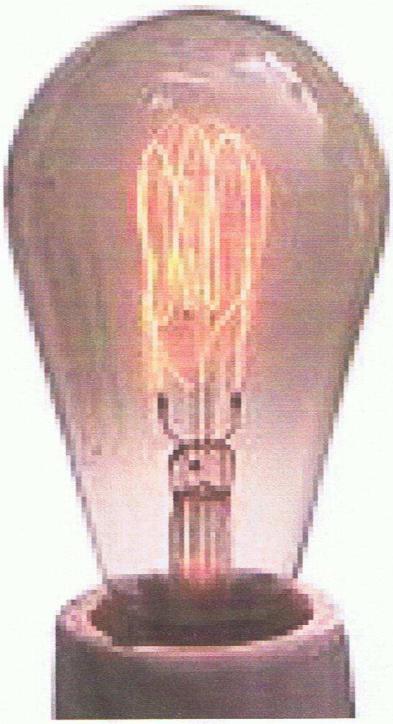
ECLECTIC



LIGHTS

Why 'Eclectic Lights'? Firstly, due to the fact that I can't resist a bad pun. Secondly, this anthology is eclectic in that it represents an odd collection of previously published short stories, most of which first saw the light of day as finalists of various short story contests, and light because I try to keep them that way. Nothing too deep; nothing too heavy. My stories are not written to preach, to educate, or to enlighten. They are written to entertain. Only that. Light.

But for those of you who like to see a moral at the end of a story I have included a few of my recent attempts to update Aesop by way of 'Fables for the third Millennium'. Still nothing deep or heavy here, although they may cause you to ponder a little.

I hope that they will interest and amuse you, and, above all, I hope that you will find them entertaining.

Barry Daniels

Western Shore, Nova Scotia

June 2009

Eclectic Stories

Rob's Cove: *Toronto Star Short Story Contest Finalist, 1985*
Our House: *Toronto Star Short Story Contest Finalist, 1986*
With Friends Like These: *Toronto Star Short Story Contest Winner, 1987*
There's no use rushing me; I'll remember in a minute: *Toronto Star Short Story Contest Finalist, 1988*
Tommy Delaney's One Hundredth Birthday Party: *Toronto Star Short Story Contest Finalist, 1989*
Chicken Scoop: *Tales of Mystery, Suspense & Fantasy. Mobius Books, 2004*
Wired: *Canadian Writers' Journal, 2003*
Redcap: *Ontario 'Scene of the Crime' Short Story Contest, 2004*
Gold River: *Open Minds Quarterly, 2008.*
The Dog Catcher of Innis Harbour: *Bard's Ink, Short Story Contest, 2004*
Farewell Speech: *Bard's Ink, Short Story Contest, 2002*
A Murder of Crows: *Canadian Writer's Journal 2003*

Fables for the Third Millennium:

The Angel's Bargain: *Writers' Collective, University of Winnipeg; 2005*
The Shoemaker's Children: *Not previously published.*
The Squirrel's Tale: *Not previously published.*
The Workshop Committee (or How Santa got the Sack) *Not previously published.*
The Beancounter and the King: *Not previously published*
The Carpenter's Hammer: *Not previously published*
The Stupid Bumblebee: *Not previously published*

SHORT STORIES

ROB’S COVE

I suppose that, the ethics of my profession being what they are, I shouldn't be telling this. But I've thought it through several times and I truly don't see how the telling of it can do anyone any harm now. I mean, they're all settled in at Rob's Cove, and there's been no challenge to their legal rights to the property, so I suppose the secrecy which was so much a part of the MacIntyre will is all over now. And it's such a fascinating tale; well, I mean the world has a right to know. That's the way I see it.

You must know, right away, that I've always considered myself a practical man. Down to earth, you know. I never did hold with all of that mumbo-jumbo about ghosts and hauntings and reincarnations, so I'm not trying to prove anything to anybody. I'll just tell the tale, and you can make up your own mind, you understand.

Well, now that I've convinced myself to the telling, I'll be damned if I know where to start! I suppose that, if you're to understand the thing, you have to know first of all about the will. And about MacIntyre himself, of course.

Robert Angus Stuart MacIntyre came to New Inverness, Nova Scotia, just before the turning of the 17th century into the 18th, and he found not much here but isolated settlements, a French fort here and there, and acres and acres of God's own country. It was said that he'd sailed with the British Navy and later as a merchant seaman, and, although his personal history is quite vague on the subject, it seems he came to New Scotland with a cloud hanging over him. It's quite likely he jumped ship.

In his early years he was not exactly the son every mother dreams of raising and - rough justice being the rule in the colonies back then - he escaped the noose more by good luck than good judgment, and on more than one occasion.

Again the history is more full of gaps than a good tale should be, but it comes clear enough when, at the ripe old age of 24, he met, courted and married Eleanor (Nell) Thompson, the daughter of a local fisherman and a spinster at 17 years old.

Well from then on old Rob MacIntyre was a changed man. A classic tale, it was, of a young rogue brought to heel by the love of a good woman. He got a job at a nearby sawmill, put down a deposit on a half-acre by the water, built a small cabin and turned over the sod for a vegetable garden. He set up house there at the edge of the Atlantic Ocean with his new bride.

With Scots blood on both sides of the marriage it was not long before the young couple was able to put enough aside to afford some of the finer things in life. Like a horse, a couple of cows, a small fishing boat, and seven children of assorted shapes, sizes and sexes. The half-acre plot with the small cabin gave way to a large, white-painted frame house on a five-acre lot; then a 10-acre lot; and finally came to represent 12,000 acres of the finest shorefront the country had to offer, complete with the grandest mansion in that part of the country, a smart fleet of fishing boats at the private harbour and a herd that provided meat to a good-sized portion of Nova Scotia.

By that time MacIntyre also owned the mill at which he'd started his working life (respectability had silenced the rumours of his earlier life as a mariner) along with three others, and half a dozen assorted enterprises scattered among local townships. One of his sons, Jamie, he sent off to Upper Canada to read the law. Jamie MacIntyre later came back to set up in practice close to home, and he, too, raised seven children. One of them, Edward MacIntyre, produced yet more sons, and if you follow the line down a couple of hundred years and through a few more MacIntyre generations, you eventually find Robert Angus James MacIntyre - the present occupant of Rob's Cove, until a couple of months ago.

Me, that is.

The first Rob MacIntyre died as do all men, rich or poor, and his wife followed him to the grave within the week. All of the county turned out for the wake and said how fitting it was that Nellie had gone so quickly and quietly, since the one without the other could not be imagined. The two of them had written a love story not yet equalled in these parts. Neither had been known to raise a voice nor say a bad word against the other. The two, it was generally agreed, had gone to lovers' heaven to take their place with Romeo and Juliet and all of the other great loving couples, be they world renowned or known only to each other, from the pages of history.

A fitting ending to such a beautiful love story, they all said.

But was it the end?

The reading of the will, as you might have expected, caused quite a stir hereabouts. The various descendants, in-laws, long term friends and just plain hopefuls turned out in quantity to hear Jamie read the will. It is said that as he tore open the envelope and read the first page, his face turned to stone. Jamie MacIntyre's little firm had not put it together, you see. A law firm in Halifax had drawn up the will, and whether Jamie liked that or no, he was probably expecting a fair-sized chunk of the estate to fall into his own hands.

He raised his eyes to the assembly and said, as it is told:

"There's nae a thing here ta hold ye, any of ye; so be about your business."

For Robbie MacIntyre had left nothing to anyone; he intended to come back to claim it himself, you see.

