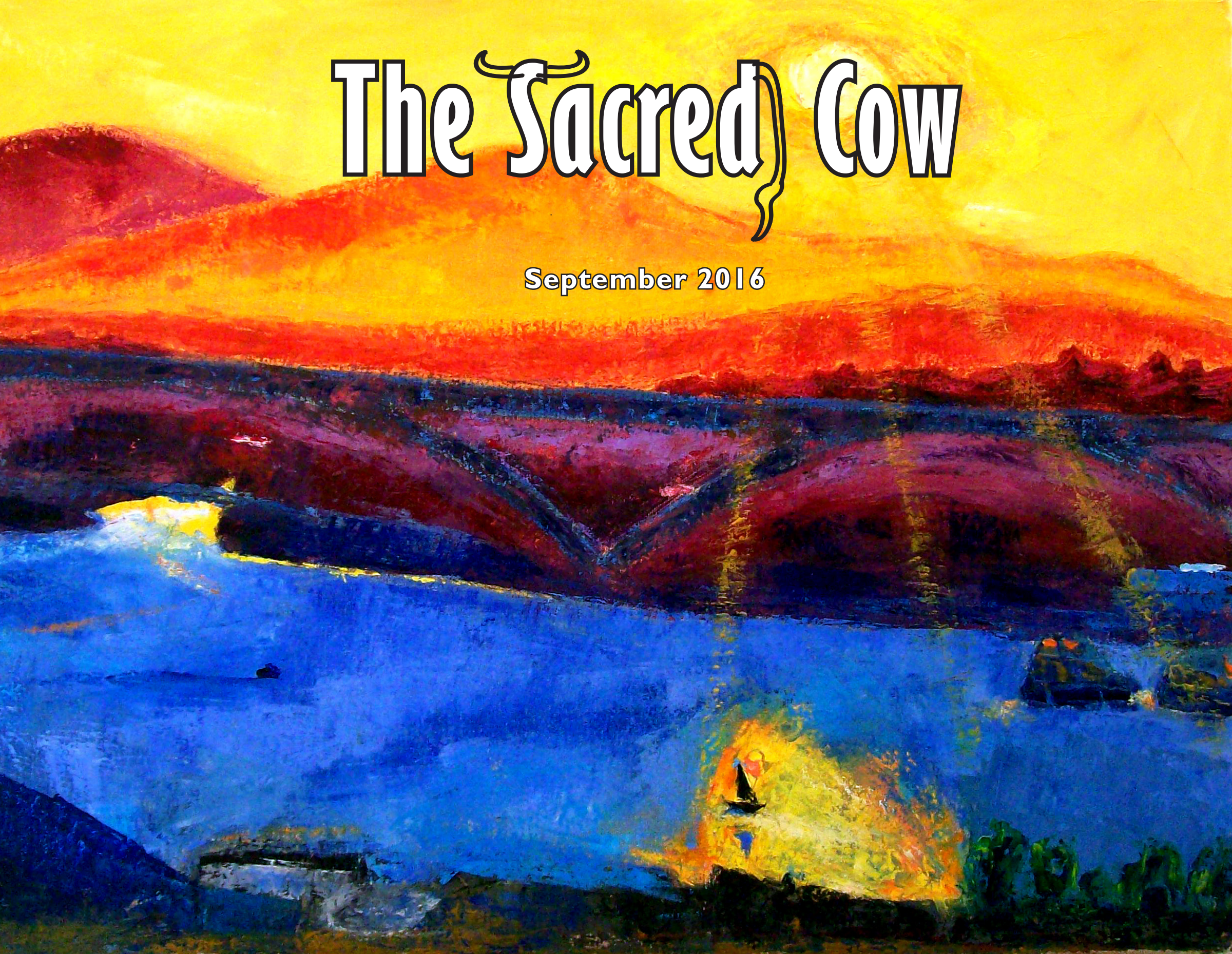


The Sacred Cow

September 2016



The Sacred Cow

Vol. 5 No. 3
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FICTION

- 5 **The Resurrectionist**
By Tom Miller
- 13 **Beatdown in Bangkok, Chapter One**
By Justin Fike and Adam Fleming
- 17 **The Knowledge of the Queen, Chapter Three**
By Juan Ersatzman
- 24 **Gunpowder Trails, chapters Six and Seven**
By Andrew Sharp

POETRY

- 7 **1961**
By Ricky Garni
- 8 **Peeking Through**
By Stephen Mead
- 11 **My Final Gift**
By Sandra Rokoff-Lizut
- 12 **Funeral for the Last Parent**
By Donal Mahoney
- 15 **The Black Mark**
By Patrick Theron Erickson

POETRY

- 16 **Tearing Through the Dictionary for the Meaning of Levant**
By Carol Hamilton
- 19 **Water on Fire**
By Kelly McNeal
- 20 **British Beach**
By Eliza Callard
- 21 **Rainbow**
By Adam Fleming
- 23 **View From the Santa Fe Rail-Runner No. 1**
By Sandra Rokoff-Lizut

Editing Editor:

Andrew Sharp

Poetry Sarahs:

Sarah Stoltzfus Allen

Sarah Mast Garber

Copy Editor:

Jesse Mast

Quality Control Editors:

Jason Ropp

Jared Stutzman

Layout: Andrew Sharp

Layout music: The Beatles, The White Stripes, Simon and Garfunkel, The Seldom Scene, Adele

Cover painting: Allen Forrest

Website:

www.sacredcowmagazine.com

Contact:

tscmagazine@gmail.com

facebook.com/sacredcowmagazine

google.com/+Sacredcowmagazine

Twitter: @SacredCowMag

Sacred Cow Publishing Company
10775 Memory Road
Harrington, DE 19952

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Contributors

September 2016

Eliza Callard (“British Beach,” page 20) is a native Philadelphian, and lives there with her family. She says forty years of managing — and occasionally mismanaging — her cystic fibrosis has given her perspective on loss and endurance. A product of Skidmore College, she enjoys family time, hiking and camping, and playing the piano.

Juan Ersatzman (“The Knowledge of the Queen, Chapter Three,” page 17) 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.

Patrick Theron Erickson (“The Black Mark,” page 15) is a retired parish pastor. He says Secretariat is his mentor, though he has never been an achiever and has never gained on the competition. Patrick’s work has appeared in *Former People*, *Literati Quarterly*, *Burningword Literary Journal*, *Crack the Spine*, and *Grey Sparrow Journal*, among other publications.

Justin Fike (“Beatdown in Bangkok, Chapter One” page 13) grew up in the Blue Ridge mountains of Virginia. He has a master’s in Creative Writing from Oxford University. He is a martial arts aficionado, a gaming nerd and a classics geek. He lives, travels, and works with his wife Mindy and dog Chino.

Adam Fleming (“Beatdown in Bangkok, Chapter One,” page 13; “Rainbow,” page 21) is a novelist and life coach hailing from Goshen, Indiana. Married with four kids, he is a writer, speaker and professional executive coach. Adam is a world traveler and has spent significant amounts of time in Zaire/

DRC, France, Ivory Coast, and a dozen or more other countries.

Ricky Garni (“1961,” page 7) was born in Miami and grew up in Florida and Maine. He works as a graphic designer by day and writes music by night. *COO*, a tiny collection of short prose printed on college lined paper with found materials such as coins and stamps, was recently released by Bitterzoet Press.

Carol Hamilton (“Tearing Through the Dictionary for the Meaning of Levant,” page 16) is a former poet laureate of Oklahoma who has published children’s novels, legends and poetry. She has recent and upcoming publications in a number of literary magazines.

Donal Mahoney (“Funeral for the Last Parent,” page 12) a product of Chicago, says he lives in exile now in St. Louis. He has had poetry, fiction and nonfiction published in print and online in various countries. He has worked most of his life as an editor of one thing or another.

Kelly McNeal (“Water on Fire,” page 19) lives and works in New Jersey. She has a Ph.D. from Fordham University. Her current or forthcoming publications appear in *Rat’s Ass Review*, *Front Porch Review*, *Slink Chunk Press*, *Crack the Spine Magazine* and *Yellow Chair Review*.

Stephen Mead (“Peeking Through,” page 8), is a published artist, writer and maker of short-collage films and sound-collage downloads.

Tom Miller (“The Resurrectionist,” page 5) has published several stories in literary magazines such as *Red Fez* and *The Wordsmith Journal*.

Sandra Rokoff-Lizut (“My Final Gift,” page 11; “View From the Santa Fe Rail-Runner No. 1,” page 23) is a retired educator, and a children’s book author, printmaker and poet. Her work has appeared in various publications including *Illya’s Honey*, *The Bicycle Review*, *Wilderness House Review* and others.

Andrew Sharp (“Gunpowder Trails,” page 24) is a journalist who works for a newspaper on the Eastern Shore of Maryland. He lives in Harrington, Delaware, with his wife and two sons.

Mail

Dear Cow,

Where in the world do you find all these crackpots to write in? I can't believe some of the letters you print. I expect idiots to be reading The New Yorker and the Atlantic, but figured they wouldn't bother with a fine publication such as yours.

Bob Smith
New York, N.Y.

Bob,
Letters to the editor reveal much about humanity, and about our own publication. We'd give more thought to your question, but in general, we prefer to just move on.

Dear Sacred Cow,

I'm frankly disgusted with your magazine and its so-called "journalism." Your bias and skewed coverage make me sick. This is why everyone hates the media today.

Jerry B. LaHaye
Gorman, Texas

Jerry,
We aren't actually a journalism magazine. Is it possible we copied and pasted your letter from the comments section of a local newspaper? That would violate journalistic principles, but of course, we aren't journalists, as we already mentioned.

Dear Cow,

When are you going to come out with a print edition? The internet is fine, but I like to have something I can hold in my hands and use later to put my coffee mug on so my desk doesn't get rings on it.

Karla Burke
Braddock, North Dakota

Karla,
We'll be happy to send you all the print editions you can use. To get started, just send us \$30,000 for your one-year subscription. This might seem a little expensive, but we are, after all, a snooty literary magazine, and the cost will likely go down if, in the future, we get more than one subscriber and some advertisers.

Sacred Cow,

Thanks for your coverage of death and dying in your last issue. I feel this is an issue that doesn't get enough press in most literary magazines, and so I'm glad to see you guys taking it on.

Delores Coyle,
Unionville, Nevada

Delores,
We are firm believers in the fundamental principle of literature: If your story isn't deep, make it about death. Works every time.

Send us mail at tscmagazine@gmail.com, or message us at [Facebook.com/sacredcowmagazine](https://www.facebook.com/sacredcowmagazine).

From the editors

There's just something magical about fall, at least in the middle and northern United States. The changing of the seasons, the vivid colors of the falling leaves, the crisp chill of the morning air replacing the heat and humidity of summer.

But the best part of fall, now that we reflect on it, is the impending death of all those living things we waited for so eagerly in the spring for some reason. Perhaps several months of brutal winter had dulled our memories of the misery of spring and summer.

In the garden as the frost comes, there will be no more tomatoes and watermelons. But there will also be no more weeds, and that seems like more than a fair trade. And frankly, we don't care if we never see another zucchini again.

With the lawn, the end is in sight. Not forever, oh Lord, will the heavy burden of mowing weigh down our weekly schedule. All that pestiferous grass (did someone PLANT that?) will die. Even so, come quickly, sweet frost.

And finally, most gloriously, we can say goodbye to all those bugs, the ones that ate our garden plants, crawled into our houses through any crack they could find, splatted on our windshields, and bit us enthusiastically. With equal enthusiasm, we'll enjoy the thought of them dying miserable deaths in the biting cold. Now there's a bite we can appreciate.

The end is in sight. It's the sort of satisfaction we would have felt after Noah's flood if we had been God. (Humanity can be grateful we aren't God. In this election year, we'd be certainly regretting our rash promise not to flood the world again and trying to find a loophole.)

As fall approaches, the Sacred Cow has also reached the end of another year. If you're hoping the winter kills us off, just remember that like the bugs, we'll be back.

And after a few months, you'll probably even be looking forward to it.

The Resurrectionist

By TOM MILLER

Franklin Montane waited while Gabriela Martinez, executive vice president and head of programming for the network, drummed her glossy red fingernails on her desk and stared past the brothers into an Art Deco mirror on the opposite wall. Franklin and his younger brother, Richard, looked over their boss's perfectly sculpted hair, through a floor-to-ceiling window, and into a cloudless blue southern California sky. They had just pitched the return of "Visigoth," the hit series they had created and produced until its seventh and final season finished just over a year ago.

"So Lucas' movie career didn't take off as he'd planned," said Gabriela, referring to Lucas Harte, the muscular actor who played Theoderic on the former show.

"He only landed one role," said Franklin, who did most of the talking for the duo. "He was the beefy fiance who was hindering the course of true love between the two main characters. His performance was described as 'wooden' and the film tanked at the box office."

"I remember that," said Gabriela, who now leaned back in her plush, leather office chair. "I can't say I was entirely displeased. I was miffed he didn't come back for an eighth season when the show was still at the top of the ratings."

Franklin nodded without saying anything. When the boss relaxed, it meant that she had made her decision. Any further attempts at persuasion would only bias her against the proposal in front of her. As he waited, Franklin detected the subtle note of Gabriela's perfume. He was not sure how to describe it, but it made him think of an older Sophia Loren, whom Gabriela resembled.

"OK," continued Gabriela, "let's say hypothetically that I did want to bring Lucas back. There's still a huge problem. Theoderic died on the finale. And he didn't just die, but he was beheaded, roasted on a spit, his body eaten and his bones burned. I remember thinking at the time that it

did not seem like an ideal way to end a television show."

"Lucas wanted us to kill him in a way that would scotch rumors of a possible return," said Franklin. "We tried to make his death as noble and heroic as possible. He held off five hundred Roman soldiers by himself and enabled Fritigern to escape and win at Adrianople. Rome was never the same after that. In doing so, Theoderic also saved the life of Hilda, his love interest, and their unborn child."

"Still, I remember how many angry emails the network got because of that," said Gabriela. "You'd think we'd murdered somebody's brother."

"Rich and I got a couple death threats," said Franklin, "but in the end, it accomplished its goal. Nobody ever asked us or Lucas about the possibility of Theoderic returning."

Gabriela, ready to think again, scooted forward in her seat, set her elbows on the desk and rested her chin on folded hands. "So how do you propose to bring him back?"

Richard, who was spare with words but always quick with ideas, finally spoke. "We reanimate him in a druidical ceremony."

"Reanimate him from what? There isn't any of him left."

Franklin provided a more detailed explanation. "About twenty-five years have passed since Theoderic died. Tensions with Rome remain. After Rome sacks a Visigoth border village and kills all the inhabitants, people begin to long for their hero of old. A local woodworker carves a perfect replica of Theoderic out of an ancient, mammoth tree, and the priests bring it to life."

The brothers hoped to see Gabriela's thin lips curve upward in a toothless smile, but as she leaned back in her chair again, her expression remained neutral. "So it's a fifth-century version of Pinocchio."

The Montanes looked at each other and each exhaled a long,



Next page

Resurrectionist continued

slow breath. They had feared a Pinocchio parallel, and their boss's facile, devil's advocate mind had immediately seized on it. Franklin tried to salvage the idea. "We could have a master stone mason sculpt him from granite."

Gabriela briefly considered the change but soon shook her head. "It's not just the Pinocchio thing. It's the whole idea of magic. We never had any magic on 'Visigoth,' which was one of the things I really liked. Theoderic rose from his position as a humble farmer not because of some cheap spell or charm, but because of his hard work, courage and intelligence. Magic just seems like lazy writing."

Franklin saw his brother's eyes begin to blaze at this suggestion. For the last two weeks, Richard had brainstormed ideas for the show's return, and both brothers had stayed up very late during the last couple nights honing the best idea into a detailed proposal. Richard had a high tolerance for criticism except when the word "lazy" was involved.

Franklin moved to stave off his brother's impending eruption. "With all due respect, Gabriela, I think our scenario is a lot more plausible than a quick incantation or a prayer to the gods. I mean, unless we want to make Theoderic's death a case of mistaken identity — which would be lazy writing and also extremely lame — there has to be some element of the supernatural here."

Gabriela looked over the Montanes' shoulders again into her artsy mirror. With the second finger of her right hand, she smoothed one of her perfectly shaped eyebrows. "I get what you're saying," she said, "but the whole reanimated statue thing just doesn't feel right. It's not unique. It's not authentic."

Franklin looked at his brother and had no trouble reading the thoughts behind his thinly masked expression of exasperation. There was no such thing as an authentic return when the person in question has been cooked, eaten and digested. He decided to try another direction. "Authentic is going to be tough on this one, Gabriela. We do have another idea, though. It's an entirely new show, called 'The Hun,' where the action focuses on Attila's campaigns into Europe. We could bring Lucas back as the grandson of Theoderic and Hilda who fights to protect his homeland from the new horde."

The savvy executive whose programs had put the network on top of the ratings quickly nixed the idea. "Too derivative," she said. "I'm predicting some major backlash on that one. No, if we're going to bring Lucas back, it needs to be in the same role. I suppose you've got a point about the authentic part. Let's stress unique over authentic."

Franklin glanced again at Richard, who was looking down into his lap so that his laser glare would not burn a hole in their boss's body. Franklin knew what his sibling was thinking — let's see you come up with something better, Ms. All-Knowing V.P.

