled into the privacy of the tent and shut the flap, wondering if this would meet South Wind's sentry surveillance standards. The children increased their chatter, but nobody followed him in.

It was dim in the tent, with a glow from the smoke hole in the roof, and he listened carefully to make sure he was the only inhabitant. The tent appeared to have been vacant for a while, and anything might have crawled in here — snakes, dogs, mice, spiders. He heard nothing rustling, and gradually as his eyes adjusted, he began to make objects out in the gloom. A couple of sturdy poles supported the beam of the roof, and in the center was a ring of stones for a fireplace. There was plenty of space. He wondered why it was empty. Maybe one of the warriors had died recently and they hadn't gotten around to taking this tent down yet. Or maybe they kept an extra tent handy for prisoners, a sort of town jail.

He found a bundle of fur, seemingly an heirloom of sorts, holding the musty smell of many nights of dried sweat. Charles shook it out to make sure nothing was living in it, then checked the floor to make sure nothing was living under it. Then he flattened out the fur, stretched out, and closed his eyes.

He woke up to the tent door flying open and sunlight streaming in. He sat up and covered his eyes.

"Wake up, sleepy!" Roger boomed. "Hope you're all rested.

The chief would like to ask you some questions. Well come on, don't just sit there blinking, get a move on!"

Charles staggered out into the sunlight, where South Wind was still vigilant at his post. Followed by South Wind, Charles followed Roger across the camp toward the fire ring. Charles' mouth was dry and cracked like an empty stream bed, his stomach screamed at him, and his thoughts struggled to reassemble themselves out of sleep. It was late afternoon, the sunlight golden and drowsy.

A muscular man whom Charles took to be the chief sat by the fire, surrounded by warriors, warming his hands and watching Charles walk toward him. The chief's face was mostly hidden by long brown hair and a bushy beard with streaks of gray in it. It was hard to read his expression, but his eyes looked sly and calculating, like the rest of the Appalachies. He was dressed about the same as the others, except that he wore a necklace with the white skull of a cat dangling from it.

The Appalachies drew in around Charles as he and Roger arrived at the fire, warriors closest and the women and children on the edges, peering around.

"This," Roger said, "is chief Running Elk."

Charles wondered how he was supposed to address the chief. Bow? Wave? Eager not to offend, he eyed Roger to see what he would do, but Roger just stood by Charles' side. Deciding to play it safe, Charles bowed deeply from the waist.

Laughter broke out around the group, and he straightened up quickly, blushing. The chief, also smiling a little, held his hand up to his forehead and shoved it outward stiffly, a gesture Charles had not seen before. But not knowing what else to do, he repeated it. The crowd made approving sounds, amid more laughter, to Charles' relief.

A number of warriors had taken seats around the fire, and so Charles began to sit down as well on a nearby stone. But Roger prodded him.

"Don't get too comfortable, little slave," he said. "Nobody said you could sit down."

The chief, no longer smiling, spoke at length to Roger, who listened and nodded.

"All right, little smuggler," he said then to Charles. "How many men are in your band? Be careful to tell us only the truth."

"Thirty, or something like that. I can't remember exactly. They aren't all men, though."

Roger conferred with Running Elk, who nodded.

"How much sulfur do you have?"

"Not very much."

Roger knelt and held his knife in the fire, then pulled it out and examined it, turning it different directions. It was glowing. "How much?" he said again, looking Charles in the eye.

"We really didn't have much," Charles said, his voice shaking. Roger took a step toward him. "About twenty packs' worth!" He would cooperate. The smugglers could deal with the consequences.

"The trading was bad, it wasn't much," he babbled, desperate to make Roger believe him. "Could hardly get any sulfur, and we had so few men left after the ambush —" he stopped. They wouldn't know what ambush he was talking about. "Other years, we had about fifty packs, but this year, it was bad."

Twenty packs of sulfur would still be a huge haul for a band of Appalachies, he realized.

Roger talked with the chief again. They seemed satisfied. "He thinks you're telling the truth," Roger said. "I guess we'll see."

Charles, who had been watching Roger's knife, felt a rush of relief.

"Now," Roger went on, "he wants to know why your band thinks you can just go marching through our land."

"Your land?" Charles said. He didn't know what Roger was talking about. "We never came through this village. We're just passing through these mountains, way over there." He waved in the direction of the smugglers.

Roger swept his arm out in a wide circle. "All this land belongs to us. Our forest. Our deer and wild boar. You are trespassing."

"But ... but you can't just claim all the mountains," Charles said. "It's ridiculous. This is wilderness. Empty woods. There's way more than you need. There are only a few of you, and you move around all the time."

"This whole woods is our home," Roger said. "We hunt. These trees are our fields. You barge through here and shoot our animals, never asking." His words were sharp and loud. "Typical darkskins. You think the world is yours, and you can just take whatever you can reach." It was strange to hear him speak as if he weren't an Easton himself, and dark as Charles.

"Your people claim a lot of land along the bay there," Roger went on, "even though they don't use all of it. And now they come walking through this forest of ours like they own it, like we're the ones trespassing on their back woodlot. Some kind of arrogance."