The terms of the will were simple. The entire estate was to go into a trust fund to be administered by Jamie MacIntyre's company. His eldest son was to become resident caretaker at Rob's Cove and have the right to whatever funds were needed to keep it in good condition. He was also allowed a small stipend from the fund to go towards the care and feeding of himself and his family. The eldest son was entitled to such privileges until his death, at which time the property passed on to his eldest son, who assumed the same function. And so on down through endless time.

But not quite endless.

At a certain point in time, old Rob would be back. He would present himself to whichever MacIntyre headed Jamie's company at the time of his coming, and claim his estate. The method of ascertaining that he was who he claimed to be, when he arrived the second time around, was spelled out in very specific terms. Very secret terms. The continued survival of the MacIntyre Law Company and the comfort of its owners were completely assured so long as the secrets of the will were known only to the principal himself. The day that anyone else came to know them the control of the

MacIntyre estates reverted instantly to the Halifax firm. Anyone else, that is, except old Rob on the way back.

The will was challenged. It held.

My father died five years ago, and I mourned his passing. In due course I took the keys to his desk, slipped my feet into his shoes beneath it, and opened the file on Rob MacIntyre's will. To say that I was amazed is to understate the case.

Over a hundred people had, over the years, presented themselves to the occupant of the office in which I now sat and had claimed the estate as their birth-right. Robbie MacIntyre had apparently tried to come back more than a hundred times. Twenty of the claimants had tried within five years of old Rob's death and the fact that they had been alive at the same time as the old man did not seem to have cooled the ardour with which they pressed their clams.

Anyone had the right to present a claim.

None had even come close.

Over the first four years after I took over Dad's chair only two claimants arrived at my office. I sent them both away as soon as they opened their mouths. Neither could substantiate his claim to be old Robbie, reincarnate. Each time, the old, yellowing papers were carefully refolded and locked within the small safe which I then carried down and locked in the vault in the basement of the old building. I kept the only key to that safe. All of my staff knew that to even touch the small steel box would mean instant dismissal, with little chance of ever finding employment in a law office again.

Old Robbie's secret was as well kept as ever a secret can be kept.

On a Monday morning in February I came into my office at nine and was met at the door by Mrs. Innes, my right arm in all things administrative.

"There is another of "them" waiting to see you Mr. MacIntyre." she said.

Sure enough, a young man sat quietly in the ante-room, his hands on his lap, staring into space. He nodded good morning as I passed.

Anyone had the right to try. I took the key to the vault from my desk, and went down into the basement to get the papers. "Let's make this as quick and painless as possible," I thought as I sat at my desk and opened the file. I pressed the intercom switch.

"Mrs. Innes, have the young man come in, please."

What I knew, you see, and the young man did not, was that the very act of stepping into my office would disqualify him. The very opening of his mouth would destroy his case.

The door did not open. Instead, my intercom buzzed.

"The young man will not come in, Mr. MacIntyre," said Mrs. Innes, obviously distressed. "He says you should know better than to ask him right now."

A cold wind seemed to blow through my office.

For five weeks the young man came to my office every morning at nine, and sat there 'til three when we closed up. Each evening he walked down the street to the small hotel where he apparently ate in silence and then went directly to his room. He spoke to no one.

It was a Wednesday morning. My intercom buzzed. Mrs. Innes said "the young man says he'll come in now, Mr. MacIntyre, if it's all right by you. And there's a young woman just come in who says they're together.

I found my mouth would not work. I was dreadfully cold, yet I could feel the sweat forming on my forehead. "Have him ... have them come in, Mrs. Innes," I was finally able to croak.

The young couple came hand-in-hand and stood before my desk. I did not need to look at the old papers to know what the man was about to say.

"I'm back with Nellie to claim my land," he said, and to my undying shame, I passed right out.

Well, things came back into focus with the young couple fussing over me and Mrs. Innes trying to get me to down a jigger of brandy - which I did - and we got on with the business. I cracked the old wax seal on the parchment envelope and took out the questions set by old Rob; the questions which no previous candidate had ever got to hear; the questions which no one had seen since they were written by hand on a cold winter's night back so many, many years ago. But by that time I knew that the asking of the questions was no more than a formality.

I moved out of Rob's Cove that weekend. "Rob", of course, had correctly answered the six questions set for him and "Nellie" had answered her six equally letter perfect. I didn't know what to believe. It was against all of my upbringing. It went against everything I'd ever believed.

But what other explanation could there be?

For me, a greater "proof" of the thing, meaning far more even than the answering of the questions, lay in the couple themselves. The 20th century "Rob and Nellie" were as warm a couple as you could ever wish to meet, and obviously meant the world to each other. I asked when and where they had first met, and "Rob" did not surprise me when he said: "In your office, Mr. MacIntyre, when we came to take the test. But we always knew each other, if you know what I mean. We each knew that we'd come together somehow. Only recently it became clear how." He'd come from Scotland. Nellie had come to meet him from British Columbia.

The final "proof" came a month later. In my office John and Patricia Bellamy (aka Rob and Nellie MacIntyre) signed away their rights to an estate worth over thirty million dollars. The trust fund continued to be operated by my firm, but with all profits and proceeds, plus all capital and real holdings, made over to a local charity.

They kept the land. Rob's Cove. They live there now and I call on them when I can. John has a small vegetable garden out back, and they keep chickens. He talks of running a few cows when he learns how. He has no concrete memories of any "previous life" but, as he puts it, "This place feels right to us. Like it's always been home and I've known no other."

Pat is pregnant due next spring. They're hoping for a boy.

Maybe they are Rob and Nellie, back from the grave. Who knows? They don't. I don't. All I know is that it couldn't have happened to a nicer couple.

They fit here, in New Inverness. Everyone says so. And they're writing a love story the like of which hasn't been known in these parts for almost 200 years.

* * *

OUR HOUSE

MONDAY (April 3rd, more or less)

It started here.

I came back, as I said I would when I left, close to 40 years ago. The trains still clank and snuffle through the night like they did then; the rain still rattles the windows. Rain doesn't change. The music coming through the thin walls is different. It was Vera Lynn, when I was here before, singing about bluebirds; now it's someone called Bruce Something asking, "Hey little girl, did your daddy leave you alone?"

I didn't leave you alone, my "little girl", *you* left *me*. No, you didn't "leave me." You died. You were supposed to come back with me, but you died.

I laugh sometimes when memory grabs me and takes me back. My ambition – our ambition – was to buy this stupid crumbling house, in which we rented two dingy top rooms. When I came back I stood in front of the house and stared, not believing that it stood unchanged. The agent asked an absurd price and I wrote him a cheque on the spot. No offer-and-counter-offer. We stood in the cold London drizzle and I wrote him a cheque for the stupid house. He stood there with the cheque in his hand, not knowing what to say. An absurdly high price, he was asking. It didn't even put a dent in my local account, and I only keep a local account for pocket money convenience.

I have money now.

Back then, just after the war, it took all of my paycheque and half of yours to pay the rent and buy the groceries. What little was left went towards the frills of our life, such as clothes, a bottle of wine now and then, or the occasional day trip to the sea. And £2 per week without fail went into the fund to buy our tickets over the Atlantic. The tickets to our future.

The day we left, our entire worldly possessions in four small suitcases at our feet, we stood in the street waiting for the taxi and promised each

other that one day we would come back here and buy the house out of the spare change in our pockets.

I forgot that promise. I only remembered it a week after you died. So I came back and bought the house. It's mine now. It's ours. Can you hear me, my love? It's ours now.