Franklin sought to convey this thought in a more respectful manner. "Got any ideas?"

Instead of sliding forward in her chair and searching for an idea that would never come, Gabriela responded at once. "Remember that show 'Knight-Errant'? This was probably about seven or eight years ago."

"I remember the show," said Franklin, "but Rich and I were trying to get 'Visigoth' off the ground and we didn't watch a lot of TV."

"The main character was a guy named Sir Geoffery. Like Lucas, the actor was ready to wind down the show, so he fell off a cliff into a two hundred-foot gorge after saving the king in what was to be the final episode. That was the final scene — Geoffery was falling through the air to his imminent death."

"That's easy," said Richard. "Create a prehistoric bird to save him."

Gabriela pointed at Richard. "I know — obvious answer, right? Except, that wasn't what they did. The whole next season had Geoffery falling through the air in real time, while parts of his life flashed in front of him. It was a series of flashbacks. In the finale, Geoffery realized something that he had buried deep within his subconscious — that he was a descendant in the line of Pegasus, the winged horse. As soon as he figured this out, Geoffery activated wings he never knew he had and flew himself to safety."

"Ridiculous," said Richard.

"True, maybe a little," said Gabriela, "but it had flair. Sir Geoffery and his new wings were back on top of the ratings. I remember the guy who conceived the idea did the same thing for a couple of other shows." She moved forward in her chair and snapped her fingers as she searched her memory. "He had an unusual name." She tapped her forehead. "Cambridge ... no, Cobalt ... no — Cerulean. Cerulean Meeks — that's it. People in the biz started calling him The Resurrectionist. Find him."

With all but his narrow face covered by his hot dog costume, Cerulean Meeks waited for traffic to approach as he stood outside of Fran's Hot Dogs. The fabricators of the hot dog suit had discovered a material so heat retentive that NASA should be using it to insulate astronauts during their space walks. While his cheeks only glistened in the summer Tennessee sun, the rest of his body dripped with sweat inside the suit. Yet, as potential customers approached, Rue embarked on a vigorous impersonation of John Travolta in "Saturday Night Fever." One car actually slowed, turned into the gravel drive and stopped at the window of Fran's tiny hot dog stand.

After successfully luring a patron, Rue decided that it was time for a reward. He lifted a thirty-two ounce Styrofoam cup from a spot on the ground where the gravel had eroded and was now just a small square of hard packed dirt. He closed his lips around the straw and let the ice water revive his dehydrated flesh.

With his free hand, Rue waved at cars as they passed, but this was not enough for Fran, who had finished with her recent customer. "I don't pay you to wave," she called out the drive-through window. "You get paid to dance. You couldn't attract a hungry bear in here with just a wave."

Rue held up his cup as if to show that he was not loafing but refueling for the next round. Fran looked as if she was about to ask him to reimburse her for the cup when Rue turned toward oncoming traffic. He set his cup back down on the dirt and commenced his Gangnam Style routine that rarely failed to draw at least a horn honk.

The results exceeded his expectations. A shiny, silver Lexus pulled into the drive. Rue saw two men in their late forties or early fifties in the front seats. He figured they were good for a four dog order, maybe even six.

Instead of pulling up to the ordering window, however, the Lexus parked in front of a pair of wooden picnic tables that Fran had set up for eat-in customers. The two men emerged from the car and walked not toward a waiting Fran, but to him.

The visitors had enough similarity of feature — the same long, straight nose, the same pointy chin, the same mop of thick, unruly hair — for Rue to conclude that they were related. One of the men — the older one, if Rue's perception was correct — was a couple inches taller than the other one. He took the lead and looked straight at Rue, while the other

Resurrectionist continued

man lagged behind and took in everything about the scene except Rue.

"Are you Cerulean Meeks?" the taller one asked Rue.

"Yes I am," Rue replied. He could feel Fran's impatient eyes boring through him from her position inside the stand. "Are you hungry for some lunch today?"

"Maybe," said the man. "My name is Franklin Montane, and this is my brother Richard. We were wondering if we could talk to you for a few minutes."

Franklin held out his hand, and Rue shook it through one of his mustard-colored gloves. Over the brother's shoulders, he saw Fran pointing at him with a pair of tongs.

"I'm working right now, but if you talk to that lady —" Rue pointed behind them toward his boss in the window — "you might be able to work something out with her."

When Franklin turned around Fran's dour expression transformed into a smile. "I'll see what I can do," he said and walked toward the eager frankfurter vendor.

With his brother gone, Richard seemed to size up Rue, as if they were about to engage in a medieval joust. Rue felt self-conscious in his hot dog outfit. "Who are you and what do you want to talk about?" asked Rue as the silence became more uncomfortable.

"We're writers and producers from Hollywood," said Richard. "We hear you have a special talent for bringing people back from the dead."

When Rue heard the word "Hollywood," he felt a sharp pain in his gut as if someone had reopened an old knife wound with a razor blade. He remembered leaving the town six years ago, a financial and professional failure. His sister lived here in Tennessee and had offered to squeeze him into her small house along with her husband and three children. He overstayed his welcome just long enough to land a job as a crossing guard at a local middle school, as well as the first in a series of fast food jobs. He thought he had left Hollywood, with its pressures and expectations, behind for good, but now it was here right in front of him. "I wrote a few good scenarios that people liked," he said.

Franklin returned from his negotiation with Fran. "She

said we could have you for ten minutes. But I hope you're hungry, brother. I had to buy twenty hot dogs."

Rue always admired the way Fran seized her opportunities. The three of them walked over to one of the picnic tables, the siblings taking one bench while Rue sat down in the other.

"I'll get right to it since our time is limited," said Franklin. "Do you know the show 'Visigoth'?"

"I've heard of it but I've never seen it," said Rue. Since he moved out of his sister's house, he had in fact not watched any shows because he did not own a television. He had found it impossible to enjoy a program because his mind was always analyzing the dialogue, the characters, the plot, and thinking of ways in which he would do it better. Only when he read novels could he give himself over to the author's creation and get lost in the story.

The Montanes scanned the area for a few moments as if to find the rock that Rue had been living under. Franklin continued. "The main character died in the final episode last year. We want you to bring him back."

1961

By RICKY GARNI

In the photograph, I am pointing at something just to the left of the photographer. Whatever it was, is gone now. It either died or moved or changed into something completely different. If I were to go back to that exact spot (and I know where it is, right near the mango tree in the backyard) and were I to point in the same direction, what would I be pointing at? Something that will die or move, or change into something else. Perhaps it will change into what it was when I pointed at it the first time. Perhaps it was someone I loved, and they loved standing under the mango tree.

A dream that Rue had long ago suppressed now flashed again in front of his eyes. He was accepting an Emmy and then an Oscar for Best Screenplay. Superstars took pay cuts to act in one of his movies, and critics praised his subtlety and perception.

Rue shook his head, both as an answer to the Montanes and to clear his mind of these poisonous aspirations. "I'm sorry," he said. "I don't do that anymore."

"You're the only person that can help us," said Richard. "When our boss suggested that we find you, I took it as an insult to my own creative abilities. Then on the plane ride, I read over your reanimation scenarios. I had to admit — and this is not easy for me — that you're the best."

Richard paused and Franklin picked up the thread. "The guy we're trying to bring back was cooked, roasted, eaten and burned. We proposed to reanimate a sculpture, but our boss shot down that idea."

"The Pinocchio parallel," said Rue.

"Exactly," said Franklin. "She wants something with as little magic as possible. Something unique."

Next page

Resurrectionist continued

Like an all-star shortstop reacting to the crack of the bat, an idea immediately occurred to Rue. It was as if his subconscious mind had taken on this problem many years ago and was finally free to release the solution into the world.

Then his inner voice screamed the promise that he had made to himself all those years ago. Never again! "I'm sorry that you wasted a trip all the way out here," said Rue, "but no, I'm not going back."

Fran walked out of the back door of the stand carrying two plastic trays filled with hot dogs. "Here are your dogs," she said. "Just come around to the window if you need condiments."

"May I ask why?" Franklin asked Rue. "You could make a lot of money if you did this, and you don't look too comfortable in that suit." He picked up a plain hot dog from its cardboard container and took a bite of the bread and meat.

As Franklin chewed and Richard took a couple dogs to the window to add mustard and relish, Rue considered refusing the request for an explanation and getting on with reality. But when Richard returned to the table, Rue decided that he might find more understanding among these fellow writers than he had among his so-called friends after he had left Hollywood.

"You can't imagine the frustration I felt," he began. "I was developing these resurrectionist scenarios that people raved about, but then when I tried to write complete screenplays they went nowhere. How could I be so good at the one thing and not the other? I mean, I had a great reputation, and I had the entree. People were excited to take a look at my work, but it never clicked."

"I can't tell you how many times we've had projects rejected," said Richard.

"I realize it's a subjective business," said Rue, "and I stuck it out for years. I wrote and pitched fourteen screenplays, none of which ever got the slightest nibble. I'd invested my money in a couple of promising restaurants both of which took a sharp downward turn once they'd received my funds. I decided it was a sign that I should leave."

Franklin swallowed the last bite of his first hot dog and slid

another cardboard container in front of him. "I'm not going to give you some rah-rah speech about how you should never give up, never surrender. But I will say this. Rich and I have read your scenarios. They are outstanding. Maybe you can't write a full episode, but you can bring characters back from the dead with a skill that has never been seen in Hollywood before or since. The dimensions of your talent may be narrow, but it's a talent nonetheless. I'm not asking you to come back and conquer Hollywood. I'm begging you to use your God-given abilities to bring back a character that means so much to us and the viewing public."

Rue wiped a bead of sweat from the bridge of his nose. Even while sitting motionless at a picnic table, perspiration continued to ooze out of his pores. "How much money are we talking about?"

"You get five thousand dollars for just agreeing to attempt this for us," said Franklin. "I've got a contract in the car to that effect that Gabriela Martinez, executive VP, has already signed. If we like your material and want to use it, you get one million dollars."

Rue was glad he was not eating a hot dog, because he would have inhaled a frankfurter into his trachea after hearing that figure. "That's in the contract too?" he asked.

"It is," said Franklin. "If you agree, Ms. Martinez wants to meet with you in two weeks."

"That's not a lot of time. I've never even seen the show."

"We've got DVDs of the entire series in the car," said Franklin, "but really, I think you just need to watch the final episode. The rest of the show is your typical fourth-century warrior stuff — battles, honor, justice, fawning women — that sort of thing."

"Rue darling," called Fran in her mock-sweet voice, "it's either time for you to get back to work, or your friends need to purchase some more product."

Rue pondered the effect of one million dollars on his current life. He promised himself he could just do this one job, get in and get out before the obsessive dream of Hollywood glory could take hold. While the money after taxes would not bring lifetime financial security, it would at least allow him to escape from the stifling hot dog suit. The rest of his body, and not just his face, would experience the sublime feeling of airflow during working hours.

"Why don't you buy ten more hot dogs," said Rue. "I want to read over the contract before I sign."

Peeking Through

By STEPHEN MEAD

A dream of morning glories & ivy,
the house, an interior jungle
right to the ceilings, and still,
this is happiness:
the leafy vines with small sky parasols
all good as Jack's stalk-magic
without a giant coming down ...

In other slumbers buildings
are hurricane-bashed, & the highest floors
feel quaking earth. Elevator gates freeze
as not unknown beings meet with the intimacy
of another's stubble against this ear,
these lips, like a ssh, & suddenly
there's a scene-shift.

Go to speak but the language is wrong.
In the bowels of that station it is hard
to connect to just the right train.
When not locomotives then there are buses
or boats to navigate, but when without a license,
driving is by rote & one's speed is fear.

Next comes dad's peonies in close-up
placed on my mother's desert-colored headstone.
In the first grade the last day of school
I gave a bouquet to my teacher.
Ants, as necessity, pushed open the pink bunches,
covered her desk, and I cried.

Rain fills the glass jars my father has placed,
such blue and rose reflections,
but his weathered hands are steady,
are sure as the bowling pins he used to set,
getting a nickel apiece, and hitchhiking home safe.

Ah, but that was another time & I wake
to this fan's summer hush,
wishing, wishing.

Next page

Resurrectionist continued

Two weeks later, Franklin led the way into Gabriela's office with Richard behind him and a dapper-looking Cerulean Meeks between them. While Franklin had never known his boss to mix business with pleasure, he also knew it would not hurt to have Rue look his best. Even in a hot dog suit, Rue's intense blue eyes could mesmerize whoever they beheld. With a new suit and a teeth-whitening treatment paid from Franklin's own pocket, however, Rue's looks approached those of the actors who brought the written words to life.

Introductions were made, smiles displayed, seats taken. In his left hand, Rue held four stapled packets of paper that contained his mental labor of the past two weeks. When Richard had asked for an overview of his scenario, Rue had politely declined. The work was complete, he had promised, and he did not want Gabriela to draw any preconceived notions from even a stray facial expression or inadvertent tone.

Franklin was about to initiate some prefatory small talk when Rue spoke. "Ms. Martinez, thank you for inviting me here today."

"Please, call me Gabriela."

Franklin and Richard shot each other a sidelong glance. It was usually years before Ms. Martinez became Gabriela to a supplicant. The striking eyes must have had a superb initial effect.

"Thank you, Gabriela, and please call me Rue." The Resurrectionist distributed copies of manuscript to each of the people in the room. "This is the scenario that I created for Theoderic's return. It's not that long, so I suggest we each take a few minutes to read it, and then you can tell me what you think."

"Sounds good," said Gabriela, whose eyes immediately began to scan the paper. Franklin doubted that the script in front of him could possibly live up to the expectations that preceded it, but he felt the anticipation that he often did when he read the first sentence of an accepted novelistic masterpiece.

FADE IN:

1 EXT. ITALIAN PLAIN — DAY

From above, we see about five hundred Roman soldiers gathered around a fire over which something is roasting. The soldiers are lounging, drinking, and making merry.

CLOSE UP: The soles of two bare feet rotate in a counterclockwise circle.

A COOK, short and fat, turns the handle of a roasting spit. We hear the squeak of metal on metal as it slowly spins. In the background, a blurred head sits atop a spike.

The COMMANDER, a hairy, muscled man still in his armor, approaches.

Commander

The men are hungry, cook. When will they be able to feast on the flesh of Theoderic, Rome's greatest enemy?

cook

Soon, my lord, soon.

While the cook waits, he sharpens the carving tools he is about to use.

As day turns to night, fires are lit. Feasting and revelry continue.

2 ext. italian plain — day

It is the morning after the extended party. Most of the soldiers are still sleeping, but a few are beginning to stir, moaning as they rise.

3 int. commander's tent

The commander wakes up next to his naked MISTRESS. He slowly removes her alabaster arm from his broad, bronzed chest.

commander

Marcus, bring me my pot!

MARCUS, in his early twenties and wear-

ing servant's clothing, appears holding the commander's chamber pot.

commander

It's time to expel this wretched Goth from my system.

The commander takes the chamber pot and disappears behind a curtain.

4 ext. commander's tent

Marcus waits patiently outside the tent. The commander, holding the chamber pot, appears and hands the pot to Marcus.

commander

Marcus, do something for me before you dispose of this. Take Theoderic's charred bones and whatever else may be left of him and throw him into the privy first. Toss this on top. The other men can also give our former enemy a similar present before we head for home.

marcus

Excellent idea, my lord.

5 ext. italian plain — day

The commander clicks his heels against his horse and the Romans head out. The camera pans over the smoking remains of Roman fires and comes to rest on the privy, which is now just a mound of dung.

A SQUIRREL scampers down a nearby tree and picks up an acorn from the base of the tree.

The squirrel looks around, wondering what to do with his newfound treasure.

SQUIRREL'S POV

The squirrel watches the last of the Roman soldiers leave the campsite.

FULL SHOT — ITALIAN PLAIN

After one more look around, the squirrel scrambles over to the dung heap and buries the acorn.

6 the dung heap

Days and nights pass in rapid succession. During one of the days, the skies darken

Next page

Resurrectionist continued

and there is a torrential downpour.

Time begins to pass even more quickly. Snow covers the ground then melts. The former Roman privy is once again a seamless part of its surroundings, except for one single difference. A new plant has shot up out of the ground and has now grown taller than the grass.

years later

Time moves even faster now. During the time lapse photography, we see the oak tree grow taller. Leaves appear and disappear as the seasons and years pass. As the trunk thickens, animals rest in the shade of its branches. A house is built nearby, and children climb the tree and frolic beneath its canopy. The house is abandoned and disappears, but the tree remains.

the present

The rush of time stops. A caption at the bottom of the screen reads "NORTHERN ITALY, c. 491." The trunk of the mighty oak is so thick now that most men could not wrap their arms entirely around it.

7 ext. horizon of the italian plain

We see a ragtag contingent of Roman soldiers appear on the horizon. They are walking toward the tree.

8 At the great oak

A ROMAN GENERAL, wearing a once luxurious red cape that is now soiled and tattered, dismounts his horse and takes shelter from the bright sun under the oak tree. His two lieutenants, BRANDUS and CRUCIAN, also the worse for wear, join him.

ROMAN GENERAL

Are the Franks still pursuing us?

brandus

They have left off, sir, and are allowing us to limp back to Rome.

crucian

Will we regroup and campaign against them next year?

roman general

That will be up to the emperor, Crucian, but if he asks my opinion, I will advise against it.