## Trails continued

It was ridiculous, Charles thought, this handful of savages claiming more territory than Easton and Scranton combined, but they were holding weapons and he wasn't, so he dropped the argument.

"Why did you kidnap me?" he asked instead. "Are you just going to kill me now that you've asked me some questions?"

Roger laughed. "Oh no, we didn't kidnap you to ask you questions. We're happy to have you give us helpful information, though. Tell me, who is your master? Some weak smuggler who can't carry his pack, and needs your help?"

Charles stood up straight. "My master is the chief of the band."

Roger smiled. "Ah, very good!" He turned to the chief and spoke, and smiles spread around the group. Some of the women clapped their hands.

"So, slave to the leader of the band," Roger said, "he must want you back. We were worried we would have to discard you, since you claim not to be a real smuggler, but as the chief man's slave, you must be worth some sulfur. If your good friends the smugglers don't see it that way," he shrugged, "well, we will just have to discard you after all." He made a gesture with his finger across his throat. "What do you think, slave, will they trade many packs of sulfur for you?"

Charles was aghast. He couldn't picture George agreeing to giving up sulfur for this kind of extortion, even if the Appalachies had kidnapped several of the band and not just a slave. A payoff would only encourage the Appalachies to repeat the stunt, and the smugglers would end up arming their enemies. He remembered back in Scranton, when George had made that extra trip despite the danger just to add a couple of packs of sulfur to their haul.

Charles knew how the smugglers would think. Charles had been caught alone in the woods, they would reason, which was the same as death. Whether it meant death then or later was up to the Appalachies, but it wasn't the smugglers' problem.

"Ah, of course," he said. "Yes, many packs of sulfur."

Roger eyed him. "Hmm. I hope you are right."

Charles' mouth was dry. "How ... how do you plan to get in

touch with the smugglers?" he said. "You can't just walk in there. They'll shoot you."

Roger smiled. "Oh, that will be no problem at all."

Alone that night in his tent, Charles stoked a small fire in the fire ring. He didn't need it for safety. The Appalachies had already lit the sentry fires, and he could see the light from the flames flickering on the wall of the tent. But he had slept by a fire for months now, and with his eyes closed and the heat and crackle of the fire next to him, it felt almost like he was back at the smugglers' camp. Strange, that a place he had hated seemed like home.

Charles wondered where the band was by now. He had been gone more than a day. If they had shot any game at the water hole, they must be drying the meat now and soon would be ready to go on the trail again. He wondered if they even missed him much. Gary probably wouldn't be all that sad. Marguerite? She seemed to hate him as much as anyone. George would resent the insult of somebody killing his slave. Would he feel anything else?

Charles could not let this be his miserable end, alone out here in the wilderness, his throat slit by a bunch of savages because he wasn't worth enough of the miserable sulfur he hated. He tried to come up with an alternate plan.

He wondered if he could just live with the Appalachies, although that would mean giving up everything he really enjoyed. His thoughts drifted back now to the library at George's estate in Trappe. He couldn't imagine never seeing it again, never reading another book.

The best times in Charles' life, since George had bought him, had been during the winter when the smugglers stayed home, feet up by a fire while sleet beat on the windows. At George's estate, house servants took care of most of the menial chores. Charles ran errands for George, delivering letters or memorized messages, and making the kind of discreet purchases a smuggler needed, but didn't want to make himself because of the risk.

George made use of Charles' mechanical aptitude, letting him tinker with useful items for the estate like lanterns or crab traps or other gadgets. Charles had come up with an efficient water pump he was particularly proud of, and was also experimenting with making clocks like they had in Easton.

He enjoyed that kind of work, but the evenings were the best, when George allowed Charles free time and he went straight to the library.

Charles read anything, but especially books about math and science, like biology, chemistry and physics. Invention fasci-

nated him. One of his favorite books was "Learn From the Past, and Repeat It," an old volume by a philosopher and archeologist named Phil, which held out the tantalizing promise of a new world.

George didn't mind Charles using his library, especially if it made him a happier slave, and he also found it useful to have a person of letters around the house who saved him the money and risk of hiring a scribe.

Charles had daydreamed about working as a scribe for George, after he was free. During the summers, when George was away, he could serve as his estate manager, and have plenty of time to study. Charles had not yet had the nerve to ask about such a job, and now it didn't seem likely he ever would.

He could argue to the Appalachies that he hated the smugglers, that he would make a useful addition to their band or even a good slave. He hated the idea of groveling, and wished he had the nerve to just die like a man. But he wished even more to live. Even living in the endless forest with nothing to do but hunt would be better than dying.

When savages had captured Roger years ago, somehow he had convinced them not to kill him. Maybe Roger, remembering that, would have sympathy for him now. He would ask Roger in a roundabout way how he had survived, and try to enlist his help.

Failing everything else, Charles would watch for a chance to escape. He tossed around a few ideas, but if he was realistic most of them ended with him pursued by a pack of irate Appalachies who knew the woods better than he did. Even if he somehow evaded the savages, he wouldn't be able to get back to the smugglers' camp before dark.

But he may as well die running as standing still.

Charles did not sleep well.



*To be continued.*