A young couple lives in the top two rooms. Indian, I think, or maybe Pakistani. They are four months behind in their rent. I don't care, of course, but I don't know how to tell them. Would they be embarrassed, I wonder, if I told them they can pay their rent or not; it's all the same to me. Would they ask each other, alone in their dingy rooms at night, "What is he after? What does he want from us, that foolish old man?"

I worry that *they* worry about the rent, that one night they'll sneak off to avoid paying their stupid £18 a week, or whatever it is they're supposed to pay me. Poor young things, alone in the night. I must tell them that I don't care about the rent and take the chance that they think me a dirty old man with ulterior motives.

I lie awake at night and listen to the trains in the shunting yards behind the house. How I used to curse them when they pried into my dreams and brought me back out into dark reality a dozen times a night. Eventually I learned to tune them out, like the ticking of the bedside clock or the soft breathing on the pillow beside me. I even came to find the sounds soothing, reassuring. When we finally crossed "the pond" and slept in the air-conditioned comfort of a luxurious (to us) apartment in downtown Toronto, I couldn't sleep for missing the train sounds.

I've found myself a hard, lumpy mattress, just like we had back then, and I lie awake on it at night, listening to the sound of the trains.

I can't remember what colour the wallpaper in the hall used to be. Blue, I think. It's brown now. The house has a new roof and a few other "improvements" of no note. Other houses along the terrace have been fixed up to a greater or lesser extent, but this one is almost exactly as we left it. It's as though it were waiting here all those years. Waiting for us to come home like we promised we would.

I read your diaries, after you died. You always kept a diary. Years on years of them. The later ones were smart, leather-jacketed affairs with your name embossed in gold on the cover. The early ones were paper-backed, cheap newsprint things with wire springs for binding and your name written in ballpoint on the flyleaf.

The diary for 1947 contained a yellowed cutting, attached to the back cover with dried-out Scotch tape. It was the list we made of why we should leave England versus why we should stay. Under the "Why we should stay" column, there are three entries:

1. *Mom & Dad: (his/mine)*
2. *Assorted Friends and Relatives (ours)*
3. *The Pub*

By the side of "3" you had written, "there are pubs in Canada too."

Under the "Why we should go" column is a long list of entries, most of which are too faded to read any more. Among the ones I can make out are:

Weather (stinks)
Pay (stinks) (his & mine)
Prospects (none)
Politics
Children (can't afford them here) (see 'pay')

I remember making that list. We made it head-to-head over the small table in the cubby-hole we called the kitchen, very late one Friday night after I had been passed over for promotion yet again. I had no idea you'd kept the list until I found it stuck in the back of your diary.

The weather still stinks.

Thursday (the 6th, I think)

I went past the factory. I went up in the morning rush hour. I took the Bakerloo line from Euston, but instead of riding right up to Watford Junction, like I used to every morning, I got off at High Street and walked the last two miles.

The faces are the same. Closed. Sleepy. The southbound platforms full of businessmen and bureaucrats heading downtown, with their pinstripe suits and their rolled brollies; the northbound platforms full of young technicians and factory workers, heading for the industrial suburbs around Watford and Saint Albans. They still wear sport shirts, open at the neck, but now they have those tiny headphones held against their ears by steel springs. "Hey little girl, are you all alone?" in tinny tones from the head of the young man sitting next to me.

The factory looks the same, too. I'm beginning to think that my memory must be playing tricks; so much seems the same when it can't possibly be, not after almost 40 years. Yet I even remember the crumbling stone wall between the factory yard and the "White Swan" next door. We used to sit on the wall and drink our Guinness at noon. The "Dirty Duck," we called it then, or sometimes just "the Duck." I suppose that the headphone generation have their own name for it now.

The town is still crowded and noisy, and the stink of car exhaust fills your nose. I stopped for an early lunch at a small restaurant, which could have been the same…

The meal was bad. Tough meat, cold potatoes.

Walking back past the factory at noon, I saw the technicians, sitting on the wall at "the Duck," washing down their sandwiches with pints of black beer

I did come home again.

Everything is as it was. All of the "reasons to go" are still here, more so than ever. The memories are vivid – not just what we did, where we went, but the emotions of that time. The desperate hopelessness. We were so relieved when the job offer came from Canada and we had our ticket money together. So very pleased to get out of this place, finally into a new, fresh land where the sun warmed your soul and opportunity shone down on a young couple and said, "Grow here." So pleased, we were.

So why, then, do I yearn so for this damp, crowded, stinking place, for those awful, hopeless days?

Because we were young and full of life then, of course, and because the Journey was all before us, full of promise.

Tuesday (11th)

I saw him on the stairs this morning – the "him" of the couple upstairs, that is. When I made eye contact and it was obvious that I wanted to talk, he tried to push past me, embarrassed, thinking, I suppose, that I was about to ask him for the rent he owed. I caught him by his thin shoulders and said, "Listen: You can forget the rent you owe me. I don't want it. You don't have to pay rent to me. I'm very rich and I don't need your rent money."

He stared at me and gave no indication that he understood. It was my turn to be embarrassed and I let him go, sheepishly, and went into my room: I don't know if he understood or not. I think I handled it badly.

When I cam home this evening, after supper, I went upstairs to see if I could make things a little clearer and I found their rooms empty. They'd packed (must have taken all of five minutes) and moved out sometime this afternoon, I suppose. Done a bunk. A midnight flit, we used to call it, even if it were done in the middle of the afternoon.

I can imagine how he recounted this morning's stairwell conversation to his skinny wife, how they discussed whether I was dangerously insane, or simply plotting unmentionable deals in place of the rent money.

Anyway, the poor little birds have flown and, in a way, I'm quite relieved. I hope they don't spend too much time worrying about the few hundred pounds they owe me in back rent, nor looking over their shoulders to see if I've sent the bobbies after them.

Wednesday (12th)

I called on my London lawyer this morning, and then spent the afternoon with the real estate agent who sold me the house. The agent was very wary at first – probably thought I wanted my money back.. After we'd talked for a while and I told him what I wanted to do, he became even more wary and his eyes went wide. He must think I'm crazy, but crazy rich. When I gave him a retainer of £10,000 he was suddenly all teeth and

enthusiasm. He told me that it would probably cost more to carry out my plan than I had paid for the house in the first place. I told him that I don't care. There is no upper limit. Do it. I will pay for it. I don't think anyone had ever said those words to him before: No upper limit. It amuses me to think of what he'll tell his friends in the pub tonight.

Friday (Near the end of the month. Probably 28th or 29th)

I stood in the rain this morning, my suitcases at my feet, and watched the wrecking ball swing. The roof went first, the slate tiles cracking like pistol shots in the grey morning. The taxi came, but I asked him to wait. He switched on his meter and started to read the Daily Mirror.

The roof took about 20 minutes and the walls less than an hour. I watched it all come down. There are great steel girders against the houses on either side to ensure that they don't tumble down, too.

It cost me £3,000 to grease the wheels of the local council and obtain planning permission in a hurry, and another £6,000 in "inconvenience money" to persuade the owners of the properties on each side not to lodge a formal objection to my plan. What really swung the deal with the neighbours was the offer to let them divide the vacant lot between them, after the house is gone. It gives them each a little garden, quite narrow but deep enough to put in some vegetables and a few feet of lawn. If I'd thought to offer that in the first place, I could probably have saved 6,000 quid.

The rain kept down the dust.

Do you understand, my dear one? Do you know why I had to do this? I'm not certain I understand it myself, but I could not rest, back home, knowing that the house still waited here. You understand, I know you do.

When it was over, I got into the taxi and asked him to take me to the airport, then I changed my mind and went to the station.