Brandus

Do you not think we will be strong enough to defeat them, sir?

roman general

We are still strong, Brandus, but our enemies are many. We have pagans attacking us from the east as well as the west. If we are to campaign, I will suggest that we go east.

crucian

And what will become of our western flank, general?

roman general

The Goths are still a powerful force that stands between us and the Franks. We will let Clovis expend some of his strength on those barbarians before we decide to attack.

brandus

A wise idea, sir.

roman general

Now I trust the report from the rear guard, but I would feel better if we were a little closer to Rome before we made camp. Tell the men to be ready to move out soon.

brandus and crucian

Yes, General.

full shot from under the oak tree – italian plain

Through the overhanging branches of the oak tree, we see the remnant of the once mighty Roman army disappear in the horizon opposite from which they came.

9 at the great oak – night

Darkness has fallen, and the night is silent. The wind begins to pick up, and the oak leaves rustle in the strong breeze. Lightning flashes in the distance, and thunder rumbles.

It begins to rain, slowly at first then harder. More distinct lightning bolts hit closer to the oak tree, as if it is the bull's-eye in a game of lightning darts played by the gods.

Finally, one of the bolts smashes into the tree. The great oak shudders. The lightning has ripped the tree in half vertically. The severed half falls away from its still implanted twin, slowly at first, and crashes to the ground.

10 close up – inside the great oak

Inside the trunk of the tree, we see THEODERIC, his eyes closed, but his torso still rippling with muscle even after his long hibernation.

close up – theoderic's face

From an expression of peace and serenity, Theoderic's blue eyes pop open, alert and wary.

quick cut to black screen

Franklin looked up after he had read the last word. Rich was also finished, and he raised one eyebrow, soliciting his older brother's silent opinion. In response, Franklin glanced at Rue, who was staring down at his lap, waiting for the critique to begin. Across the desk, Gabriela was still immersed in concentration.

Franklin imagined producing the scene that Rue had written and continuing the show. Having Theoderic sprout from the waste products of his own flesh might draw some jeers from the entertainment press, but the unique reincarnation would draw a buzz. People would gather around the water cooler at the office the next morning and the comments would fly: "Did you see 'Visigoth' last night?" "How crazy

Next page

Resurrectionist continued

was that?" "That was ridiculous!" "I can't believe Theoderic is back!" People would love or hate the scene, but the show would be back, and back in a big way.

Gabriela lifted her eyes from the script. Franklin had known her for long enough that he could usually predict what she was going to say even when she was trying to keep her expression neutral. In this case, however, her face was truly a Switzerland between East and West.

"The script still seems a bit raw to me," was the first thing she said.

"Sorry," said Rue. "It's been a while since I've written anything. I'm out of practice."

"The scenario is not realistic in the least," said Gabriela.

"Theoderic was as dead as a person can be," said Richard. "Total realism was not an option." Franklin knew that his normally restrained brother felt compelled to defend a fellow creator before Gabriela shot down the script.

Gabriela nodded and, resting her chin on a hand, pondered Richard's comment. "You're right," she said.

The executive then broke into a wide smile and Franklin could feel the tension start to drain from his body. "I love it," she said. "The Earth itself returns Theoderic to life not only because the people need him, but the planet itself requires his return. And the Franks as the new enemy. Opportunities for new characters, new storylines."

"Only one small caveat," said Richard. "The Franks defeat the Visigoths in 507, and after that, the Visigoths are about done in Gaul."

"By my calculation that gives Theoderic sixteen years to do his thing," said Gabriela. "Plenty of time for us to get several more good seasons out of him." She leaned back in her chair. "Cerulean, you've done it again."

Franklin looked at the triumphant man sitting next to him. He expected to see joy and excitement from a man who had just earned a million dollars and resurrected not only a fictional character, but his own Hollywood career. Instead, Rue looked as if he were admiring distant mountains from his back deck. He loved the view, but he had no intention of climbing the peaks.

"More than that, Rue," continued Gabriela, "I want to give you the opportunity to stay in practice as a screenwriter by

offering you a salaried position here at the network. There may be some projects from time to time that I'd like you to get involved with, but other than that, you're going to have total creative freedom."

Franklin was shocked by this sudden offer of employment. Screenwriters were usually only as valuable as their next script. Almost no writers existed who enjoyed the benefit of getting paid whether they produced work or not.

Franklin patted Rue on the shoulder. "Congratulations, Rue. It looks like you've worn that hot dog suit for the last time."

Rue's expression did not change, nor did he reply. Franklin assumed that it was from that shock of having success thrust upon him so suddenly and completely.

Six months after his victorious day in the office of Gabriela Martinez, Rue lowered a basket of tater tots into the sizzling, golden peanut oil. This was the first batch of tater tots to fry at the grand re-opening of Fran's Hot Dogs. Beside him, Fran, now his co-owner instead of his boss, arranged hot dogs on the new, spacious grill.

After opening its doors only five minutes ago, the new restaurant with eat-in dining room — no longer a mere shack — had attracted three customers through its glass and metal doors. It did not quite match the return of "Visigoth," which aired to an audience just shy of Super Bowl size, but it was still a good beginning.

Rue had no regrets about turning down Gabriela's generous offer. When he had accepted the job of reviving Theoderic, he had promised himself that he would not get sucked back into the vortex of Hollywood's enticements. Maybe his ability to mold complex characters and craft genuine dialogue would improve if he accepted the secure position at the network. Maybe he would finally live up to the creative potential that his numerous reanimation scenarios portended. Then again, maybe the work he so carefully polished would still be seen as "raw." Maybe after two or three years of writing scripts that would never be shot, Gabriela would approach him and suggest an extended sabbatical to help him find his voice. Even a writer with a salaried, secure position was only as valuable as his future work.

Some acquaintances had questioned his avoidance of a risk that so few people ever got a chance to take. To these doubters, Rue would smile and respond, "I invested in two restaurants that failed, yet I'm now again in the restaurant busi-

My Final Gift

By SANDRA ROKOFF-LIZUT

The surgeon softly murmurs
that I'll doubtless live a day or so
and bids my two grown daughters
to leave and get some rest.

I'm busy dying faster.

Willed my remains to science; can't
stand those phony *funeral flowers*.
Vodka and V8 in the fridge.
The old dames next door can
go over and drink a final toast.

I'm willing my body to close down.

Rent on the apartment
is due in two days time. If
my girls get a move on, they can
clean the whole place out by then.

And — when my daughters leave to take a nap,
I'll just wrap up my soul and slip out.

ness. I don't think you can say that I'm averse to a little risk."

In reality, Rue had never thought of his partnership with Fran as a risk. He had worked with Fran for two years and learned that the woman had ample business acumen. She had a great feel for the market and for what her customers wanted. She made a great tasting hot dog at a fair price and always received outstanding reports from the health inspector. Rue had no doubts that Fran would succeed and he considered his investment as safe as a U.S. Treasury bond. He would not only be a financier in the new enterprise, but he would also be an active participant in its success. Fran had

Next page

Resurrectionist continued

promised to initiate him into the ancient mysteries of the frankfurter. She also had no problem with him keeping his job as a crossing guard. He did not need the money anymore, but he still enjoyed seeing the kids who depended on him for their safe passage to and from school.

Another customer walked through the door, and Rue went to the register to take his order. Behind him, Rue heard Fran wrap and bag two hot dogs with graceful efficiency and present them to a waiting customer.

The man in front of Rue wore a uniform shirt that had two patches sewn to it. The patch on the right read "Dawson's Plumbing" and the one over his heart listed the man's name as "Dennis." He ordered a Tater Dog Basket, and Rue gave him a drink cup and took his money.

"Aren't you that Hollywood writer guy?" asked Dennis. Rue had refused an interview with the local paper that had been seeking information about his recent Hollywood adventures, but they lived in a small town and word spread without the help of media.

"That's me," said Rue. "I wrote a few little bits for various shows."

Dennis asked if Rue had ever met the stunning female whom one magazine had just named "The World's Sexiest Woman."

"No," said Rue. "I can't say that I've had the pleasure."

After realizing that he would have no vicarious contact with The World's Sexiest Woman, Dennis lost interest in the conversation. His face assumed a dejected look, as if Rue had squirted a hated condiment on an otherwise perfect hot dog.

"How do I look?" asked a female voice.

Rue turned to see Andrea, the cheery twenty-one-year-old woman who was now the new dancing hot dog. The suit, freshly cleaned of Rue's dried sweat, concealed Andrea's lithe figure but accentuated her large brown eyes and sparkling smile.

"You look a lot better than I did in that suit," said Rue.

"Looks to me like there's going to be a large rush here shortly," said Fran as she handed Dennis his food. "Now get out there and do your thing. I want that parking lot full in half an hour."

"Will do," said Andrea as she headed out the door.

As Fran spread more hot dogs on the grill for the expected rush, Rue got some fries going and grabbed a damp towel to wipe down the counter.

When he looked out the front window again, Andrea was already by the road doing the "Whip and Nae Nae," as she had called it during her interview. While Rue did not know whether this was one dance or two, he enjoyed watching somebody from the next generation update the moves of his old character. Andrea seemed to have the energy and enthusiasm to continue nonstop through the dinner hour. Compared to her, Rue's disco steps were the lackluster gyrations of a tired man.

As two cars, lured by Andrea's spectacle, pulled into the parking lot, Rue felt a new energy surge through his veins. The rush came not from the achievement of Hollywood and fortune, but from a feeling of contentment. He had not rejected Gabriela's generous offer because he feared failure, but because he preferred the peace and serenity that life in this small Tennessee town offered him. He had pulled out of the rat race to enjoy the simple pleasures of connecting with regular people and providing them with quality hot dogs. Rue headed back to his register, ready to serve the new customers and knowing that he was right where he belonged.



Funeral for the Last Parent

By DONAL MAHONEY

They were never one
always two
yet they had five,
adults themselves now,
bowling pins today
upright in the front pew,
wondering still
after all these years
why the two
were never one.

It's not a story
the two would tell
even if they could.
They were galaxies apart.
They had no answer
yet they still had five,
adults themselves now
who can celebrate
they're here at all,
bowling pins today
upright in the front pew.

No need to wonder why
the two who loved them
were never one.
It's not a story
the two would tell
even if they could.
They're galaxies away.

Book excerpt



Beatdown in Bangkok

A Stetson Jeff Adventure

By ADAM FLEMING and JUSTIN FIKE

CHAPTER ONE

I woke up and looked in the mirror. Lines on my face from my new corduroy Arkansas Razorbacks pillow. Spiked the hair on the top of my head with gel and let it dry while I combed out the tangles hanging to my shoulders with my brand new Arkansas Razorbacks comb. “Barbed wire in front, horse’s ass in the back” my Daddy calls it. He tried to make me cut it once, but I reminded him that great-grandpappy had long hair, and he rode with Wyatt Earp. Then I grabbed my Stetson, a regular Stetson. Oh, I got a few that are bright red, with a big Razorbacks logo in the center, but I’d rather shake hands with a rattlesnake than wear one of those in public.

Look, can I just say right up front that I hate the Arkansas Razorbacks? I did not choose to be born in Texarkana. I would throw out all the Arkansas Razorbacks stuff clutter-

ing up my trailer if it wasn’t all given to me on my birthday and holidays by members of the family. But it was, so I have to keep it. I tell my family members “Ef the Razorbacks” and they all laugh and say, “Spoken like a true Arkansian, or is it Arkansite? Arkanser?” Then they all fall to arguing about what they should call me. Oh, it’s a big joke here that I was born in Arkansas. It’s become a family tradition every Christmas to see who can give me the weirdest Razorbacks memorabilia, and yesterday was no different. Everyone else got something they wanted. I got ten Razorbacks place mats to go with my Razorbacks card table, and a shiny new Razorbacks razor, which Daddy was especially proud of finding. And remember this was 1988, long before there was Ebay or Amazon, but still they managed to find stuff like a metal sign that says “Reserved Parking, Razorbacks fans only” or a

desk statue of a pig made from resin that’s supposed to look like bronze. I don’t even have a desk, and I don’t need a parking spot. I swear they spent all summer lookin’ at yard sales and auctions for stuff to get me, and they laughed when I told them I don’t need more Razorback stuff, and then they just kept on debating what you call someone from Arkansas. Arkansonian? No, that’s not what you call me.

My name is Stetson Jeff Stetson.

You know, just like Bond James Bond, Double Oh Seven. Except with a bigger hat and a bigger ... heh, heh. You know. Everything’s bigger in Texas. Heck, even in Arkansas things are bigger than little old Great Britain. But let’s not go there.

I threw open the door to my trailer and admired the view.

Next page

Stetson Jeff continued

East Texas spread out from my front step; the big house, the ranch, the warehouse with trucks pulled up. Somebody loading hats for delivery to San Antonio, maybe. Went over to the big house to see what kind of leftovers were in the kitchen for breakfast, probably refried steak and eggs. I was all set and ready to have a pretty great day. Maybe watch some old boxing tapes on my Razorbacks-brand VCR because it's Boxing Day and I got nothin' to do, but I checked the TV Guide and there's no boxing on TV. How can that be, y'all? It ain't right, it's Boxing Day. All we got is MacGyver reruns, which is sort of like boxing I guess, but with extra duck tape.

Daddy met me at the door, he was coming out to limber up. He won't admit it, but he was doing yoga. He was getting older even back then, a little thicker around the waist, but he always wanted to stay fit in case the Sheriff called and organized a posse or some such nonsense. Daddy used to be a fighter like me. He always said he never lost a fair fight, but the truth is he got his butt whupped probably the last six or seven times he got in a jam. Now he's more of a talker.

"Mornin', son," he says to me, and now I know it's on. Once he starts in like that, he'll be talkin' all day. "We got a pretty big shipment of hats goin' out, considerin' the retail season just ended. Thing is, winter can pretty well ruin hats." As if I didn't know all this. He went on about the business for a while, doin' his Downward Dog and other poses. If the poses had namby-pamby names, he gave 'em better, Texas names. Rodeo Jack, Rattler on the Rocks, Defending the Alamo, and Wide Open Spaces just to name a few.

He talked right through it all until he got to Birthing Calf and I got embarrassed for him so I went inside to find some steak and eggs. He kept right on talkin' at me with his head down between his knees about how well the business is doin' and how we're gonna start making jeans now, too.

I came back out after breakfast and he was smoking a cigar, looking much better. I guess the stretches do help, or at least the cigars do.

"So, what do you say?" he asked.

"I dunno. What do I say about what?"

"Goin' into town to meet these guys?"

I missed something in between the yoga and the cigar, but Daddy doesn't like it when I'm not listening, so I said, "Sure, why not?"

So much for watching the Rumble in the Jungle again. Daddy walked on over to the pickup truck and I had to toss down the last of my coffee and chase after him.

"So these guys," I asked all casual-like as I climbed into the passenger seat, "you said they were from ..."

"Bangkok," Daddy says. "Funny name, isn't it? That's in Thailand."

"And you said that they came from Bangkok because ..."

"Because they want to make our jeans for us over there. Seems they've set up a new factory, and they want our brand to be their first big contract. I can tell they're hungry for it, too, so I told them if they can beat a certain price to fly over here and we'll shake on it."

"What price?"

"We were gonna have them factory-made in the USA for one-twenty-two a pair, but we can order from Thailand for half that." I whistled low. He kept talking. "I'm all for 'made in the USA' but that's the name of the model we're going to have these fellers make, so it should be just fine."

"You mean like 'Levi's, 501's'. Ours would be 'Stetson's, Made in the USA's'."

"Right. Then we put an itty-bitty tag on the inside, you know, like on the backside of 'Machine Warsh Warm' that says 'Thailand' and nobody's the wiser."

"Makes sense. But what if you get caught? Is it worth it, for half of one-twenty-two?"

"Half of one-twenty-two is sixty-one cents, Jeff," he said.

"I was coming around to that," I said. "Sixty-one cents, you can buy three generic cokes at Wal-mart for that. I got that much between my couch cushions, I reckon. I mean, Daddy, you're the boss, but we got a brand-name to worry about. I don't know if you should mess with that whole Made in the USA thing."

"Jeff," he said, "It's not sixty-one cents, it's sixty-one cents times 300,000 pairs, every year."

"Wow, over a million bucks."

"Yes, it would be, in time," he said, real pensive-like. The look he gets whenever he's about to make a pile of dough. "Look, just be nice to these guys. They bow instead of shakin' hands. Let me worry about the math, you just use your street smarts. Make sure these guys are on the level. You can always figure out people from outside of Texas. It's your Texarkana gift, dealin' with foreigners."

That made me think of a line from Ranger Discoveries, the second greatest book ever written, although if I'm being real honest I've read it way more often than the Good Book itself.

If you've got a gift, you've got to humbly accept it. The world needs what you've got to give.

Jeremiah P. Johnstone, Ranger Discoveries, page 271.

I thought about that in silence while we drove through town, and Daddy was quiet cause he was doing the math. Soon enough we got to the bar, parked in back, and went inside. The Tippy Cow wasn't the best bar in town, but it's the spot where Daddy learned drinkin' so he stayed loyal to it even after the time he found a fingernail in his chili. The place was always noisy, and if you stood in one place too long you had to work hard to pick up your feet to get them unstuck from the floor, but to this day the smell of old beer and boot leather makes me feel right at home.

I looked around, I didn't see anybody from Bangkok but I saw two foreigners, maybe Chinese guys in the back pouring their own shots from a big bottle of Jack's.