I'm on a train now. It's going to the sea. I'll stay a couple of days, I think and then make my way home. I'll call the kids and let them know I'm okay. They must have been worried, not knowing what I was up to these last few weeks. We're passing a shunting yard. I can hear the engines clanking, the big diesels purring. Strange how I took the sound for the

snuffling of steam in recent nights. The mind plays tricks when you get up to my age, I guess.

I find the sounds and the rhythm of the train very relaxing.

I think I'll sleep for a while.

* * *

WITH FRIENDS LIKE THESE

Ephraim Bedloe and me go way back, you know. Lived all our lives in this valley; went to school together, and farmed next door to each other for nigh on half a century. So it's natural that folks should come to me for the truth of it: "Was it all truly a misunderstanding," they ask me "Or did the old coot plan the whole thing right from the beginning?"

Well it pains me to have to say this - but I don't know. I've lost count of the times I've asked him, was it all just a misunderstanding or did you know what you were doing all along? He looks me straight in the eye and he says, “George, t'was all no more than a mix up which by the grace of God turned out all right in the end.” Then, when I think I've the truth of it at last, he'll give me one of those great broad winks of his that crinkles up the whole side of his face, and a great silly grin like a lad caught with his finger in the cherry pie.

Maybe the only way to get at the truth is to reason it out, like Sherlock Holmes would, or that scruffy detective on TV. "Let's just stick with the facts Ma'am," he'll say, and then he'll reason out the whole mystery and you just want to kick yourself for not having seen it all along.

The shot was a fact. Booming out of the still spring morning and rolling like thunder along the blue hills to the end of the valley and echoing back down the river. Tommy Faulkner was up by then, and he heard it plain as day. Set the crows to squawkin', it did, and brought old Millie Faulkner out of her kitchen at a run.

Old Millie, she's not much on brains, and I reckon she was at the back of the line when they handed out good looks too, but she got her big mouth right at the front of the line, and a nose she's always sticking into other people's business. Still the good Lord gave Millie a heart to match the size of her mouth and on account of the one folks tend to overlook the other, if you catch my drift. She means well, Millie does. I guess that could be the epitaph of many a busybody.

Anyways, when Millie hears the shot she waits only long enough for Tom to point her in the right direction and she's a-throwin' off her apron and jumpin' into that old Chevy pickup of theirs to go see what's up.

Now the last thing that Ephraim needed that morning was a visit from Millie Faulkner, and you can put that down for another fact, but Millie came a-rattlin' down the drive, kickin' up the dust with that old pickup, and pulled in by the porch just as Eph came up over the fields. He was carrying his shotgun in one hand, a long-handled spade in the other, and his hands were covered in blood to the wrists. It takes a lot to stop up Millie's yappin', but Eph managed it that morning; for a while.

Millie was half scared out of her wits, and I'll tell you that don't leave a lot of wits left. Well, like it does with many folk, scared came out angry, and she laid into Ephraim, demanding to know where Mary was - Eph's missus, that is. Eph mumbled something about Mary takin' off to visit her sister, and told Millie to mind her own damned business anyway. Now telling Millie to mind her own business is a red rag to a bull, and she really started on into Eph at that point, which is just about exactly the last thing you should do to a man carrying a shotgun and covered in blood. Eph put down the spade, but hung onto the gun, and turned to Millie all calm and quiet (which scared her more that if he'd been a-rantin' and a-ravin' at her) and he said, almost in a whisper: "Now go easy on me, Millie, or dammit I'll be diggin' two graves out there this mornin' instead of just the one."

And then she looked him square in the eye and noticed the tears, streamin' down both his cheeks, and that scared old Millie more than anything else in that strange morning. She jumped right back in her old pickup and left Eph in a cloud of dust and exhaust smoke, with the tears still coming.

Eph's no fool, of course, so he knew what had to come next. He put away his shotgun, fetched a beer from the icebox, sat himself out on the porch looking over his front fifteen acres, and settled in to wait for a visit from Jake Mundt. Sheriff Mundt that is; our local version of that TV cop. Eph knew that was where Millie was roaring off to, and he was dead right.

Now here's another of those Sherlock-Holmes-type "facts of the case"; It concerns that fifteen acre parcel out front of Eph's farmhouse; the one he was a-gazin' at while he waited for Mundt. Fact is, I've seen a lot of land go under the plough in my day, and I'm telling you that parcel of land has got to be the hardest, stoniest, meanest, piece of God's earth that ever broke a steel blade. Eph had been trying for years to put it under the plough, but all he'd

got to show for it was another busted transmission on his tractor. It needed major surgery this time - costly surgery by the look of it - so the tractor was up on blocks waiting for Eph to somehow find the funds to bring in a professional mechanic.

Eph sat, sipped, stared and waited. Mundt arrived about forty minutes later. He got down from his car, fetched himself a cold beer and sat down on the porch step. Eph gave the sheriff "Good Mornin'" and the two sat a while watchin' the sun glint off the rocks, and old Jake never mentioned the gun nor the blood on Eph's hands. Two old friends sharing some time together. Then Mundt says:

"Where is she, Eph?"

"Millie Faulkner's an old fool" says Ephraim.

"No denying that," says Jake Mundt. "Now where's your Mary? And don't start that tale about visiting her sister, 'cause I called already and there ain't no visit nor no plans to visit. Want to take it from there, Ephraim?"

Eph said nothing; sipped, rocked back and forth, stared out over his land. Mundt got up and squinted out under the sun.

"There's fresh turned earth out there, Eph. Thinking on putting in some potatoes, were you?"

Not a word from Eph. He stood, shrugged, turned slowly and went into the house. Mundt opened the leather restraining strap on his gun and moved to the porch. Eph came out of the house holding his shotgun, but it was open and he held it by the barrel. He gave Jake the gun and held out his wrists for the cuffs.

"Want to tell me where to dig?" Mundt asked.

Jake put Eph in a cell on Monday morning and there he stayed 'til Thursday noon when he was bundled into the police car and driven back to his property to meet with this policeman, this Morrison, a detective he was, out from the city. Not at all like the fellow on TV. A little fellow, Morrison was, all points and sharp edges. Talked fast and moved in quick dashes, like

he was always anxious to be somewhere other than where he was. I had a dog like that once.

Morrison starts in on Eph asking whereabouts Mary might be, but nasty like, not with any concern at all. We all thought that the suspect was innocent until proved guilty, but this Morrison had it backwards. "Where d'you bury the body?" he kept asking.

Eph wasn't paying much attention to the detective anyway. He was much more interested in the twenty or thirty men they'd set to digging holes all about his rocky acres. They had these big orange-coloured earth movers in, and men with picks breaking up rocks and hauling them away in wheelbarrows.

Jake had no love for this Morrison, I can tell you. He'd gotten himself bawled out by Morrison in front of his deputies 'cause somebody had let Eph wash himself up in the cell afore anybody thought to take blood samples from his fingers. Anyway, as Jake tells it, Morrison was talking to Eph at thirteen to the dozen while Eph was just a-starin' over the field with a strange look in his eye.

"Where d'you bury her, Bedloe?" Morrison asked for about the fifth time. "It'll go easier on you if you help us. Where d'you bury your wife? We've got Millie Faulkner's testimony, we've two neighbours heard the shotgun, and we've marked the spots where the ground's been turned. We'll dig them all if we have to, but why don't you make it easy on us, and on yourself as well? Where's the body, Bedloe?"