"Must be them," Daddy said, and walked over to say hello.

I watched how they bowed, and I bowed back the same way. Daddy stuck out his hand, and they shook it.

"Welcome to Texas," Daddy said, "You fellers been here long?"

One guy was the interpreter. His English was pretty good. He said they came early to get a head start, and Daddy said he respected that. They started talkin' business. I tuned out of the conversation, but kept my feelers on for vibes. (You can see that I humbly accept my gift, Ranger Johnstone.)

We drank all day. The interpreter's English got worse, then went from worse, to bad, to downright mediocre, with words from Bangkok startin' to get mixed in.

Finally, Daddy said "I gotta take a piss," and I said "me, too," because that's the signal.

"It's a great deal," he mumbled into the urinal.

"I smell a rat," I said.

"It's the goddam bathroom in a bar, son, of course you smell somethin' unpleasant," he said.

"No, Daddy, it's these guys. Something's wrong. I can't put my finger on it."

"Are you sayin' I shouldn't shake on it today?"

"No, that might piss 'em off. Shake on it, do a short-term temporary deal, tell 'em we'll give them a try for a while. Six

Stetson Jeff continued

months. How many jeans is that?"

"150,000 pairs. It's not a bad start, and I think they'll agree. They might charge me a bit more per unit, but still better than a buck. But how are we gonna figure out if we want to keep workin' with these guys, though?"

"I dunno." I felt the feeling of being at a loss.

As we went back out I saw that our friends had meandered over to talk to some girls at the bar, and the older Bangkokian was actually making a move on this pretty blonde. She was beautiful, I mean, cheerleader foxy. Her name is May Daisy Cook. I didn't take much notice of her growing up, cause she used to just be a little girl. She was maybe two-three years younger than me and she surely was no little girl now, in fact all my friends who didn't have girls of their own to stick up for agreed she was the most beautiful woman in the county.

As he moved in beside her at the bar, his hand brushed her rear end. Looked intentional, I mean, he did it in the way drunks who think they are being subtle do, but what they're doin' is obvious to everyone else.

"Crazy idjit," I said.

"Yup. Looks like they may be in a jam. Good thing I limbered up," said Daddy, as we broke into a trot. Sure enough, Big Mac Wallace, who was seeing May Daisy Cook at the time, was getting red in the face and didn't like that feller talkin' to his girl let alone touchin' her bottom that way. He's dumb but he don't miss subtle.

I went to school with Big Mac, he was in my class, and let me tell you if you want someone to write you a killer essay so that you can get into the Texas Rangers, which is my dream and that is even why I am writing essays like this right now, well, Big Mac is not much of an essayist but he's sure as shootin' a killer. I come up to his solar plexus, which is this little knob below the sternum, so the one time I did fight him I nearly killed him with a head-butt to the chest, cause I almost broke off his solar plexus and drove it right into his heart. As it was his heart just turned out to be bruised and it laid him up for a good while, but I wouldn't want to fight him again because as he told me himself, next time I will not be so lucky because it will not be a fair fight. I am not afraid of him at all unless it is not a fair fight.

Big Mac took a longneck and busted it on the counter and everybody cleared away except for the Bangkokian, who didn't seem to know better. Big Mac came a-swingin' for him, glass shards flashing in an arc through the air. But that is when I saw something that if I didn't see it myself I wouldn't have believed my eyes.

The younger Thailander guy, the interpreter, came up alongside Big Mac and punched him in the ear, with only two fingers. Wow! It was such a hard punch, and it stopped Big Mac in his tracks.

Well it was a brawl now, and you may think it was racism but I tell you what, if you are a Chinaman or a Mexican or an Indian or a British Gentleman or a Fighting Irish from Notre Dame or just from Texarkana it does not matter to Big Mac, you are a foreigner and besides you are touching his girl which is the main point, and so he didn't stay down. He got up swinging, and his brother and two cousins were off their stools faster than heat lightning in July. They got all bunched up trying to get to the Bangkokians and they clipped a few of the fellers standing nearby who started swinging back, and you can imagine how things went from there.

Now I got to say the rest of the day was a kind of a blur, because we got those boys out of the bar while everyone else was fighting so I did not get a chance to speak politely to May Daisy Cook and besides it was not a good time to talk. I wanted to talk to her again some day if she would just stop hanging around with Big Mac, not that I had anything against him personally. We always got along okay, and even helped each other out of a few scrapes down the road, but before she started seeing Big Mac semi-regular, May Daisy had danced with me one night when they had a boot-scootin' at the county fair. I said something that made her laugh, and she kissed my cheek when the dance was over, and she said "You're cute, Shorty," and that was the sorta thing that was hard to forget. But she was still in her Senior Year at Texas A&M and I knew I would see her on the sidelines during the Cotton Bowl on TV in a few days, bouncing up and down with her pompoms and whatnot lifted skyward and that was a comfortin' thought I must say. I like Texas A&M a lot more than the Razorbacks, I tell you what.

"You fellows really know how to box, over there in Bangkok," I said, once we'd got some ice packs on our faces and things were mellowing out, as the hippies say. We were sitting on the veranda back at the ranch.

"Yes," said the interpreter. "We practice Muay Thai."

"Mooley what?"

The Black Mark

By PATRICK THERON ERICKSON

of bloodshed
marks my black heart

And the avenger of blood
invades my bloodstream

For I considered
the poor beneath me

And now their blood
cries out from the ground
beneath my feet

Every man's hand
has a hand in this

who has a free hand
to toss his hat in the ring

and cast the first stone.

"Muay Thai. Thai-style boxing. My master taught me. I am not only interpreter, I am his bodyguard. He was great fighter but now he need me. He has become thick in the middle. Fat-fatty."

His English was getting better again.

"You dudes have your own brand of boxing?" I said. I was feeling a feeling of incredulity.

Next page

Stetson Jeff continued

"Yes, it is our national sport. We have a big tournament in Bangkok every year. Like your Series of World Super Cups, but with kicking. In summer time, I think you would call it. You should come and see sometime, Stetson Jeff Stetson."

"I gotta take a piss," I said.

Daddy followed me into the bathroom.

"I know what I gotta do," I said, "I'm going to Bangkok. I'm going to tell them I want to watch their Mooey Thailand Tournament, but I'll check out their operations while I'm over there."

"Sounds good, son, let's shake on it."

"Wait until I'm done pissin'," I said.

"No, I mean we'll shake on it with the Big Shot out there. Whatshisname. Fat-fatty."

"Sounds good. I'll call Betsy P. at Texas Travels tomorrow morning and get a one-way ticket to Bangkok."

And you know what, I did it. And that is how the story began to unfold as you will see.



Editors' note: "Beatdown in Bangkok: A Stetson Jeff Adventure," is a new book from Justin Fike and Adam G. Fleming, available on Amazon. It's the first of a planned series.

Their lighthearted story follows Stetson Jeff Stetson, a Texan from Arkansas who travels to Bangkok on a mission for his father's company, which makes Stetsons and is looking to get in on the cheap Asian jeans market. The book doesn't get any less absurd from there.

The book masquerades as light fluff, but lands some sneaky punches on unfair labor and trade practices. It also manages to poke fun at two serious cultures and the clash between the two while showing an underlying respect for both.

Tearing Through the Dictionary for the Meaning of Levant

By CAROL HAMILTON

It seemed the opposite of Orient:
"North, South, Orient, Levant."
Huge dictionaries can surprise,
and the word shot off light splinters
like our sparklers on your deck
at Fourth of July midnight,
the air heavy with moisture
from the lake as we watched
the lighted motorboats slip homeward
as smoothly as water striders.
There is a touch of levitation
in the definitions, also,
breaking camp, pulling up stakes,
or the spoiler who slips away
while his gambling debts stay behind.
A fine grade of rock so named, too.
But mostly it is an eastern shore
or eastern weather slipping
a moist gray shawl over everything
from the Adriatic to Gibraltar
to the Canary Islands while
I was expecting the opposite.

Stacked together, my two dictionaries
replicate each other in most things,
but like identical twins each
has unique features not to be lost.
I have never desecrated a dictionary
before, except with overuse,
and neither looks its younger best.
But now I've torn this paper chunk
out of the elder just to carry all
the contrasts found to a brighter light.
Orient, Levant. The lever of this word
has pried up many stones this morning,
and perhaps I'll Scotch tape this fragment
back into place on its etymological map.

Tearing Through the Dictionary — 2

I did it, so now it appears to be
the repair of an accident.
On its reverse there is a bit of overlap
at lewd and lettuce and
letters of credence.
The latter is probably something
you should never quite trust.
Words and appearances
are really quite slippery.

The Knowledge

CHAPTER THREE

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

The new king's good reputation was short-lived. Presented with a crown and with sovereignty, Hiram found himself freed of the limitations imposed on his behavior by his traditionalist father. Within months, the nobility were noting signs that Hiram's exemplary conduct at the time of his father's death had been nothing more than a ploy to solidify his popular support. That it had done so left Hiram's critics unable to publicly criticize or confront the king, for fear of the people's anger.

At first, the unease was the fear of that situation which befalls every monarchy: a playboy king. Hiram's parties were lavish, his affairs were multitudinous and his attention to duty was lax, at best. The nobility, including his uncle, the Duke of Qift, saw to it that handlers were hired to hush up the king's philandering — duties which included misdirection of the press, ensuring that the king's rendezvous were discreet, and keeping his paramours quiet. These measures met with moderate and predictable success.

The result of these efforts was an uncomfortable and ultimately short-lived status quo. Once again, the precipitating event was sadly predictable: the king fell in love with Lumi Koderzaught, the young daughter of the Duke of Maltin. This was a source of



of the Queen

great controversy and unease in the capital. The houses of Maltin and Trefen, being both of the royal line, had on occasion been rivals for the throne — most notably in the War of Succession, roughly eighty years before Hiram's reign. Though that conflict was brief, the bitterness it engendered endured, and was perpetuated by a thousand subtle slights across the years. Invitations and notes of thanks forgotten, nobles left waiting in antechambers, rolls of the eyes and every other dagger of social practice available kept the anger alive, if not the memory of its reason. As noted above, the Duke of Maltin at the time of Hiram's reign was at best a reluctant admirer of the king's early efforts at good behavior, and a suspicious one at that.

Consequently, as the king's hedonic tendencies grew unavoidably obvious, Maltin's criticism of the king became correspondingly harsher and more pointed, though never public. The only matter of any public note was the strange coincidence that the Duke's beautiful, charming daughter Lumi seemed never to be at dances, dinners and social events simultaneously with the king. The natural — and true, according to Lady Koderzaught's own diaries — rumor was that the Duke carefully arranged for the two young people never to be together. Clearly a political insult made under the pretext of paternal concern, it became clear that any paternal concern on the point would have been more than justified.

In the Spring of (date redacted), at the debut ball for the king's distant cousin, lady Anida Knauger, the king committed an egregious violation of etiquette — arriving far earlier than expected, and entering the line for announcement out of proper order. He found himself in the queue behind lady Koderzaught. According

Next page

Queen continued

to contemporary records, the king's faux pas caused a temporary delay in proceedings while the Knauger domestic staff sought a protocol for lessening the indignities brought on by his majesty's misstep. Through the delay, the king engaged lady Koderzaught in conversation, and appeared immensely affected by her charm.

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

“Right,” the prophetess said, “well, then, that’s enough for one night.”

She reached behind the tree she was planted against, and drew out a thick, fur-lined overcoat which she offered to Marigold. When Marigold took the coat it was warm and dry, not like something lying on the forest floor on a cold night.

Either failing to remark or disregarding Marigold’s astonishment, the prophetess reached back behind the tree and drew out a coat of her own.

“Not much,” she said, though not apologetically, “but they’ll keep us warm. Wrap up.”

At any previous juncture in her life, Marigold might’ve stopped to inquire about coats appearing from behind trees in the dark. She found, though, that her mind had space only for a few questions, and that the origin of the coat didn’t warrant her curiosity.

“The others,” she started. “Harrison and Almira, and —”

The prophetess told her that if Harrison and Almira weren’t safe, they would be, and that anyway, there was nothing Marigold and the prophetess could do. She assured Marigold that Harrison and Almira, in particular, would be safe for the night, and that Marigold could sleep without fear.

Marigold took off her flannel shirt and jeans, bunched them into a grimy semblance of a pillow, and nestled into the overcoat. As she slipped away, she heard the prophetess, still sitting against the tree, overcoat slung across her knees, muttering to herself.

Sunday morning was cold. Gray light and frosty air that leaked in at the cuffs and the collar of the overcoat forced Marigold awake. Her eyelids were swollen and gritty with mucus. Her throat hurt, and her nose was congested. The wound above her eye ached and itched, and stung.

Every time she moved, cold air flowed into her sanctuary, and her joints and muscles protested until the pain made her gasp. Once, on an educational trip to the harbor in Tetidet with other Oneness Students, she had seen a shipping crate that had broken free of the crane unloading the ship. It had crashed down onto the pier from a great height. No one was killed, but the cargo itself had been ruined. When Marigold’s group visited, the day after the accident, workers had been unloading the ruined freight — luxury cars. The bedraggled metal messes that rolled out of the crate were recognizable, but dull, sagging approximations of their intended shape. In mind and body both, but especially in body, Marigold felt like one of those squashed-up luxury cars.

The prophetess was also asleep, propped against the tree with the overcoat laid over her whole body. She was snoring.

As soon as Marigold poked her head out of her overcoat, the snoring stopped, and the prophetess’s round head shot up out of the coat.

“DAMN!” she roared, startling Marigold, who gasped in terror and twitched one foot out from the protection of the overcoat into the cold.

“It’s cold!” hissed the prophetess, seeming surprised. “What the hell?!?”

Marigold, pulling her foot back in, wondered again what was the worth of a prophetess who was being constantly surprised.

Or of a queen who didn’t know she was one. An account manager who turned out to be a queen. A hill girl who turned out to be a city woman.

“Of course,” she said, “why wouldn’t it be cold?”

The prophetess glared at her, but seemed to choose silence as the route of wisdom, allowing herself only a snort. Having begun to snort, she transitioned smoothly into clearing her throat and spitting.

Marigold winced at the prophetess’s manners, and eased upright, accompanying the movement with a self-pitying collection of moans and gasps, and taking care to keep the overcoat wrapped around her. “Good god,” said the prophetess. “What are you on about? You’re young. Imagine being my age.”

Marigold felt a flash of irritation, but fought it down.

“Yesterday was hard,” she said, “and last night wasn’t great, either.”

The prophetess scrunched her face into a prune and sighed. The breath steamed out in front of her. “You’re right, you’re right. Apologies.”

Marigold wasn’t sure what to say to that, and said nothing. Beyond the soreness, her stomach was empty and aching, and the air was stinging her exposed skin.

She fumbled with her makeshift pillow, disentangling her shirts, pants and socks. She made a brief attempt at dressing under the coat, but gave it up, and was obliged to pull on her clothes while standing shivering on top of the coat.

As she was dressing, Marigold noticed that the gray was beginning to subside. In all directions from their particular pool of shadows, Marigold could see patches where the early autumn sunlight cut through the forest canopy and painted leaves and branches white.

As Marigold was watching the woods, and buttoning up her flannel shirt, the prophetess reached behind the tree again, searched with her hand for a moment, then dragged a large backpack out from behind the trunk, solving the question of just where the warm, dry coats had come from the night before.

The pack was made of two leather bags, one huge and one moderately-sized, bound to a polished frame of dark-stained wood. To Marigold, the pack was very like the prophetess — antique, and peculiar, but effective.

The prophetess had begun to hum a lurching melody in a minor key while she unsnapped the smaller, upper compartment and fished out a battered copper kettle. Then, she turned back to Marigold, who was ashamed to find that she’d been staring, and raised a bushy eyebrow.

“I imagine,” she said, “That you’re as hungry as I am.”

Marigold nodded.

“Alright, then,” said the prophetess, “we eat, and once our brains have fuel, we think till our skulls split.”

It was as agreeable a plan as Marigold could have hoped for, so she tottered off, her knees creaking and ankles rattling in search of twigs and leaves to burn. She wasn’t inclined to go far, and didn’t have to. When she had filled her arms with sticks and verified by investigation that none of the leaves on the forest floor were dry fit to burn, she circled back and found that the prophetess had somehow filled the kettle with water, set out two tin cups and bowls and cleared out a bare circle of dirt for the fire.

Queen continued

As Marigold approached, the prophetess was fiddling with a short, cast-iron post with three notches in the shaft, and a curve like a shepherd's crook on one end. At the tip of the crook was a smaller hook, which Marigold presumed was for the handle of the kettle. The prophetess pushed the straight end into the ground, got up, leaned her full weight on it, rummaged in her backpack until she produced a wooden mallet, pounded the post with the mallet, and — finally satisfied that it was solidly in the ground — hung the kettle from the crook end.

In the space beneath the kettle, Marigold assembled the fuel by habit, her fingers guided by memories her mind had forgotten. When she was done, the prophetess leaned in and struck a flame with flint. Marigold smiled. For as much as she'd lost of her heritage, she could still set a fine fire.

As the fire crackled and the kettle steamed, the sun's rays turned from white to gold. Still, the air was cool in the shadows, and the women sat close to the fire, staring at the flames.

When the water began to boil, the prophetess roused herself from her reverie and wrapped a rag around her hand to fill the cups and bowls with water. Hanging the kettle again, she extracted from her mysteriously abundant backpack oats for the water, salt for the oats, and tea for the cups.

They ate ravenously, Marigold thinking that as much as her father's spirit might've disapproved of her breakfast on Saturday, he would've applauded the prophetess's choice for Sunday. It was everything her father had been: hearty, wholesome, and difficult.

With a congealed brick of oatmeal in her stomach, and the warm tea in her hand, Marigold's thoughts turned from her stomach to her plight.

Clearly, so had the prophetess's. She grunted, and said, "So. You're the queen."

"We don't know that," said Marigold, "not for sure."

"How sure do we need to be?" asked the prophetess. "The amulet thinks so, you think so, I think so, all those nincompoops in Valeview seemed to think so — what more do we need?"

"The government, maybe?" hazarded Marigold. "I imagine they want a word."

"Ah," said the prophetess. "No. What they think doesn't matter, because no matter what they think, they'll do what they want, which is deny that you could possibly be the queen, say it wouldn't matter if you were, denounce you, and try to have you killed."

"Gosh," said Marigold.

The prophetess shrugged, "You'll get used to it."

Marigold looked away into the woods. Shafts of sunlight shone on tree trunks and dappled the undergrowth and the carpet of matted leaves. The pinpricks of light shifted and danced in a meandering breeze that ruffled the leaves and needles affectionately on its way. The whole world seemed to be at perfect peace.

Despite the soothing tranquility of her surroundings, Marigold's stomach was knotted, and her chest was tight. It hurt to breathe. The foremost thought in her aching mind was that after fewer than twenty-four hours of government pursuit, her body was a battered mass of aches and bruises, cuts and scrapes and scabs. She took a deep breath and tried to rediscover the courage she'd felt in the night.

"I don't know that I will."

The prophetess laughed, but did not smile. "Your choice, of course, but you'll do one or the other: get used to it, or die." Marigold clenched her teeth.

"You might not like to hear it," said the prophetess, "but I'd rather you be angry than dead. Now —"

"If I'm the queen —" started Marigold, wheeling on the prophetess, and then said, "— get down."

She dropped flat, and the prophetess, showing agility and reflexes remarkable for a woman of her years, flopped down beside her.

"Give me your gun," whispered Marigold. "There's someone in the trees."

The prophetess rolled onto her side, and plunged a hand into the backpack. Marigold, eyes fixed on the woods, was surprised at her own response. It had been nothing but the faintest flash of skin and cloth in her peripheral vision, but instinct had risen from the past to put her on high alert. She eased her right hand back toward the prophetess.

The older woman was breathing loudly and fumbling in the backpack. Marigold felt her heart beat running faster and faster, pressed against the ground, until the prophetess gave a satisfied sort of snort and pressed the gun into Marigold's hand.

The weight was astonishing. It was a struggle for Marigold to swing the gun round and level it on the sunny under-

Water on Fire

By KELLY McNEAL

Crazy is that
Feeling

Everything is fine
And you explode

A match not
Lighting a candle

Then detonating
In water

You smirking
Like that's normal

growth where she was convinced that someone was hiding. Even when she managed it, she found that she held it steady — not from nerves, but from weight.

Her nerves, though, were taking part in the festivities. They blurred her eyes with tears, as she stared into the sunny foliage, some twenty yards distant, where she'd seen ... whatever it was she'd seen. Now, there was no movement but the undulations of branches and leaves, swaying with the wind. The prophetess, having completed a complex maneuver to turn around and crawl up next to Marigold without raising her head, was muttering under her breath unintelligibly.

Marigold squinted to clear her eyes. Blood thundered in her ears, and throbbed through the scab on her forehead and

Next page

Queen continued

the abrasions that now seemed to cover most of her body. The prophetess's muttering was growing louder, commanding. A lock of hair fell across Marigold's eyes, and tickled her nose.

"Crap," she whispered, and, taking the gun in her right hand, tried to brush away the hair with her left, without losing focus.

As she moved her hand back to the gun, three things happened in quick succession. First, Harrison — looking surprised and embarrassed — tumbled out of the thicket and crashed down with a yelp. Simultaneously, the prophetess swelled up from the ground beside her like a striking cobra, arms spread straight out from her sides, gibbering at a thunderous volume. Third, Marigold — first trying to swing the gun to cover the movement then trying not to aim it at Harrison, lost control of it. It slipped out of her right hand, and as she tried to catch it, her grasping fingers landed on the trigger. The gun went off.

Marigold was blinded, deafened, and felt a devastating blow across the bridge of her nose. The gun had recoiled from the shot straight into the bridge of her nose. She dropped her head, clutched at her face, and rolled over onto her back.

The prophetess whooped and charged forward, unconcerned by the possibility that Marigold might've killed Harrison or herself. Marigold, her nose radiating pain, rolled back over to see what was happening.

Harrison had recovered his wits, and turned to run, but he'd taken no more than three steps before the prophetess was onto him. Leaving her feet, the old woman caught him in the back with a flying tackle.

She landed on top of him, swept up his arms behind his head, and planted a knee in the back of his neck before he had reacted.

Marigold scrambled to her feet, scooping up the gun with one hand and holding her face with the other. She staggered forward at the highest speed she could manage, driven by adrenaline, restrained by soreness.

"HOW DID YOU FIND US?" thundered the prophetess, dragging at Harrison's arms.

"Ouch, ouch! Let me go! LET ME GO!" squealed Harrison, squirming and trying to wrench his arm free.

"Not just yet, you toad," growled the prophetess, digging in the knee. She turned to Marigold. "I don't trust him."

"I saved her life!" said Harrison. "What have you ever done?"

"Oh, did you?" asked the prophetess. "You know as well as I do that —" She paused.

"Let him up," said Marigold, wincing as blood trickled out under her fingers and rolled down her nose. "Let him up, take the gun, and we'll talk."

The prophetess pouted, and insisted on taking the gun before she was willing to let Harrison rise, extending and complicating the entire sequence significantly. When at last Harrison rose, dusting himself off, he and the prophetess glared at each other. She ostentatiously drew back the hammer on the revolver.

Marigold sighed.

"How did you find us?" she asked him, keeping a hand pressed to the bridge of her nose.

"You should ask her that same question," said Harrison. "She shows up at a secret meeting, tells us she can't prove she's trustworthy, and five minutes later the building is burning and we're under attack from all sides. She somehow miraculously escapes with — with you, and leaves the rest of us to our own devices."

"Why exactly," asked prophetess, "would you want me to stay and fight if you don't trust me? And why would I arrange to have the meeting broken up, and lots of people hurt, and the building burned if I was planning to escape with Marigold?"

Harrison glowered.

"I think it's obvious," he growled, "you —" He trailed off. The prophetess raised a mocking eyebrow.

"Go on," said Marigold.

"—You want her to trust you," finished Harrison, lamely.

"Sure I do," said the prophetess. "But I certainly wouldn't have needed her to if I just wanted to kidnap or kill her. If you're wondering how I found your 'secret meeting,' and the whole place ended up crawling with enemies, maybe it has something to do with how well you and your little insurrection club keep secrets."

At this tactless suggestion, Marigold made an attempt to break in, but the prophetess stamped a foot and raised her voice.

"And of course I took the queen — sorry, took Marigold — and escaped. Were you thinking that it would be more trustworthy to keep her there, surrounded by assassins, when

British Beach

By ELIZA CALLARD

The sand flows in a fine grit
wind across my feet and ankles,
like watching the dry ice that my father
brought home — packed
around the ice cream now
in the freezer — escaping
in a Santa's beard, flat and white, over
the table edge.

she's already beaten half to hell? You're either an idiot, or you've a lot to learn."

Marigold bunched up a dirty sleeve, and wiped away some of the blood draining from the cut on her nose. She was beginning to tire of constant fear, of flight, of scrapes and cuts and bruises and rivers of blood gushing from her head. More than all that, though, she was weary of conversations she didn't understand, and being spoken of like she wasn't present. Harrison had paused to plan his response, and she cut in sharply.

"If you're done fighting among yourselves about whom I can trust," she said, "why don't you answer the question?"

The prophetess nodded to Harrison. "Go on."

"You, too," Marigold told the prophetess, wiping at her nose. "You've been lovely, but I'm not altogether convinced I should trust either of you."

Now Harrison smirked, and the prophetess sighed.

"How did you find the meeting?" Marigold asked the prophetess.

The old woman sighed again and rolled her eyes, before answering, "Magic."

"Be serious," said Marigold.

Next page

Queen continued

The prophetess's eyes widened in anger.

"I am," she barked.

Marigold was taken aback. Harrison snorted.

"Just because you don't believe in it doesn't mean it doesn't exist," said the prophetess. "I tap into the powers of the earth and elements, and there's no other word for that than 'magic.' I'm shown things and commanded by God, and that's what it is to be a prophetess. Why is that so hard to believe? Because it hasn't happened to you? That's a laugh."

Marigold felt incapable of marshaling a response to this onslaught, so she nodded, and turned to Harrison.

"How did you find us?"

"Magic," said Harrison, and winked at Marigold.

Marigold, despite herself, giggled. The prophetess snarled, and raised the gun. Harrison ducked away.

"Stop!" Marigold raised a hand, and the prophetess lowered the pistol. Harrison straightened up, and asked, "Well, if she can just say 'magic,' why can't I?"

"She said it sincerely. You didn't."

Now Harrison rolled his eyes. "Fine. I tracked your cellphone."

The prophetess turned on Marigold, agape with indignation,

"A cellphone? You've been carrying a phone with you this whole time?"

"I — I — I guess," stuttered Marigold, "I mean, I don't — I didn't — I don't have reception here."

"Oh, good lord!" groaned the prophetess, flinging a hand to her forehead. "You'll be the death of us all."

"GPS is by satellite," explained Harrison to

Marigold, "not cellphone tower."

Marigold, the presumptive queen, found herself feeling like she'd laughed in a library.

"Give it to me," ordered the prophetess, switching the gun to one hand (Marigold noticed that the prophetess seemed to have no trouble with its heaviness), and reaching out.

She took the phone, laid it across a thick root, adjusted her grip so she was holding the gun by its barrel, and used it like a hammer to crush the phone. There was a splintering and crackling, and a small shower of glass. The prophetess nodded to herself, and proceeded to bash the phone five more times for good measure. Then she got to her feet, nodded again, and kicked the remains off into the trees.

"Let 'em find that," she said.

It was true that Marigold hadn't thought of her phone for a day and a half, but as the prophetess banged away at it, she felt a deep pang in her chest. She'd been proud when she bought that phone, with her own money from her own job. She'd taken picture after picture of the buildings in the city, of herself twirling her hair around her fingers in the mirror, of herself with friends on their way to dinner, of herself and her friends at parties she never wanted to go to, drinks in their hands, arms over shoulders. She never wanted to go, but she was almost always glad she'd gone.

She swallowed. Far away in Valeview, the church-bell rang.

"I'm sorry," said Marigold, biting her lip, and staring at the forest floor.

"Don't be," said Harrison. "It's a good thing that I found you. And now I've told you how. Isn't that enough?"

Marigold was careful not to look at the prophetess. "Yes," she said. "Yes, that's enough."

"He saved my life," she told the prophetess, who had begun to growl in protest. The prophetess pursed her lips and said nothing.

Rainbow

By ADAM FLEMING

If you could take a whole rainbow
And stuff it back through
The prism from which it came, to the other side
I guess you'd manufacture light.

If you could take a free man
And shove him back
Through the prison from which he came, to the other side
I guess you'd manufacture innocence.

Good luck with that.

"Are you alone?" Marigold asked. Harrison nodded.

"I came alone, but I was just with the others this morning," he said, moving into the shade, and rolling up the sleeves on his sweatshirt.

"Almira —" started Marigold, grimacing and taking another timid wipe at the cut on her nose.

"She's safe," said Harrison. "After the two of you disappeared, it was pretty much over. Everyone just left. The Kemizeze were gone as quickly as they showed up, and those guys with the guns left, too. We lost one, and the K lost one."

"I'm sorry," said Marigold, "as always, I guess, but also as always, I'm confused. Could you explain?"

"The K — Kemizeze — were the people in black," said Harrison. "They're some kind of anarchist death mob."

"Oh," said Marigold, disappointed to discover that death had found its way back into the conversation, and wondering what a "death mob" might be.

"Personally," said the prophetess, her pride sufficiently restored to rejoin the discussion, "I'm more interested in those ruffians who came busting in the front door shooting. I guess that's how your man died?"

"No," said Harrison, "and it wasn't a man." The prophetess shrugged.

"It was Nell, our lookout."

His voice was dry and forced. Marigold gasped, and the prophetess's face flickered.

Next page

Queen continued

Marigold was remembering the slight form, crumpled in a moonlit gutter, the pool of blood beneath her head. Fine features, long lashes, still as in repose. Marigold's head filled with a buzzing, and she couldn't tell whether it came from her ears, her crushed nose or her mind.

"Good god," said the prophetess. Harrison shrugged.

"She wasn't so young that she didn't understand," he said, and pressed his lips unsteadily together again.

Marigold had known Nell, but not really. She had been a face of the village, one thirteen-year-old girl in a swarm, giggling and flirting with the village boys. Boys. Whose pale pimply face was Nell longing for as she died, Marigold wondered, what sad, shallow romance was her last thought. Or did she cry for her mother in those final moments? Least likely to Marigold was the possibility that Nell died enraptured by visions of revolution.

"Ha!" said the prophetess, echoing Marigold's thoughts. "Wasn't so young she couldn't understand what? Death?"

"She knew that there are causes worth dying for!" snapped Harrison.

The prophetess gazed at Harrison for a moment, opened her mouth as though to speak, and then her expression changed, and she said, "So the group that came through the door — any ideas?"

"None."

The prophetess nodded, almost to herself, then said to Marigold, "These are the people who think they can help you."

"Look," said Harrison, "I know we looked bad ..."

"Like a bunch of kids," put in the prophetess, "a bunch of useless kids."

"... but we're improving. And, unlike the woods, we've got guns, and people, and walls and food."

"... And I've got a spoonful of wit, and can actually aim my gun," countered the prophetess, "which is worth the whole pack of you."

Marigold shook her head. "I'm sorry," she said to the prophetess. "I know your concerns, but I just don't know how we could do this alone."

The prophetess looked at Marigold for a long moment, her small eyes inscrutable, and then she nodded.

Having decided to trust Harrison and his rumored coalition, following him to the camp was a natural progression. It was a long hike through the woods, up the shoulder of the mountain where the forest wrapped around the west side of Valeview, and then up the steep slopes into dense pines. Marigold found that years of urban living had muted her ability to tell time in the wild, but she guessed that the walk was about three hours.

As they walked, Harrison explained himself to Marigold in a sort of breathless, quiet speech about his childhood on the plains, the son of a metalworker who worked on the machines, homes, and even horses of his neighbors. He told her about his selection as a Oneness Student, his initial wonder at being selected, and his gradual recognition of the inequity inherent in the program.

He spoke at length about injustice, and the corruption of the ruling class, and Marigold made small noises of affirmation, and took in his words in a vague sense without hearing the details. She was glad he was talking to her, and glad he didn't expect her to talk. Behind them, the prophetess stumped along, gasping for breath and glaring.

Two times as they walked, they heard the ominous hum of aircraft, but the sound was distant, and they kept hiking.

It was about midafternoon by Marigold's estimate when they climbed up onto a natural stair at the base of a cliff that ran along the side of the mountain like a wrinkle. The trees pressed in close to the stair, and stretched up beyond it, almost to the top of the cliff, so that the sheltered area underneath the ledge was almost impossible to detect from a distance.

To their right, along the course of the cliff, was an impassable crush of debris. Trunks, branches, roots, rocks and dirt formed a blockade as complete as a wall. Harrison turned toward it, and let loose a halting, crackling squawk.

There was a silence, punctuated only by indistinct bird sounds. Marigold stared at Harrison, and the prophetess stared at him rudely.

"Really?" she asked, and Harrison scowled.

"Let's see you do better," he snapped.

"Can't," said the prophetess, "which is why I'm not trying."

She turned to Marigold. "The mountainfolk screech of entry."

"Oh," said Marigold. She bit her lip. "I — I don't think I remember it, anymore."

The prophetess scoffed, "Alright," she said, "we'll stay out here and listen to plains-boy yelp." Harrison shrugged, and took a deep breath.

"Fine," said Marigold. "Fine! I'll try."

She took a deep breath, and let out a screech. It was a quiet screech, but it held the melodious rasp of her heritage. As the sound of her voice died away, a small section of the mound slid aside, revealing a narrow passage through the wall of debris. The hole was small and dark. Branches stuck out from the walls, and bits of dead grass hung from the ceiling.

"Stay to the center," called a muffled voice, "and move!"

They hurried in, Marigold first, bent over and scuttling through the passage. About ten feet down the tunnel, when the light from the doorway behind them was almost entirely obscured, Marigold's hand, fumbling in the darkness, came up against a dead end. She stopped, but another section of the wall on her left opened again with a flash of diluted daylight. Marigold scrambled through the dogleg, and crawled another ten feet to daylight.