Eph stared at the men in the field for long seconds before replying, and when he did it was real slow-like, as though he was choosing each word very carefully. "Well, inspector, I'll tell you this," Eph said. "I may look like a dumb sod-farmer, but I'm not so stupid that I'd plant a flag where I'd buried a body. Speaking – how d'you say it? – 'hype-a-thetical', if I'd done what you're saying I done, I reckon I'd have dug those little holes all over just to throw some jackass like you off the scent. Hype-a-thetical, of course."

And that was it. Not another word could they get out of Eph, and in the end the little inspector got tired first and told Jake to take Eph back to his cell. Some say that Jake was a-grinnin' all the way home.

Come Saturday morning, sunlight through the small barred window woke Eph early, and he got up to stretch some feeling back into his arms and legs, which had gotten cramped from the small cot. He washed his face with cold water and shaved as best he could, trying to keep the nicks and scratches to a minimum. At nine a.m. he rattled his bars and called for Mundt.

"What you want, Eph?"

"Got to get out of here, Jake."

"You going to confess? Is that what you mean? You want me to call Morrison?"

"That little Jackass?" Eph laughed. "The Hell with him! I got to get down to the bus station by ten o'clock. Now open this cage before I got to pull that damn door off!"

Why you got to get to the bus station, Eph? You planning on taking a trip or something?"

"Come on, Jake, open up. I got to get there to meet the ten o'clock bus from the city. My Mary's on that bus and she'll have a blue fit if I'm not there to meet her. Move now, Jake. You know my Mary's temper. Do *you* want to be the one to explain why I couldn't get down there to meet her?"

Eph says it's a toss-up who was the more surprised; Mary, to see old Mundt waitin' to meet her or Mundt, to see Mary skippin' down from the bus, glowin' with good health and jumpin' up to give Eph a big kiss, like a young girl on her honeymoon.

Jake no doubt thought he'd get the mystery out of Eph later, but he never did. Eph didn't like the way he'd been treated by some of his so called 'friends' and he decided to let them stew for a while. But he told me, and, if you promise not to spread it around too far, I'll tell you.

First off, there's a part of the secret that'll be out in a few months anyway, when Mary's middle starts to show. Now, Mary is a fine, healthy woman, and bearin' another child shouldn't by rights be a problem. But she is getting on in years – No! I'm damned if I'll tell you how many - so she'd

been away to the city hospital for a week of tests and observations. Well, she brought back two pieces of information. The baby is healthy – and it's a boy! The news just took ten years off Ephraim Bedloe, let me tell you.

Nat'rally, Mary didn't want the news up and down the valley afore she was ready – you know how women are about these things – so the very last person Eph would have told was Millie Faulkner, even if she'd come at a good time. Which she didn't. Millie showed up at the worst possible time.

Eph's old dog, Jenny, had been ailin' bad for some months back, you see. She was nearly fifteen, Jenny was, and that's a fine span for a dog. Well, the vet had told Eph what had to be done, but he'd put it off as long as he could – which was right up to that Monday morning, after a long and sleepless night. She never felt a thing, Jenny didn't. One shot.

The best part of the story, of course, is how Ephraim had finally got his rocky fifteen ploughed. Eph says that when his old truck turned off the highway and Mary saw that east fifteen she squealed and jumped about so, Eph was worried for his unborn son. Give them their due, the police had put the land back to rights. The last of the big equipment had moved out just a few minutes earlier.

"Oh, Eph! How'd you do it?" Mary asked. "Did you get the tractor fixed?"

"No, honey" Eph told her. "I got a little help from some friends."

So now you've all the facts. There's a fine crop of corn starting to show out of the rocky fifteen, and with luck the land will finally start to repay Eph for all the hard work he's put into it over the years. Did he plan the whole thing? Or did fate and circumstance just throw it into his lap? I'm damned if I know; and I'll probably never find out. But I bet that TV cop would have reasoned the whole thing out by now.

* * *

THERE'S NO USE RUSHING ME; I'LL REMEMBER IN A MINUTE

I've always loved the rain, you know. All my life. I've never thought much of those bright, hot sunny days people rave so much about. I always figured they were fine if you happened to be a sunflower, or a peony, or suchlike; but nobody ever accused me of being a sunflower or anything remotely similar. No, I've always got much more from Mother Nature when she's in a bad mood, and wants to throw her weight around a little.

But just a minute now. You must think me a foolish old man, coming up to you out of nowhere and babbling on about the weather. No, I didn't come all this way just to find a stranger to bore with my ramblings! There was something urgent I had to tell you. It was right on the tip of my tongue just a moment ago. Well, there's no use trying to rush me; I'm sure it will come back to me in a minute. Always does. You must understand, it's difficult for me to hold onto a thought these days. I <u>am</u> nearly eighty, after all. Maybe more. I haven't been keeping close track these last few years; not since Annie died. My wife, she was. Died three years back. Or was it four?

Now there's nothing wrong with my mind, you hear! It's just that I can't carry a thought the way I used to, so you'll just have to bear with me.

What were we talking about? Oh, yes, the weather. Well, as far back as I can remember I've enjoyed a good storm. Back in my skiing days, I'd be off out on the trails in a howling blizzard, when sane folks were at home sitting around the fire thinking: "Pity the poor wild beasts on a night like this." Well, I'd be out there with the wild beasts - except the beasts had sense to stay in their dens while I was out trudging the trails though I couldn't see five feet in front of the icicle on my nose. I felt really close to nature, those days. Still do. We understand each other, Nature and I. You might sit by your fire and curse the snow, and the wet and the cold and the wind and all; but not me. I'm out there close to it; right in it, you might say, and enjoying the show; every minute of it.

Since Annie went, I seem to spend most of my life on the road. Bad weather never stops me. In fact in many ways I prefer to go walking in the bad weather; I've the roads to myself then. At first it was only short walks

of a few miles, along the coast road and back home for supper, but then I started going further afield. I'd still follow the coast road when I could, getting the salt spray off the sea, and growing heady from breathing all that fine fresh air. And if the weather were not too bad I'd just find myself a cozy little hollow in the cliffside somewhere and curl up for the night. William, my eldest boy, he asked me once "What's the farthest you've ever walked Dad?" and I told him "Six days". Bill says "How far, I mean? How many miles?" D'you know, I'm damned if I could tell him!

That time I hurt my leg, and the police had to call Bill to come and get me, well, I'd walked clear to Innis Harbour, and they say that's over eighty miles. I must tell you about that time. It was so funny, you know. I'd slipped down the cliff face, you see. Damned silly thing to do, but it was raining hard, and there was a lot of mud, and - no, never mind the excuses, it was a damned silly thing to do. So there I was, covered in mud, and soaked to the skin, limping into Innis Harbour. That's a jumped-up little fishing village which thinks it's the capital of the tourist industry down our way. Anyway, the police picked me up and threw me into a cell. I admit they were very civil about it, and they fed me, and cleaned me up, and brought a doctor to see to my leg, but they still threw me into a cell. Next morning I said to the sergeant: "Thanks for your help, but I'll be on my way now," and he smiled and told me: "'Fraid you're not about to be going anywhere, old timer." They were setting up to put me on a vagrancy charge. Me! Do you believe it?

But wait up, here! Talking of the police puts me in mind of what I came up to you about. Here I am rabbitting on about God-knows-what, and there's something pressing at the back of my mind..... just give me a few seconds.... No, I can't seem to bring it back. But I know it was important. I clearly remember thinking: "I must get to the police. I must get to a phone, and let the police know....." No, there's no point in me using your phone until I recollect what it was. It's useless trying to rush me. T'will come back to me in its own sweet time.