Marigold broke through, and straightened up into fresh air. The flat space at the base of the cliff was wider on the inside of the barrier, possibly through the efforts of the inhabitants. The cliff loomed to her left, and the wall of brush and earth curved around from behind to run parallel to the cliff on her right. Small huts, tents and lean-tos were arranged in rows between the walls. From where she stood, Marigold couldn't tell how far the space extended, but it was already enough to surprise her. A hundred feet away, in a wider-open space, a fire was burning. She wondered how it was she hadn't smelled or seen smoke from the far side of the wall.

Just in front of them were four people, all armed, and strangely symmetrical. Two were men, two were women. Two were plains-dwellers and two were mountainfolk, one woman and one man each. Two — again, one man and one woman — held blackwood cudgels, and the other two had compact submachine guns slung over their shoulders. The equality of representation impressed Marigold as forced and awkward.

"Welcome," said the plains-man, stepping forward. Marigold clasped his hands and smiled. He bowed his head.

"Hail to the queen," he said.

"Oh," said Marigold. "Oh, um."

"Hail to the queen!" echoed the other guards, in turn stepping forward to clasp her hands and bow. By the time the

Queen continued

third guard was clasping her hands, Marigold, who didn't know what else to do, decided she ought to bow her head in return. As she bowed to the fourth guard, a petite woman from the plains whose dark hands were warm and soft, she heard a rustle of tent-flaps, and footsteps crackling through the crabgrass and gravel. When she looked up, Almira Hotchkiss was standing before her. Almira was wearing dark clothes; ill-fitting, heavy-duty hiking gear that replaced her graceful curves with utilitarian androgyny. Even her baby bump was obscured by a heavy jacket. The golden waves of her hair were pulled tight into a ponytail and a white bandage was wrapped around the place where she'd been struck the night before. Her eyes were red, and her cheeks flushed.

As at the market, Marigold's mind turned to memories of Almira as the golden daughter of Valeview, fluttering her eyelids at an adoring future while skinny little Marigold burned her tongue, gulping coffee to keep from inconveniencing anybody. She also remembered her own submerged satisfaction at realizing that years of tumult and exile had turned her into someone who knew bad coffee when she bought it.

Now, seeing Almira again, Marigold felt a deep surge of an emotion she couldn't understand. Sorrow and anger and joy and relief welling up at once. She bit her lip as Almira approached.

"Hail to the queen," said Almira quietly, clasping her hands and turning her eyes to the ground.

Marigold's heart was racing, and she felt a wild urge to hold Almira, and weep into the shoulder of her coat. But she didn't. She bowed, and looked up. Almira's eyes were red from tears, but they were dry now. Almira's gaze flickered to Harrison, and back to Marigold.

Marigold looked back at Almira, and for a moment they stood in stillness. Account manager and coffee girl, soldier and queen, daughters of mountainfolk.

"Hail to the cooking fire," said the prophetess, pushing past them. "Provided any of you know how to cook."

To be continued



View From the Santa Fe Rail-Runner No. 1

By SANDRA ROKOFF-LIZUT

Sand swirls
 down dry arroyos
 abandons strands of plastic
 to crippled chain-link fences
 that quilt the callous landscape
 keeping in or keeping out
 the yellow mongrel canines
 curled tight like coils of rope
 beneath still-shiny pickups
 or silent rusting junkers
 alongside mobile homes. Yet, in this dusty landscape, tradition's
 still alive. Handmade adobe *hornos* grace a corner of each yard.



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.

For breakfast, Charles gnawed on a species of biscuit. It tasted suspiciously like a pulp of deer fat and acorn flour, heated over the fire until it turned into a dry clump. But it was his first food in a day, and he considered it the best clod of edible material he had eaten in some time. He was disappointed there did not seem to be seconds.

"Very good, thank you," he told Roger.

Roger grunted.

"I could get used to it."

Roger grunted again.

"So, ah." Charles said. "Suppose the smugglers won't deal. Of course, they will, but if they don't, I'm sure I could be useful around here."

Roger shook his head. "Sorry, boy. That was never the plan. We're not a home for reformed smugglers. Or their slaves. The smugglers need to know we kept our word if they won't deal with us, and they'll find out, believe me. But you don't really want to join us. You're just trying to save your own skin. We wouldn't be able to trust you."

"But you joined," Charles protested.

"That was different."

"How?"

"Look, I'm sorry for you," Roger said. "But life is tough out here. We do what we have to do to survive. We need gunpowder, and you got caught up in it. Count your blessings. We could have just shot you up right there, you know. Worst case, you've had a couple bonus days. Best case, you walk away with your band and we walk away with our sulfur and everybody's happy."

Charles, not comforted, tried a different tack. "Well, why don't you just trade with them instead of trying to steal the sulfur?"

Roger laughed. "Sure, they'd trade gunpowder ingredients to a bunch of 'savages.'"

"But they would," Charles said. "George — that's the leader, my master — trades it to anybody. Even the enemies of Easton back home. Anybody that has something valuable to trade for it, he'll take it."

"Sounds like a real nice man," Roger said. "A model citizen."

Gunpowder Trails: Chapters Six and Seven

By ANDREW SHARP

Next page

Trails continued

But why don't you look around the camp and tell me what we might trade. See all the wampum coins? No? Well, we don't have any. See all the food? We just ate most of it for breakfast. Think they'd like some glass beads? I bet not. Besides, what we do have is, we're good at fighting. We like it. Makes us stronger and smarter. Gives us something to do. And, we don't like trespassers. So we'll do what we're good at and charge our sulfur fee for you to go through our land."

The idea that the smugglers were somehow trespassing still seemed absurd to Charles. Appalachies were a sort of native species, another predator like wolves or cats. What did they have to say about the land? Where were their farms, their villages? Even if it were theirs, there was plenty of room. Why make a fuss over a few smugglers hiking through?

"So," Roger said, "you might say we are trying to trade. We'll trade you back to the smugglers for a few packs of sulfur, plus we agree not to attack them any more. This time." He grinned. "Sounds like a fair bargain to me."

He pushed himself to his feet, and joined a group of Appalachies holding a discussion not far away. The women in the camp didn't take part, as the smuggler women would have. Instead, they did their work, which seemed to be preparing deer hides, probably to make them into tent skins, blankets, or clothing.

Two days went by without much happening except the children running around the tents shouting. Charles wandered around the camp under the watchful eye of South Wind until he was acquainted with all of it. That took about fifteen minutes. He spent most of the rest of the time in his borrowed tent, staring at the ceiling or napping. Even if he had wanted to be social, Roger was gone with the rest of the men during the day, hunting or some such thing, and the women were busy working. There was nothing to do outside the tent except be stared at, and so he withdrew.

Early the third morning, while Charles was finishing his breakfast by the fire, the camp dogs ran out to bark at another party of Appalachie warriors, ten or so, who made their way through the trees. After they all greeted each other, the newcomers filed over to look at the darkskin captive, and squatted down next to Charles, pointing out interesting fea-

tures to each other. He tried to ignore them, focusing instead on the dying fire, watching the coals turn white and crumble into ash.

The smugglers, he thought, were in more danger than they had realized. Before the ambush, they had the numbers to discourage attacks. But with the fresh forces, the Appalachie warriors now numbered about thirty, roughly equal to the smugglers' numbers. They had fewer and inferior guns, but plenty of deadly looking enormous bows, as tall as a man, and long arrows with heavy tips.

It seemed the newcomers had not come for social purposes. Soon after they arrived, the men of the village began making what looked like farewells to the women and children, and gathering up their weapons and small packs.

Roger, strapping a quiver of arrows over his shoulder, came over to Charles. "Well, your adventure here at our camp is over," he said. "We're about to head out. We're going to leave you untied, so we can move fast, but don't try to get away. We'll just shoot you. And then we'll have to kidnap somebody else and try again."

Charles jumped as the men burst into a shout, which they repeated several times, holding their bows and arrows over their heads, rattling them together.

"That would be our signal," Roger said. "Come on, little slave."

Running Elk led the way into the woods at the brutal Appalachie half trot, followed by Roger. Charles fell into line behind them, and the rest of the warriors followed behind him.

Charles put his head down and watched the ground move by steadily, and the moccasins of the men in front of him flash in and out of his view, and tried not to think about the miles ahead.

Running Elk's revolver bobbed up and down on his hip as he strode, and the intricate design on the revolver butt caught Charles' attention. It looked almost like writing of some kind. Yes, it was — a letter "W" in ornate curlicue script. Where would the chief get something like that? It reminded him of a gun he'd seen before somewhere.

It was Warren's.

That was strange. No, it wasn't strange, it was impossible. Warren hadn't talked about missing a gun. He usually only wore one, and it looked just like this one. Maybe it was one of a matching set. Yes, he had seen two matching guns before, now that he thought about it.

Running Elk had Warren's revolver. Yet he had not shot

Warren to get it. At least, Warren had been fine the morning Charles was kidnapped. And surely the Appalachies weren't fast enough to kidnap Charles and waylay the hunting band on the same morning.

Warren must have given it to him. But how? Why? The truth, which had been growing in his mind, now clobbered him like a club. Warren was the traitor.

He caught his toe on a rhododendron root and sprawled forward into the leaves. Easing up onto his knees, he gasped for air.

Roger stood over him. "You all right, little smuggler? Take a breath now."

Charles felt like he was getting sick. He tried to crawl to his feet, then he definitely was sick. Roger jumped back.

"Oh dear," Roger said. "Here, have some water. We forgot, you're weaker than we are and you're not used to traveling at a normal pace."

Roger held his canteen above Charles' mouth, careful not to touch his lips with it, and poured. Charles gulped the sloshing warm water, grateful for the kindness.

"Not too much, or you'll get sick again," Roger said. After a few minutes, he said, "Come on, let's keep moving. You think you can do that? We'll slow it down a little." He spoke to the others, who nodded.

The new pace must have felt like a gentle stroll to the Appalachies, but it was still too rapid for comfort for Charles in his state of shock.

As he walked, he tried to take his new knowledge about Warren and bend it and twist it to make it fit what he knew about Warren. Maybe Warren had just lost his revolver, or ... there was some other explanation. Which he couldn't think of.

But no, if Warren had lost such a valuable possession, surely he would have complained about it, or asked people if they had seen it. Yet he had never mentioned it, and that silence was damning. And if Running Elk had mugged him in the woods and made off with the revolver, Warren would surely have thought it was interesting enough to bring up later.

The warriors followed Running Elk in a long detour around an immense rhododendron thicket that blocked their way. Finally the small shrubs gave way to larger rhododendrons that towered overhead, shading out the light with their huge dark green leaves, and the travelers were able to slip through the thick gnarly stems like mice in a meadow.

Trails continued

Charles continued trying to untangle the problem of the gun. It was far from proof of treachery that Warren's gun had somehow come into Running Elk's possession. And even if Warren had made some kind of secret deal, Charles had no proof that the Appalachies had been involved in the Scranton soldiers' ambush. But it didn't take a suspicious mind to leap to damning conclusions. Warren had been secretly communicating with enemies like the Appalachies. An unexplainable ambush had decimated the band. The chance the two were not related was small. George certainly would not ask for more evidence before drawing his own conclusions.

But it did not fit. On the one hand, he suspected Warren of being responsible for the death of his friend Big John in the ambush, and the many other smugglers who had fallen that day. On the other hand, Warren was the man who had stood up for Charles against the suspicions of the other smugglers. He was the intelligent and thoughtful man who had talked to Charles so many times about science and books. Warren was the opposite of a villain or a schemer. He was a gentle man, a man of strong character, a man who would never tell a lie. Could a man like that live his life as an enormous lie?

The hikers stepped out of the low green light of the rhododendron thicket into an eerie bright sunlight that filled the forest under the empty branches of dead trees. The group clambered out onto piles of boulders on a rocky ridge top, where the scattered trees somehow reached down through the rocks to hidden dirt far below. All the trees' effort at growing had gone for nothing, though. Gypsy moths had stripped their branches bare of leaves, and all that remained were the white silk bags of the moths.

They all slowed down, careful to avoid twisting their ankles on the shifting rubble terrain.

Charles wondered if Warren had tipped off the Appalachies about where Charles would be so they could kidnap him. If so, he had essentially murdered Charles. It wasn't often a murder victim could solve his own crime, he thought.

Even setting aside that Warren didn't seem like a murderer, Charles could not fathom a motive for betraying the band or Charles himself. Warren seemed happy enough,

and he was certainly wealthy enough. What could the Appalachies offer him?

Charles grieved over the betrayal, and his anger built. If he ever made it back to the band, he would expose Warren's charade, clear the slaves of wrongdoing, and help end this disaster of an expedition as soon as possible.

But Warren didn't have anything to worry about because Charles would never get back.

When Running Elk called a stop for lunch — pemmican again — Charles decided to probe Roger about what the Appalachies were up to and why they were working with Warren.

"You're already great at using bows and arrows," he said. "So why are you going to all this fighting and effort to get gunpowder? You can already hunt as well with bows as we can with guns."

"That's probably true," Roger said.

"Then what do you need gunpowder for?"

"Well, curious little captive, what other use is there for gunpowder besides hunting for animals? Take a guess."

"Well ... shooting people, I guess."

"That's a crude way of putting it, but you're right," Roger said. "We need sulfur for gunpowder because we happen to be at war."

"Appalachies fight in wars?"

Roger shook his head. "You really need to get all that 'tree people' junk out of your head," he said, taking a bite of pemmican. "Of course we fight in wars." Bits of food fell out of his mouth as he talked and he picked them off his lap and ate them again. "Did you think we all live as one happy family in the greenwood?"

Well, yes, that had been close to Charles' idea.

"Just because there aren't as many of us as there are of you doesn't mean we aren't human. By the way, while we're on the topic, we're not 'Appalachies.' We call ourselves, 'The People.'"

"What does that make the rest of us?"

Roger grinned. "The almost people, I guess."

"So why don't the Appa — the People — just attack the smugglers and take a pile of sulfur, instead of sneaking around trying to grab a pack here and there?"

"Well," Roger said, "why make a big attack where a bunch of people die when you can get a lot of sulfur without all that? How many warriors do you think we have lost so far, fighting you for this sulfur?"

"Two? Maybe three?"

"None. Not one."

"But you haven't gotten any sulfur either," Charles pointed out. "None of those hunters ..." he stopped, unable to think of a diplomatic way of saying "None of those hunters you murdered was carrying any sulfur to speak of."

"Not yet," Roger said. "Not yet."

They must have gotten something out of helping set up the ambush, Charles thought. Maybe some of the sulfur the smugglers had been carrying.

He decided to play curious. "So, do you fight the Scranton soldiers too in your wars?"

Roger eyed him. "Not if we can help it."

Charles wondered if he were being too nosy. Roger might suspect he had found something out about Warren. On the other hand, they really had no way of knowing that the markings on the revolver made a letter "W," implicating Warren. They couldn't read.

"So your wars are pretty much just with the other Appa — People then."

"We fight whoever we have to fight," Roger said.

It was good he wasn't a real spy, Charles thought. He couldn't come up with any questions that would tell him anything of interest and not sound suspicious.

After lunch, the Appalachies pressed on, and instead of stopping in the early afternoon for a rest like they had after kidnapping Charles, they continued until it was nearly dark.

"We don't want to get too far behind the smugglers," Roger told Charles. "Your friends might have already taken off for the sunny south. We want to see if we can catch up with them before they do that so we don't have to chase them for fifteen or twenty miles."

The dancing yellow tongues of fire felt good in the chilly air. Charles wished he had the old fur blanket from the tent, but the whole group had traveled light. He scooted as close as he could to the flames.

"So, curious little smuggler," Roger said, "tell me about yourself for once. I haven't heard any news from Easton in many a year. You have a funny accent. What part of Easton are you from?"

"From the city," Charles said.

"But I know a few people from the city," Roger said. "Knew, I mean. They didn't sound like you."

"I was a slave to a rich family."

Roger slapped his knee. "Ah, that's it, that's it. You talk like an aristocrat!"

"My master was a Builder," Charles said.

Trails continued

Roger whistled. "A Builder! You do run in high circles. Builders and smuggling chiefs. You tell good stories, anyway." He stopped and spoke at length to the other Appalachies, who stared at Charles.

"So you hung out with those loonies," Roger said. "Big dreams, and lots of high taxes to pay for them. Just a fancy racket to get our money."

"I wasn't a Builder," Charles said. "My master was."

"So your master took all our money. You ate pretty good too, I bet."

"It's not like that," Charles said, frowning. "Of course they liked to be rich. Anybody would. But you should have heard them argue over the best way to save the world. They really believed in it. A lot of them, anyway."

He had believed in the Builders' vision as well. And he had also hoped his master would set him free and then help him get into the Builders' university, reserved for the most talented students.

"Yeah, all right," Roger said. "They believe in it. They also believe in power. And they've got it. But how did a posh like you end up with a bunch of dirty sulfur peddlers, then? Maybe we should be trading you back to the Builders, eh, instead of the smugglers?"

"My master died," Charles said. "Boils."

"And they just sold you off?"

"Yes."

Charles hadn't spoken of these memories for a long time. He had felt like part of that family, even though he knew his place as a slave. He had loved them. The children were his schoolmates, and he had tutored the younger ones. They were his everyday companions around the estate. He joined in their football and lacrosse games out on the lawn and explored the university buildings with them after hours. He had thought they cared about him.

That had been his real education, when they sold him.

The next morning, the Appalachies — Charles still called them that to himself, not able to stomach "The People" — got up early. After a couple of quick bites for breakfast, they

charged off into the woods at top cruising speed again, seemingly unaffected by the previous day's travel. Charles, not being one of The People, hurt all over and winced at every step for the first half hour.

As they came down off the mountaintop just before lunch and started heading downhill, Charles realized that the mountain in the distance must be the one the smugglers were camped on. The lines of the ridge looked familiar, and it felt like they had traveled long enough. He was almost home.

When they reached the summit of a smaller ridge in the valley, the mountain looming close, the Appalachies stopped and made camp. This time, they tied Charles' hands and feet. So much for any last minute escape plans. So this is where they would kill him. He looked around. How was this for a place to die? Just another ordinary hilltop. A few wild rose brambles, a stone foundation from an ancient building, and a grove of massive white pines.

Roger and a handful of the other Appalachies set off for the mountain, leaving Charles and the rest at camp. The warriors left behind seemed content with this arrangement, immediately stretching out in their hammocks for a nap, an activity they seemed to indulge in any chance they got. They seemed to have forgotten, or didn't care, that Charles couldn't very well put up his hammock, or climb into it, while tied up. So he stayed where they had tied him, with his back to a tree, and stared through the trees at the mountain above.

He was not aware he had fallen asleep until he woke up to the sound of a boisterous herd of elk tramping through the woods straight toward him. When he opened his eyes, he realized it was just Roger and the others returning. The long drought had made the leaves so brittle that anyone moving through the woods without meticulous effort could be heard a long way off. Charles sat up, instantly alert, heart pounding, watching Roger's face to try to guess what had happened.

The warriors conferred, seemed to be debating, and then began to nod.

Roger leveraged himself up into his hammock and lay back with a sigh. He said something in Appalachie, and the men standing nearby laughed.

Charles refused to beg for information. He lay his head back against the rough bark of the tree and closed his eyes, staring at the inside of the lids.

After a while, Roger ended his conversation, and spoke in

Easton. "You asleep, little smuggler? I wish I could sleep through a racket like that."

Charles opened his eyes. "No."

"Well, we won't know till tomorrow what your friends will do. We made our offer. They wanted time to think about it. We shall see."

"All right," Charles said.

"We're going to go meet them tomorrow morning. Just you and me, that's the deal. If there's somebody there with the sulfur as agreed, you can go home to your nice camp. If not, well, that will be a shame. I've kind of gotten to like you."

That the smugglers had even agreed to think about it gave Charles more hope than he had before. Or, maybe they had done no such thing, and Roger was just giving him, and them, one last chance anyway. Maybe the smugglers would come to the meeting place, but try to ambush the Appalachies. It seemed very trusting of Roger, he thought, to agree to show up alone like that and count on the smugglers to keep their word. Knowing George as he did, Charles wouldn't have made that mistake.

And so Charles and the Appalachies sat all afternoon, waiting for morning. Time crept. Charles tried to be grateful for that. If it was his last afternoon, he wanted it to drag on as long as possible. That thought reminded him of all the "lasts" he had now experienced, without realizing it. Last sunset over the Chesapeake Bay. Last oyster dinner. Last book. Which one was it? He couldn't remember now.

He imagined what would be going on in the smugglers' camp. George would be furious, of course, but it would only show in his cold eyes. James and John would be demanding a full attack. Warren ... what would Warren be doing? Playing his old role, pretending to be the calm one, the voice of caution. Probably trying to convince them that it was too risky to deal with the Appalachies.

The Appalachies, now that they were within an easy hike of the smugglers' camp, kept a sharp watch, with about half the group at any given time standing sentry. The rest sat and talked and seemed to be telling stories. Charles envied their ability to look forward to another full day of life, and probably many more after that, a privilege they probably weren't even grateful for.

Sunlight crept up the tree trunks. Yellow and red leaves spiraled down. Sunlight crept higher up the tree trunks. More leaves spiraled down.

When Roger suddenly switched over to speaking in Easton,

Trails continued

Charles was glad for a break in the monotony.

"Running Elk wants to know about the Builders," Roger said. "So do I, although I only half believe you didn't make it up about being mixed up with them. What are they really up to, if they aren't just out to make money?"

"Just what they say they're up to," Charles said. "Taking the world back to where it was. But doing it better this time. No Calamity."

"And the king bought that," Roger said.

"Sure. He knew it would make Easton the most powerful nation in the world, eventually, if it worked. He had a bold vision."

"Dream big, I guess," Roger said. "I bet he didn't realize the Builders would be in charge. Everybody knows they really run the show. Picking all the brightest and best and indoctrinating them in their learning. And the ones that don't make the cut still get special perks, so they're good supporters. And on the face of it, as loyal as can be to the king, of course."

He spoke with the chief again.

"Running Elk wants to know how far along they are with their 'save the world' stuff. Just what everybody wants to know, I guess."

"They don't make any secret out of it," Charles said. "Everybody acts like it's some kind of secret society." He could still see Professor Tom at one of the many discussions around his master's dinner table, glasses pushed back on his head, ranting about the conspiracy theorists.

"So, what have they done? What practical things have they come up with?" Roger asked.

"Archeology is the big thing they're working on right now. It's like a big puzzle. People have to be patient until they can put together the pieces. But it's like everybody's looking over their shoulders saying 'Are you done yet?'" He could almost hear Professor Tom saying the words. "But yes, there's been lots of advances. We're — they are — learning about physics, biology, math ..."

Roger held up his hands. "Whoa, whoa, all right, I get it, lots of big words I can't understand. But what have they done that does anybody any good, besides make bigger and

better weapons so they can kill more people at a time?"

"Those big words," Charles said, "mean they're figuring out how the world works. That's the key. The ancients knew secrets about how to harness the forces of nature."

"Ah, magic," Roger said, in the same tone he might have used if Charles had told him a story about a talking pig.

Typical ignorant peasant, Charles thought. Just another one of those who ran down what the Builders were doing, when they didn't even understand it. They saw it as some kind of dangerous plot.

To Roger, he said, "They've made lots of breakthroughs."

"Such as?"

"Well, indoor plumbing, for one."

"And what might that be?"

"Well, pipe systems in houses. Pipes to take out sewage. And bring in water."

Roger wrinkled his nose.

"Not the same pipes," Charles said. "They have pipes for each."

"Oh. So ... they shit right in their houses and then wash it out?"

"Well, kind of," Charles said. "There's a special room for it, and ... well, trust me. It's better."

"Yeah, for the big shots, maybe," Roger said. "Meanwhile, the peasants still have to shit in the hedgerows and carry water for a mile if they want any."

"When I left, the Builders were working on a steam engine," Charles said, thinking it might be good to try a new tack. "You could use it to make wagons go by themselves. They were getting close to making it work."

Roger laughed long and loudly, slapping his knee, while the Appalachies stopped what they were doing and stared at him. When he could catch his breath, he stopped and explained to them. Some of them laughed a little, without conviction, but the rest looked puzzled and a little worried.

"Unlike my friends here," Roger said, "I do not believe in magic."

Running Elk now broke in and spoke at length, Roger listening and nodding. He turned to Charles again. "Chief wants to know about weapons. Which is a good idea to find out about, since that's about the only practical thing the Builders do make. As they made sure to tell all of us in case we didn't want to pay our taxes."

Charles figured there would be no harm in telling the Appalachies what little he knew about weapons, so he gave an outline on projects the Builders had been working on. There

were the rifles that fired more consistently and accurately, and the long artillery guns, which could throw destruction a long way, but were too expensive to use much. Roger relayed it all to Running Elk, who watched Charles' face as if he were trying to guess whether Charles was lying.

"But it's not just weapons," Charles said. "It's better farm tools, better wheels and wagons. And," he added, wondering if he was supposed to be talking about this, "there are some secret labs where they are working on very powerful forces, the same forces the ancients learned to control. But I don't know much about those."

"Secret labs! Ha," Roger said.

Charles went back to watching the sunlight creep up the trees. From the mountaintop, off to the south, he saw a dark plume of smoke rising. The smugglers' campfires.

When the last light blazed orange on the tips of the treetops, then faded, the Appalachies lit their own fire. They also had the courtesy to lift Charles into his hammock. But he did not sleep. His body was tense, his nerves were jittery, and he shivered in the chilly fall air. As he fidgeted and tossed, the rope chafed at his wrists and made his feet numb.

It also didn't help him relax when cats came close in the darkness. He could hear them padding in the leaves. They circled the camp several times, then he heard claws scratching on bark. In one of the treetops, glowing eyes appeared, two sets of them, watching the campfires.

As morning approached, the eyes left, and Charles finally got a little sleep.

At dawn, the Appalachies started getting out of their hammocks, and Charles sat up, but Roger waved him back down.

"You can go ahead and sleep a bit," he said. "They're just getting a head start."

That didn't make any sense. A head start to do what?

The warriors didn't do much talking, just some hasty breakfast chewing. Then there was a rattle of arrows as the Appalachies slung quivers over their shoulders, and crashing of their footsteps in the quiet morning, fading into the distance.

Charles was still awake when Roger shook him again. On other mornings, Roger had kidded him about how he had better eat hearty, because he didn't know how many more chances he would get to eat pemmican, but this morning he said nothing, just handed him a lump of the stuff. They were alone in the camp.

"Where did they go?" Charles asked.

Trails continued

"It's just me and you going to the rendezvous," Roger said. "That's the deal, has to be just us. But in case something happens, we don't want to be very alone."

After the sun was well up in the sky, Roger untied the rope around Charles' feet, but left his hands tied.

"Don't try anything, little captive," he said. "I'd hate to have to shoot you." He put a heavy hand on Charles' shoulder, not roughly but firmly, and guided him toward the top of the mountain.

"Your friends have to dump the sulfur packs at our meeting spot, and leave them there with just one person to meet us. That's why the boys had to get such an early start, to make sure everything was quiet before the smugglers got there. When the sun is halfway to noon, which is not very long now, we'll see if they decided to bring any sulfur. If they didn't, or if they try any tricks, we'll kill you on the spot, and they know it."

"How much sulfur?" Charles asked, his mouth dry.

"Three packs."

The disappointment crushed down on him. Three packs of sulfur was worth a heap of wampum coins, and would make a lot of gunpowder. And since the smugglers only had about twenty packs left from their whole trip, giving up three would slash deeply into their profits. There would be no sulfur at the meeting spot.

As they climbed, Charles wondered what it would be like to be dead. Did you go to heaven? Or to the hall of the gods? Would he be one of the ghosts in Eliza's stories, hanging around here ready to frighten Warren to death next time he camped in the neighborhood? He hoped ghosts could still strangle people even without real fingers. Or would he just stop being altogether, and rot away and become part of the trees and worms? In that sense, the circle of life would go on, but the Charles part of the circle would be so greatly diminished he didn't find it very comforting.

It was a cool day, and partly cloudy, more cloudy than he had seen in a long time. Maybe the drought was finally about to break.

They reached the crest of the mountain, and Charles re-

membered having passed through the spot with the smugglers before they arrived at their hunting camp. He remembered how desperate he had been then to stop walking and find food, and the way every quarter mile had taken what seemed like hours.

Just ahead, he remembered, there was a large meadow. He could see light breaking through the trees on its edge now.

"It's in this meadow," Roger said quietly. "That's where they had to leave the sulfur."

Charles allowed himself to hope for a miracle of generosity from George. If he was disappointed, the disappointment wouldn't last long.

They came to the edge of the clearing. Roger pulled Charles in front of him as a shield, held a revolver to his head, and they walked out together into the light.

Chapter Seven

As they stepped into the clearing, Charles shut his eyes. If Roger was going to shoot him in the head, he'd rather not know it was coming.

"Well, well," Roger said. "Your smuggler friends came through for you." He sounded relieved. "As long as it's not some kind of trick."

The blazing mid-morning sun in the meadow made Charles blink. Two packs leaned against each other in the middle of the meadow. Warren stood next to them.

"Hey now, don't fall down on me," Roger told Charles. "I still need you for a shield."

Tears Charles had been holding back began to spill over. He fought them back. There must be a trick. Maybe the smugglers had filled the packs with leaves or rocks. Maybe they were hiding nearby waiting to shoot any Appalachians who showed their faces.

Warren's lips were tight and he looked at Roger with a gaze that seemed calculated to knock him down.

"Here's your sulfur," Warren said, clearly detesting Roger for stooping low enough to want such a thing.

"And a good day to you," Roger said. He kept the gun pressed against Charles' head. "Well smuggler, I don't see anybody hiding behind the trees. Yet. So far so good.

Now take a stick and poke it down into that sulfur. I want to make sure there's no garbage in there."

"We don't cheat," Warren said.

"As much as I'm impressed by the honesty of smugglers, I'm still going to have to see for myself," Roger said.

Warren didn't move. Roger pulled the hammer back on the revolver.

After walking all those miles, Charles thought, he was going to get his head blown off anyway. Why hadn't he made them carry him if they wanted him here so badly?

"I don't have a stick," Warren said.

"All right, just take off your gun belt then, and I'll check it myself," Roger said.

Warren hesitated, then took off the gun belt, put it down, and stepped away.

Roger walked over to the packs, keeping his gun pointed halfway between Charles and Warren, wavering from one to the other a little. Without looking away from them, Roger stuck his arm all the way to the bottom of each pack. After he pulled his arm out, he brushed every bit of sulfur he could back into the bags.

"Good," he said. "All sulfur. And looks like good stuff, too."

Roger untied Charles' hands. "Looks like you're free to go."

Charles looked down at his wrists, the lighter marks from the rope slowly darkening again.

"Oh, wait, just a second," Roger said. He fished a handgun out of his waistband and held it out to Charles, butt first.

Charles stared at it. "What's this?"

"This is your gun we took off you when we, ah, escorted you to our camp." Roger bowed, and Charles took it. "A little gesture to make up for all you went through to help us out. Maybe it will help you remember savages aren't all bad. Happy trails to you, little slave."

Then he said, "You two outgun me now, but I'd recommend you don't try anything. You kill me, you'll be dead before I hit the ground."

Warren scowled. "Our deal was for you to come alone."

"And I am alone," Roger said. "But I have a lot of friends a short way off. Like I said, we don't trust smugglers. But maybe instead of arguing about fine points, you can just leave the sulfur here and head on back to your camp."

Warren and Charles looked at each other, then walked together across the clearing. Charles' legs trembled, and he tried to think what he should do now.

Warren might kill him if he got an inkling Charles knew

Trails continued

anything about that personalized revolver. Charles found it ominous that Warren happened to be the one at the hostage swap. The traitor must be worried about what Charles might have found out among the Appalachies. Maybe Warren would shoot him to be on the safe side, and just claim the Appalachies did it.

At the end of the meadow, Charles turned and looked back. Roger and the sulfur were gone.

He decided he had two options. He could pretend he was still ignorant of Warren's treachery, hope Warren bought it, and then turn him in as soon as they got back to the band. Or, he could confront Warren now, before Warren had a chance to shoot him. Both options were dangerous.

It would be his word against Warren's, if Charles tried to turn him in. George would believe one of them, and the other would die. And Warren seemed to be a much more accomplished liar than Charles had realized.

And if Warren did suspect Charles had found clues about Warren's collaboration with the Appalachies, Warren would have to kill him. Given that Warren had probably helped set up the ambush that had seen a third of them shot dead on the spot, it seemed he wasn't opposed to smugglers dying.

And Charles didn't see how Warren could help being suspicious that he knew something. Guilty people saw a noose when others just saw rope. Warren would have no trouble at all seeing the noose dangling in front of him.

"Are you alright Charles? We've been worried about you," Warren said.

So that's how he was going to play it. Concerned, caring Warren, until Charles turned his back.

Charles pulled out his revolver and pointed it at Warren.

"D-drop your gun," he said.

"Your gun is shaking," Warren said. Charles did not feel he was showing the proper concern.

"And it might go off," he said, raising his voice. "Drop your gun right now. Slowly. Or I'll shoot you."

"I wonder if you would," Warren said.

"This is the last time I'm telling you," Charles said.

Warren slowly took off his gun belt and let it down on the ground.

"I'm getting tired of everybody telling me to take this off," he said. "Are you going to explain what all this is about? You'd better have a really good reason for this. Pulling a gun on one of the leaders is a death sentence, you know."

"You know what it's about," Charles said.

"Nope," Warren said. "Suppose you clarify."

Charles had somehow expected Warren to break down and confess, or stammer and try to lie his way out of it. But Warren's calmness had him rattled. What if he had made a terrible mistake? What if Warren didn't confess?

"I know you're the traitor," Charles said.

"You do, eh?" Warren said.

"The Appalachies told me." Where had that come from? It wasn't a bad idea, anyway.

Warren stroked his chin. "Those bastards," he said.

Charles realized he did not have a plan for what to do now. If Warren wasn't going to attack him, Charles didn't think he had what it took to just murder him. But if he didn't kill Warren, Charles would then have to march him into camp at gunpoint, where Warren could coolly deny the whole conversation.

"Why? Why did you do it?" Charles asked.

Warren didn't say anything for a long time. Charles was about to demand a response when Warren finally said, "Well, Charles, I guess I may as well try to explain. Maybe honesty will have its reward."

A little late for you to try honesty, Charles thought. "Go ahead," he said.

"Charles, we're on the wrong side, smuggling sulfur. You know that as well as I do. We sell it to everyone, even to Easton's enemies. Now who's the real traitor, me or this whole band?"

"Easton isn't my problem," Charles said. "I don't owe Easton anything. Neither do any of the others."