They know me now, after that Innis Harbour business. The police, that is. Once they realised I was *the* MacElroy of MacElroy Industries, well, they couldn't have been nicer. Of course it's *William* MacElroy that runs things now. Bill came himself to pick me up, driving a company limo. The police were very civil and there was a great deal of apologising all round, but I thought the whole thing was hilarious and I told them so. I mean the

cops were right to think what they did. I gave them a fat cheque for their benevolent fund, and since then all the cars honk and give me a wave if they pass me on the road. I think they run some sort of spy network to let Bill know where I am all the time, but that's all right with me.

It's a funny thing, in a way, don't you think? How I worked all my life, from when I was twelve years old, and I'd made all this money by the time I retired, and now what have I got to spend it on? A good pair of hiking boots and a warm weatherproof parka. And what more do I want out of life? Nothing. Not a damned thing. Well, the open road, I suppose; and nobody hassling me. And it would be nice if Annie could be with me, but I guess that just wasn't in the cards. Still, I've always my sons. My boys. Annie always wanted a little girl, you know, but we kept getting boys. Four of them. Always boys. Never a little girl..... a little girl! My God, that's it! That's what it was I came to tell you about! That girl, the one in all the papers! The little seven-year-old who wandered away from her parents' camper. What about her? Why, I *saw* her, that's what! I know where she <u>is</u>! *That's* what I came to tell you about, not to go blathering on about all of my money, and walking in the rain, and all that clap-trap. Why didn't you stop me, for heaven's sake? I read about her when I was in Alary Bay - or was it when I was down at Gull Bend? Do you know the stretch of coast down there? It's a wonderful walk, that is. One of my top favourites on a winter's day, when a storm comes off the sea, and the spray can reach near to the cliff top. They have to close the road to motor traffic you know, due to icing on the surface, but they can't keep *me* out. Why, one winter I was down that way.....

Here I'm doing it again, you see! I was talking about that little girl. Joanie, her name was; or Jenny? Yes, Jenny, I think. Wandered off from the campsite where her family was parked, and half the county is out combing the woods for her. Well, they won't find her. She went by the coast road, you see. Now don't ask me how she got down to Alary Bay, which is all of a hundred miles from where she wandered off. Maybe somebody gave her a ride. There's all kinds driving these roads, I can tell you. You wouldn't believe what people yell at me out of cars. They even throw things at me. You just wouldn't believe it.

What were we talking about? The little girl? My God, yes. Somebody better get to her quickly. She won't survive twenty-four hours out there, even if it is summer. What do you mean "Out where?" What do

you think I've been telling you for the last half hour. Jenny what's-her-name. Didn't I just finish telling you where she is! I didn't? I was sure I told you about that. My wife Annie, she used to have ESP or something, you know; always knew what I was trying to say. I'd say "How about a cup of tea, Annie?" and she'd bring me a cup of coffee, and do you know, it was coffee I'd really wanted; and I'd say "How'd you know I really wanted coffee?" and Annie would say "Never mind what you *said*, I heard what you *meant*." She died about five years back. Did I tell you that already?

The girl? What girl? Oh, yes, of course. I *saw* her, you know! Now don't you yell at me! Yelling won't get you anywhere! I was over by Five-mile point, where you can see those big rock islands off-shore. I came off the road a mile west, and I was walking along the cliff-top when I heard what I thought was a seabird, but when I looked down, I'll be damned, it was the little girl, with her long black hair just like in the newspaper pictures; just like they described her. Singing. She was singing and dancing on the pebbles there. I tried to come up on her quietly so she wouldn't be startled, but I slipped on the scree and came sliding down, and as soon as she heard me, well the poor little thing started screaming fit to burst. No, I don't know why. Well, I suppose I'm not the most reassuring sight for a young child. I don't bother much with my appearance, you know, when I'm out on one of my 'walkabouts'. Why should I?

Well, little Jenny started backing away, and I tried to tell her not to be scared but I thought "she isn't going anywhere, not with the ocean behind her", so I just kept walking towards her. She was covered in bruises, poor child, and her dress was all torn, hanging from her in shreds, it was.

The thing is, I didn't see the raft. It wasn't really a raft, you understand, just a chunk of some old fishing-dory which had broken up on the rocks and drifted in to the cove there. But Jenny saw it. By the time I guessed what she was about she'd pushed the thing out to sea and jumped aboard.

Now it's no use getting mad at me! Let's see how fast <u>you</u> can run over loose pebbles when you're eighty. If you ever get that far!

She paddled her way out and I just stood there yelling at her to turn back before the current caught her. Do you know the currents there, at Five Mile Bay, out past the Point? No? Well they're evil. Take my word for it. I

used to sail out there. Had this forty footer. Still got her somewhere, as far as I know. I think the girl realised at last because she tried to change direction and paddle back in, but the current had her by then. I could still hear her crying even after I couldn't see her any more. My ears are still sharp, you know. Did I say that already?

When? What do you mean, "When?" Oh, when was all this? Why, this morning. I came straight here, as fast as I could walk! Now don't you start yelling at me again! Let's see how fast *you* can cover twenty miles when you're my age, if you ever get there. Listen, I walked through that damned storm to get here; right through the storm, I came! That must have been the worst storm in these parts in ten years, and I walked straight through it. So you just get on the phone to the police, or the coast guard, or both, and don't waste any more time..... what do you mean, it's been fine since Wednesday? I walked through the storm, I tell you. Straight from Five Mile Point.

The storm was last week? Don't be silly. That can't be. I came straight here, as soon as I saw the little girl down at Five Mile Bay. Now I know I'm an old fool, but don't try to tell me I don't know what day it is. I mean, there's no way I could have..... you must be mistaken. The big storm was this morning and..... how the hell do I know why my coat is dry; it's a water repellent coat, I guess. That's why. My hair? Dried in the sun, I suppose.

You're damned right, you shouldn't be standing here arguing with me. I couldn't agree with you more. You'd better get on the phone pretty damned quick, and get the Coast Guard out there! She won't last twenty-four hours out there, floating on that piece of wood on the Atlantic Ocean. Not twenty-four hours.

* * *

TOMMY DELANEY'S ONE HUNDREDTH BIRTHDAY PARTY

I thought it was some kind of joke when I first heard of it. A hundred years old, indeed! I'd known Tommy Delaney from the day he moved out here to New Inverness almost thirty years ago, you see, and I just knew he couldn't be a hundred years old. Seventy five, I would have said to look at him; maybe eighty on a bad day and with his teeth out. But not a hundred. Never a hundred.

To be perfectly honest, I couldn't really claim to know all that much about old Tommy, even after all those years. None of us could. He was always a bit of a loner you see, and even after a few beers at the Inverness Tap he wasn't much of a talker. His disposition was rarely better than surly. Come to think of it, under the circumstances I could rightly claim that I knew Tommy Delaney as well as most; He was a retired public servant from Indian River, Saskatchewan, who'd moved out to New Inverness a few years after he retired to be near the sea.

That's about all I knew all any of us knew, I suppose. I'd never have believed that Tommy was a hundred years old, though, and that's a fact. But when Ian MacAlistair showed up at the Tap with that telegram from the Queen, well, you just have to accept such things, don't you. Ian is our local Postmaster, and a bit of a nosy old cove, in a well meaning sort of way. He brought this copy of the telegram into the Tap and showed it about to us, you see. There it was in black and white, straight from Buckingham Palace. Congratulations to Thomas Delaney, it said, on reaching your one hundredth birthday. Signed by her Royal Britannic Majesty, Elizabeth Two herself. Well, I mean if there's two things in life you can count on it's that the Pope don't cuss and the Queen don't lie. There's just no disputing it. That telegram put an end to all speculation on the spot, and no argument about it.

When we got over the surprise of it we got to thinking that, under the circumstances, the least we could do for the old coot was to bring him down to the Tap for a night of free beer. Then someone suggested that we could surely afford to stand the old goat a supper to go with the ale, and somebody else asked why not pass a hat and maybe get old Tommy some sort of memento to hang on his wall and before you know it we'd the makings of a surprise party. By the time we'd finished there were some that thought maybe the Tap wouldn't be big enough for the do. Even then we could have

kept things in proportion if the local press -- the revered though oft criticised "New Inverness Echo" -- hadn't got wind of it and turned the damned thing into an "EVENT". There's some folks who'd even have you believe that the "Echo" engineered the whole business for the sake of a story and, mind you, I'm not saying that they're all above such a thing at the Echo but in this case I'd give them the benefit of the doubt. I'd like to think that our local rag has a heart beating somewhere under the thunder of its presses, and that they acted out of a sincere desire to honour the township's oldest resident. Not that it matters a lot why the Echo did what it did; what's more to the point is how it went about doing it and, of course, what fell out of it in the end.

It was Martin Rudd who got the thing going. Martin is the Editor at the Echo, and a self styled "Newsman". Now I know that there's some who say Martin wouldn't be the pressroom coffee boy if it weren't for the fact that his father in law owns the paper, but I don't usually listen to such talk myself. I've seen Martin put away his scotch at the Tap and I'll tell you there must be some newsman in him. Anyway, what Martin put together (with the help of our local RCMP detachment) was a plan to run to earth some of Tommy's old friends and long lost relatives from his Indian River days. The basic idea was that we would lure an unsuspecting Tommy down to the Tap with the promise of free ale, and then spring a "This Is Your Life, Tom Delaney" on him, with the Echo cameraman snapping it all up for posterity. Now right from the start Ian had said how that was going to be a sight harder to do than to say. In all the years Tom had lived out at New Inverness, nobody could recall even once seeing out of town visitors at his property, nor recall hearing him speak of relatives or friends from his Saskatchewan days. And, according to Ian, the only mail the old boy ever got was his monthly Government pension cheque, and once in a while, one of those fat manila envelopes addressed "or occupant". Well, says Martin, all the more reason for us to run down his long lost kin now, and pay the freight out to Inverness to help the old lad celebrate turning a hundred, and maybe just fetch a tear to an old man's eye at such a time. Aye, says Ian, and mayhap sell a paper or two? Well why not? says Martin.

Ian was righter than he knew. Two weeks into the scheme it began to look as though the old coot had outlived anybody and everybody who might have had a kind remembrance of him. There'd been a Mrs. Delaney once, but she'd gone to her reward many years back of some unspecified disorder. There was a son somewhere, Clarence Michael by name, but he seemed to have walked off the edge of the earth with no forwarding address. Not that

he was any great loss, by all accounts. Even after all these years Clarence was remembered well enough, if not too fondly, at Indian River. Seems he'd been something of a drifter, and with bottle problems. Spent most of his time on the road, living off hand-outs. Once in a good while he'd show up to sponge off his dad for a few weeks, making a general nuisance of himself in the township, and then just when folks were starting to think in terms of lynch mobs Clarence would fade off into the sunset. When old Tommy had decided to up his roots and move to the sea, this had apparently not sat at all well with Clarence. He'd departed for parts unknown right about that time, and nobody at Indian River had had sight nor sound of him since. Not that anyone had tried too hard to find him you understand, and we got the distinct impression that we'd be doing the good folks of Indian River a big favour if we kindly left Clarence wherever fate and circumstance happened to have deposited him.

So we'd all just about decided to give up the "This Is Your Life" idea and go back to the original concept of a Grand Drunk, when the Echo turned up Howard. Howard Delaney was Tommy's long lost nephew; the son of Tom's brother, who'd shuffled off his own mortal coil back in the early fifties. Howie hadn't seen his old uncle since the day of his dad's funeral, and was some surprised to find the old boy still in the land of the living. The last news Howie's family had heard of Uncle Thomas was that he was not at all well, and with a poor to worse prognosis. But the good news was that Howie had always had a soft spot for his Uncle Tom, and would be tickled just pink to play his part at the Echo's Grand Bash.

Well, the boys at the Tap didn't think much of a "This Is Your Life" with only one mystery guest; but the Echo was still keen on the idea, and decreed that the show must go on. So the scripts were readied, and the lines were learned. In a nutshell, the idea was that just as Tom was settling down to his second or third jar we'd cut into the Muzak system and Howie would announce over the microphone: "Hi there, Uncle Tommy. My, you're looking well for a man of a hundred." Then while everybody sat about with grins frozen on their faces Martin would step up and say: "Thomas Delaney, do you recognise that voice?"; then Howie would step out from the Snug Bar and Tommy would toddle over to embrace his long lost nephew with a tear in his eye, and the flashbulbs would pop, and the Echo would start to recoup some of the cash they'd laid out to put the whole shooting match together.

It didn't work out that way. Not at all.

For starters, Tommy didn't want to come. He didn't even bother with excuses; just said he wasn't interested. Turning a hundred was no more of a trick than turning ninety-nine, he said, and there'd been no free beer for that one. And then the last thing in the world he wanted to do was sit about remembering old times he'd sooner forget. It was Ian saved the day by hinting that we had a nice fat cheque waiting for Tommy at the Tap by way of a birthday present.

Even then Tom kept playing the reluctant virgin, but he went to get his coat. Of course, nobody mentioned Howie, nor the "This Is Your Life" bit; that would have spoiled the surprise and ruined the whole evening. We needn't have worried about the Tap being big enough for the party. Fewer than two dozen folks turned out to help the old man turn over his century and half of those were press. Martin had offered a share of the story to two other local papers which were somehow affiliated with the Echo, and each had sent a camera crew and their own reporters.

Now Tommy didn't take to those cameras one little bit. Terrified, he was. By the time he'd drained his second jar he was looking like a man who couldn't think of anywhere he'd rather be except maybe in front of a firing squad. A hundred years old or not, we figured that in ten more seconds Tom would need his shoes nailing to the floor if we were going to keep him around for the main event. So Martin got all twitchy and decided to rush things along a bit. That was a mistake, too. Tom knew something was up as soon as the Muzak cut out. He sat there for a while looking back and about like a cornered badger, and holding onto his pint like it was a life-raft and the Tap was the Titanic. Then Howie spoke his piece; but with Martin rushing things, nobody had thought to adjust the volume on the speaker system, and Howie boomed into that little room like the Wrath of God. Also, Howie didn't much appreciate being rushed -- either that or nobody had been counting his scotch-and-waters because he really blew his lines. "Hi there, Uncle Tommy" he boomed, and his voice echoed along behind from adjacent rooms. "Boy, I'm surprised to see you still alive. I thought you'd snuffed it back in fifty seven."

Tommy turned grey; then white. He gripped his pint pot 'til his knuckles shone and we feared for the glass. Then he started to gibber. Nobody had thought to turn off the speakers, which hummed like a swarm of insane bees; and into this madhouse from the Snug Bar walked a semi-potted

Howie Delaney. He looked at Tommy, glanced about the room, looked back at Tommy, and said: "Hi there, Clarence. Where's Uncle Tommy?" There was a pause of about ten seconds which seemed like a week. The speakers hummed; Tommy gibbered; Howie smiled. Then the flashbulbs popped to catch forever the sight of Clarence Tommy Whoever Delaney sliding quietly under the table in a dead faint.