"You do owe your neighbors something," Warren said. "Such as not selling highway robbers the ingredients for gunpowder. George knows that. But he wouldn't care if they robbed his mother, as long as he was making a profit, Charles."

"He's not so bad. He gave the Appalachies that sulfur ransom so they wouldn't kill me," Charles said.

"Yes, and I was surprised about that," Warren admitted. "But believe me, we had to do some convincing to get him to do it."

Sure you did, Charles thought.

"I was worried about what you might have found out,

Charles, but I helped convince him. Give me a little credit here." For the first time his calm voice wavered almost imperceptibly toward pleading.

"Give you credit? You've been lying to all of us for months. Or is it years?"

Warren ignored the last question. "Well, you can believe me or not. But you know I'm right about George," he said. "I know lots of smugglers have plenty of reason to complain about the way the king's men have treated them. Fine. But that's no excuse for making money by supporting violence and death like we do."

"So you thought you'd make things better by getting a bunch of us killed. You could have gotten me killed." Charles' gun was shaking again.

"Well ... I can't justify that, not really, Charles. Except to say that sometimes to overthrow violence, you have to use violence. Those Scranton soldiers were enforcing the law. That might not make you feel any better, but I don't see it as murder, enforcing the law like that. Still, it hurts, when you know the people who are breaking the law and you see them get punished.

"I didn't want you dead," Warren said. "You're not here because you want to be, I know that. I didn't want Big John dead. He was my friend. I've thought about it every day since it happened, and it still hurts. I am a loyal person; you have to believe that, Charles. I'm just not loyal to George."

"So you're working for Scranton," Charles said. "But you're from Easton. How's that help out your neighbors back in Easton?"

"I'm working for Easton," Warren said. "I'm a Builder, Charles."

Charles' mouth went slack and he let his gun down.

"No, you didn't know all the Builders," Warren said. "I remember seeing you around, though. Some of us are academics; some of us deal more with security. I didn't quite make the cut for the university."

Warren was one of the Builders' secret enforcers now. This story was getting wilder, Charles thought.

"You killed your friends," he said. "You killed Big John, your friend and one of the best leaders we had. It's partly your fault, everyone the Appalachies have killed since the ambush, and you got me kidnapped. So forget the big moral argument. You're my enemy." Charles brought his gun back up.

Warren sighed. "I don't seem to be explaining myself very well. Why don't we sit down, and let me give you a little

Trails continued

more of my side of this.” He glanced at the sun. “I think we have a little time before they’ll be expecting us back. If you don’t like what I have to say, you can shoot me. Fair?”

“Well ... all right. You sit down first,” Charles said. Warren smiled, and stepped farther away from his gun, then sat with his back against a massive white pine tree. Charles settled down a few feet away.

“I’m never at my best with a gun pointed at me, but I’ll give this a shot,” Warren said. “For starters, the deal with the Appalachies was never about them trying to kill us and stealing sulfur. They were just the messengers to Scranton. That was the only deal I made with them. After that, I guess they got greedy.”

If Warren was pretending to be angry, he was a good actor. His whole face was tense and his words came out with force. “I’ve been trying to get in touch with them and ask them what the hell they think they’re doing, but I never could. Then one day Roger shows up saying he’s got you, but he’ll give you back for sulfur. They’re the ones who double crossed me.”

“And there’s not a day that goes by that I don’t think of the people who died in that ambush. But that’s part of war. And the Builders have declared war on the smugglers.”

“But why?” Charles asked. “Easton needs the smugglers to get them more sulfur. That’s why they’ve let George get away with it for so long. They won’t get enough sulfur just from their own trading. Scranton is stingy with it.”

“But George won’t stick to dealing just with us,” Warren said. “We tried to bring him around, believe me, and he won’t listen. If he’s going to arm the whole peninsula, he’s hurting us, not helping. If we had an all out war with plenty of gunpowder on both sides, we could wipe out almost all the people on the peninsula. And we need people.”

“So instead, you want the Builders to have all the gunpowder and all the power.”

“I believe in them, Charles. I believe in what they’re doing. You have to pick a side in life. They aren’t perfect, but you have to pick a side. The smugglers who died were criminals. They were my friends, and that made it the hardest thing I’ve ever done. And if I ever make it back

to Easton, I’m done with this job. It’s not for me. I’m out. I’ll work security detail at the garbage dump if they want me to.

“Charles, this will be tough for you to hear, but the world would be better off without George in it. The goal of the ambush was to get him out of leadership — either get him killed, or get him kicked out and get somebody else in who would work with us.”

“Somebody like you,” Charles said.

Warren shrugged. “Would I be such a bad leader, Charles?”

You still betrayed us. I’m on a side, too. I’m on the smugglers’ side.”

“Are you?”

“Well ...”

“I want to make a proposal,” Warren said. “I don’t really think you do like the smugglers all that much. And you’re smart. You’ve studied. I’ve seen what you can do. I think I could get you into the university, if you had time to get some tutoring to get you ready of course. If you can help me get back to Easton alive, I’ll do my best to get you in at the university, with special consideration for your service to the Builders. What you do from there would be up to you.”

Very shrewd, Charles thought. Warren knew his weak spots.

“You’re asking me to be a traitor,” he said.

“No. I’m asking you to leave a life you never chose in the first place, so you can work to make the world better, all while doing something that would be a dream for you. Isn’t that true?”

“A Builder sold me into slavery,” Charles said.

“A Builder’s family, if I’m not mistaken,” Warren corrected him. “I’d be lying to you if I said the Builders were all upright and moral. There are good ones and bad ones, like anywhere else. My question to you is, can you get on board with helping the good ones? Some of us are really trying to make the world like it was before. The whole world’s stuck in a pit of ignorance, and we’re trying to get them out. Now there’s a cause you can live for, not just trying to survive after you’re free, or God forbid, staying a smuggler for the rest of your life.”

Or, Charles thought, the option Warren hadn’t mentioned was that Charles could accept the deal and Warren could shoot him in the back whenever he let his guard down.

They sat in silence for a minute or two.

“Charles, all I can say is, I’m being honest with you. I’m making the best case I can. I’m doing what I’m doing for

what I believe are the right reasons. George is doing what he’s doing to make himself rich, and damn everyone else.”

After a pause, Warren added, “If I can’t convince you, the least you can do is shoot me now instead of taking me back to George.”

What Warren was proposing would give Charles a purpose, a dream to live for. The chance to join the Builders was a chance of a lifetime. Yes, it was an opportunity to do good, but it was also a chance to make it, to be rich and powerful. Warren couldn’t promise he’d get into the university, of course, that wasn’t his decision, but Charles was sure he could make it in and sure he could thrive once he did.

Warren was too idealistic. But he also had some good points about the smugglers. The smugglers told their own self-justifying story, about how the state drove them to their life of crime through persecution and injustice. What they really wanted, though, was easy money.

At the same time, although he’d always told himself he wasn’t a smuggler, the idea of turning against them now felt like a betrayal. While they were on the trail, whether they liked each other or not, they were a team. They all protected each other.

There was too much to think about, all at once, and not enough time to make a decision this huge.

If he accepted the deal and George found out, Charles was a dead slave. Or would be dead, once the band could no longer keep him alive for their amusement.

There was also the chance Warren would simply shoot him in the back while they were walking back to camp. The man had lied before. Charles really didn’t think he would shoot him, though. Warren seemed sincere. He found he still believed in Warren’s morality, as foolhardy as that might be. The morals of a traitor.

A wind swept along the ridge from the south, bringing the smell of wood smoke from the smugglers’ camp and plucking more autumn leaves from the trees.

How did he end up in these wretched situations all the time? Either he had to kill Warren or join him in his double life. What he really wanted to do was just carry his pack and get in nobody’s way and get home safely.

“It’s risky,” he said finally.

“Yes, it is,” Warren said. “Usually if you’re going to do anything great, the price is risk.”

From where they were sitting, Charles could see through a gap in the trees out over the mountain range, stretching off

Trails continued

in the distance toward home. He wished somebody else could tell him what to do. A religious saying his old master's wife used to quote came to him: "I will lift my eyes to the hills; where does my help come from?" He couldn't remember the end. She would have said her help came from God, not the hills, he guessed. He could use advice from above now.

All he could hear, though, was the wind.

"All right," Charles said. He lowered the gun.

"All right what?"

"All right, I promise not to turn you in to George. But you have to swear to do your best to get me into the university."

"I swear it," Warren said.

"While you're at it, swear you won't shoot me as soon as my back is turned."

Warren laughed. "That's an easy one. I swear that too."

"All right." Charles stood up, and stuck his gun in his holster. He helped Warren up, and they shook hands. But Charles made sure his gun was loose in the holster, and watched Warren carefully as he put on his gun belt.

"I'm almost glad you found out," Warren said. "It's more risky this way, but it was terrible to be alone like that. It was good to be able to defend myself to somebody. And to get an ally."

Charles nodded, though he wasn't sure about all this friends and soul mates stuff. The man was certainly not who Charles had thought he was, sincere as he sounded now. He would need some time to get to know the new Warren.

But a deal was a deal.

“Well if it isn't the runaway slave," the first sentry said. This less-than-heartwarming greeting was as enthusiastic a welcome as he got from most of the smugglers.

Charles supposed it was understandable. They had all lost money on him, giving up their share of the profits from the two packs of sulfur, for a slave they didn't really like.

George and the other leaders failed to show a great deal of joy, either, but they were more polite than the rest of the

band. Warren told everyone how brave Charles had been, and John and James shook hands and told him, "Welcome back, good to have you," with small smiles.

"Glad you are back," Old Harry said, with the abstract melancholy of a man who has just misplaced a large sum of money and wants to get back to thinking about it.

George shook his hand and said, "Glad we didn't lose you," but his unsmiling face could have fooled Charles.

So sorry to lose you your sulfur, Charles thought.

He nodded hello to Marguerite, who was standing nearby. If she felt any interest in his adventures, she hid it well. "Hi," she said.

Gary was more enthusiastic. "What was it like? Were the Appalachies like real people, or more like ghosts? Did you —"

Warren glanced in their direction.

"Later," Charles said. "I can't talk about it right now." He needed to go over his story and make sure there were no hints of Warren in it.

"Oh, sure, sure, sorry," Gary said. "I know you need some time to recover from something like that." He seemed a little awed.

Why couldn't Gary have been kidnapped? Charles wondered. Gary certainly would have enjoyed it more than he had.

Keeping Warren's secret made Charles feel like a small boy hiding a broken vase, but worse, because, unlike the small boy, he didn't just have vague notions of doom; his notions of doom were precise and detailed. The rest of the trip stretched far out in front of him.

"I want to go lie down for a while," he said.

"No time for that," George said. "We're heading out now. Let's move it."

"I don't really think we have anything to worry about now from the Appalachies," Warren said.

"Nah. I don't trust those damn savages, but I'm not worried about them," George said. "It's them who should be worried about me. Now pack up!"

The smugglers, finally grasping that he meant pack up, sprang to it.

When Charles first got to camp he had noticed the strips of meat drying on racks, nicely cured and ready to be turned into pemmican. He'd assumed that would be his next chore, but the slaves now hurried to gather up the meat and stuff it in packs. They would have to make the pemmican later.

"Looks like Dan's idea about finding animals at that water

hole worked out, then," Charles said to Gary.

"Yeah, enough to get us by," Gary said. "They did get some deer, the day you disappeared. Actually, we were just waiting for the meat to dry before we headed out, because we thought you, we —" he stopped, embarrassed.

"Yeah, I figured," Charles said.

"Yes ... so anyway, then Warren comes into camp saying he's just been held at gunpoint by an Appalachie, and they have you and ..."

"Let's go, let's go!" George shouted. His own pack was loaded and on his back, bedroll neatly tied on top, and he started walking away through the trees.

There wasn't much to gather up, but over their days at the campsite, they had spread their belongings all around, and the smugglers scrambled to gather them up and shove them into their packs. In only a few minutes, the campsite was empty except for the blackened rings of stones and the meat drying racks standing empty and useless; and the band was trailing after George, still tugging at straps and shifting packs around to get them balanced.

"What's the hurry?" Gary muttered. "There's hardly time left today to do any walking. We may as well just have stayed here overnight."

Charles overheard hushed grumbling among the others too. George was running now after all his talk of staying and fighting ... gets his favorite slave back ... I'd have left a long time ago ...

Charles was happy to see the camp go. It had been the last campsite for too many people. But his body was furious about setting out again without a rest, after his long days of hurried hiking. All he really wanted to do now was lie down and sleep, or maybe cry. His thoughts were scattered like marbles and he wanted time to try to track them down and gather them up.

They soon reached the end of the mountaintop they had camped on and the ground sloped downward ever steeper, finally easing into a broad valley. By the time evening had definitely replaced afternoon, the mountain was in the distance behind them and they stood on the edge of a wide stream.

Or it had been a wide stream, when they crossed it earlier in the year on their way to Scranton. It was now several tepid trickles of water, crisscrossing over a broad band of loose stones and solid bedrock. Water bugs swarmed over warm pools standing alone as islands from the rest of the stream.

On the way to Scranton, the band had been forced to string

Trails continued

a long rope over the rushing current, so it wouldn't sweep them off their feet and spoil their trade tobacco. Now their biggest risk was slipping on green algae-slicked rocks.

In twos and threes, the smugglers scrambled up the far bank of the stream.

"All right, now somebody start a fire, would you?" George said.

"Say what?" John said.

"A fire. You take a hand drill ..."

"I know how to start a fire," John said. "What do you want a fire for? We've hardly gone anywhere yet. I thought you were in a hurry."

"You'll see," George said. "Gary, you get one started while we bring firewood."

The thought struck Charles that fires could be used for purposes of encouraging confession, and he edged toward the outer part of the group, so as to be in good position to run if the need arose. He'd rather face the mercy of the cats in the deep shadow than the mercy of the smugglers.

Gary soon had a fire going, and once they had stacked wood on it and it had burned for a while, George said, "Charles."

He jumped. "Yes?"

"You and Gary get those copper pots and get a nice scoop of coals."

Gary and Charles looked at each other. Gary shrugged.

When they had done it, George said, "Now each of you go a ways along the stream, about a thousand steps will be about right I'd say. Go over to the other side, and dump the coals out in some nice dry brush or something."

There was gasping and murmuring. John pumped his fist. "Yeah! That'll fix those Appalachies!"

"Chief, you can't be serious," Warren said, looking ashen. "The fire will jump the stream. It's suicide!"

"He's right," Old Harry said. "This is way too risky."

"It won't jump the stream," George said. "It's plenty wide enough. Even where there's no water, it's not going to burn the rocks. And haven't you been watching the weather? Wind's been out of the south all day, southeast. My money is there's a storm behind it. Should be here by morning. Wind

won't change before that rain hits. But by the time the rain gets here ..."

Talk broke out among the smugglers. Charles stood still, overwhelmed by horror. All the women and children in that village. Roger. Running Elk. They were enemies, yes, but not the kind of enemies he wanted to roast to death. And George was going to make him do it.

"Charles and Gary, are you going to get those coals?"

He should not do this thing. He hated George for delegating his murder to other people, to Charles. But surely, this wasn't his sin. He couldn't disobey a direct order. And if he did disobey, somebody else would do it.

He and Gary put sticks through the pot handles so they could carry them without the heat from the red coals singeing their knuckles. At the stream, Gary went left, and Charles went right. I'm just obeying orders, he told himself. This is on George's head, not mine. One thousand steps.

He walked up the other side of the stream bank, crunched a little way into the dusty dry leaves and twigs. What he was doing did not seem real. It was momentous, but small. All he did was set the pot down, tip it over, and watched the coals spill over into the leaves. No longer red from the fire, they looked almost harmless.

For a moment, they just lay there, a bright glow crawling along the dark edges of the charred wood. You could step on it now, he told himself. Throw some dirt on it.

A black spot spread on one leaf, then the spot burst into a tongue of yellow flame.

Charles turned and sprinted for the stream, but stopped at the edge. The pot. He had left it behind.

He ran back and grabbed it. The fire was already the size of a campfire, shooting through the leaves and licking up a dead branch. One edge crackled into some brown grass, and gray smoke rolled out.

"Charles! Get away from there!" somebody shouted at him from the distance.

By the time he got back to the smugglers, Gary was already back too, and everyone was watching the fires. Two plumes of dark gray smoke rose from the forest on the other side of the stream.

"Now grab another bucket load and dump it right across the stream here," George ordered. Gary and Charles did it.

Other smugglers grabbed partially burning branches and ran across the stream, hurling them into the trees, shouting and whooping.

Nobody could stop the fires now. Tinder dry leaves and

grass puffed into yellow flame as the fire advanced, crackling and whooshing as it found new fuel. The fire, it seemed to Charles, was in as much of a hurry as George had been. The wind was blowing from the south, just as George had pointed out. It might be bringing rain, but it had no moisture yet. It leaped through the fire and showered sparks further into the woods, fanning the crackle into a roar.

The flames climbed the trees and blackened branches, which glowed and then fell in flaming chunks. The several fires raced toward each other to join into one.

"There's no point running anywhere," Warren said. "If it jumps that stream we'll never outrun it."

The whooping died down and the smugglers watched the fire in silence.

It flowed toward them, through the streamside grass, sized, and went out as it met the stones.

George stood, arms crossed, a smile on his face, and watched his creation rage.



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