It was weeks before we got the facts of it. The RCMP out at Indian River found old Tom's bones in a shallow grave at the bottom of the yard at his old house. The bones had lain too long in the ground for the coroner to be sure of the cause of death, but the records showed that Tom had suffered bad heart trouble for months, and that agreed well enough with the tale Clarence was pouring out to the New Inverness mounties a few thousand miles away. He claimed that he'd found the old boy's corpse about a week after he died. Just followed his nose, you might say.

In true Clarence Michael Delaney fashion he'd decided to hit the road and leave the complications for somebody else to sort out; but in going through the old lad's possessions (looking for ready cash) Clarence had stumbled on the key to his future good fortune: an uncashed pension cheque straight from those lovely people in Ottawa. As good as cash in the bank, it was to Clarence after a little bit of initiative had been applied to the back of the cheque, that is. The lack of Tom's signature presented not the slightest moral dilemma to Clarence, and no more than the merest of technical difficulties. After a few days of practicing the signature, Clarence deposited the cheque to his Dad's account, and two days later he made his first withdrawal against it. Of course Clarence had to tell the neighbours something when they asked after Tom's health, so he told them that the old boy was off in Nova Scotia looking for a retirement home by the sea. By this time the old man's remains had been placed without ceremony and with little tenderness at the bottom of the yard.

Clarence was bright enough to work out just how fortunate it would be if his dad actually *were* to retire off somewhere where nobody would know him by sight and the rest, as they say in all of the best mystery stories, is history. Within the month Clarence had set up house in New Inverness, introducing himself to anybody who cared to inquire as Thomas Albert Delaney Esquire, late of Indian River and Her Majesties Government. Not that many cared enough to ask. It isn't that we're unneighborly out here in

New Inverness, you must understand; it's just that we tend to mind our own business unless invited to do otherwise.

A few letters arrived from Saskatchewan asking after Tommy, but when they went unanswered even this small trickle of interest dried up. After four days of questioning the mounties took Clarence away. We've no idea what they'll do to him, but you can bet that the Government is not too happy with him cashing thirty years of pension cheques to which he wasn't what you might call fully entitled.

Now, we haven't any great love of Ottawa down in these parts, I can tell you. If I were to sit you down and tell you what's wrong with the Government of this country it would be a long sit, and I don't know whether your sitting parts or your listening parts would have the worst of it by the time I was through. So you might say there's a fair amount of sympathy at the Tap for old Tommy (we can't rightly get used to calling the old man "Clarence" after thirty years of "Tom"). In a perverse sort of way, we're even rather proud of the way he fooled the government for all that time. And the rest of us, I suppose I should add. Mind you, you can't fool all the people all the time, and he didn't fool me. Not completely, at any rate. Like I said at the start of the business, I never did truly believe that Tom Delaney was a hundred years old.

* * *

CHICKEN SCOOP

My name is Sam Thomas and I'm a Newspaperman. I say that with a pride which is in no way diminished by the fact that I work for a small-town newspaper. The Innis Harbour 'Echo' (circulation 12,000) is a newspaper in every sense of the word, and its staff are professional journalists of the highest order. You think I'm kidding? I'm not. My boss is every bit as hard nosed as the toughest city desk editor on the biggest urban daily, and the fact that she is also my wife doesn't mean that she's likely to go easy on me. Anything other than top-notch copy earns me a lot of red ink and tough criticism. The fact that her father owns the paper doesn't make for any feather-bedding either.

Now, let's keep things in proportion; I'm not suggesting that my daily round is full of gory murders and political intrigue. We haven't had a murder in Innis Harbour since -- come to think of it, I don't believe there's *ever* been a murder here; and all of our National news comes off the wire. OK, to tell the truth, the only 'crime story' I've ever covered was a bicycle theft ring; that was seven years ago, and involved half a dozen twelve-year-olds. But that's not what I'm talking about. When I say I take pride in my work I'm talking about professional ethics and standards. When you read the 'Echo' you can be sure that the facts are facts, and that any editorial opinion is confined to the editorial page. There are several bigger newspapers in these parts that can't say as much, believe me.

Now all of this propaganda is just meant to convince you that the Chicken Scoop business wasn't some weird, belated April Fool's joke -- which a lot of people thought it was at the time. Some folks even accused us of making the whole thing up just to boost circulation. As though we'd do a thing like that!

It started at the Barnes' farm, and we didn't know about the chickens at first. John Barnes called out the local constabulary to report some odd goings on about his farm one night last July. He'd seen lights in his backyard, and heard strange buzzing and beeping noises; then when he'd got his shotgun and gone out to investigate, he'd found his old collie dog staggering about in the yard as though drunk.

Nothing was missing; nothing was broken. Sergeant Harry Wills – our local, resident mountie -- tramped about the property for a while looking for clues, but gave up in the end and wrote the thing off as some prank that likely backfired. School was out then, and some of our high school kids have the oddest sense of humour, you know. I suppose it's not that much different in the city on those long, hot summer nights.

Anyway, Harry called me to see if there might be a story in it, and I bought him a couple of beers to get the tale out of him. But it wasn't much of a tale and I didn't write it up. Not right then, anyway.

The second incident came three nights later, and since he got the call at about half after eleven, and knew I would still be up, Harry called to see if I'd like to go along with him. Why not, I thought; there was nothing on TV but re-runs and CBC documentaries. Well, this time it was no false alarm. Harry parked the cruiser about half a mile from the Barnes property and we walked in real quiet and stealthy like. Before we were even in sight of the farmhouse we heard the sound. It made the hair on the back of my neck stand on end, I'll tell you. It was more than a whistle; less than a scream. It pulsed, somehow; perhaps 'throbbed' would be a better word.

Now I make my living by words; by describing things to folks who weren't around to see them first hand. So I don't relish having to admit this, but I can't rightly describe the sound I heard that night. It was like nothing else I've ever heard, before or since. And I might as well admit this too; it near scared me witless. It seemed to get right in through my ears and just rattle round and about inside my head. And I don't suppose there will be any Pulitzer Prize for *that* tasty little bit of journalistic prose.

The rest of the evening was anticlimax. Barnes' dog was staggering round the yard when we got there, but there was no sign of any other living creature about the place except for the chickens, who were making a great squaukin and clucking commotion about something.

The following Saturday I was awakened by Harry Wills at half after two in the morning. He called me from his car. "I've solved the mystery, Sam" he told me. "I'm on my way to get them now. Do you want to be in on the arrest?"

“Solved? Who? Arrest? What?” I questioned Harry in my finest two a.m. newspaperman manner. “Chicken Rustlers,” he told me. “Chicken Rustlers?” I asked him. “Chicken Rustlers,” Harry repeated. And I could be there for the scoop. Wow! “Pick me up!” I told him.

There weren’t any rustlers; but they'd been there. *Someone* had been there. Or something. The chickens were gone. Barnes’ collie was asleep on the porch and couldn't be roused, and in the ground all around the yard were the most scary-looking great claw marks that you ever saw outside a science fiction ‘B’ movie. We couldn't see much, even using the powerful spotlight on top of Harry's cruiser, so we called it a night and agreed to meet up back at the farm the next day.

The claw marks looked even scarier by daylight. None of us had the slightest idea what on God’s Good Green earth made marks in the ground like that. The dog was staggering around the yard with a hangover. Seriously. Listen, I know the symptoms of a hangover, and the dog had them all, right down to the bloodshot eyes. We wandered around for a while, wondering who or what had taken the chickens; not to mention why. Given the price of poultry and the cost of gasoline at the time it just made no economic sense to drive all the way out here to steal a dozen or so birds and then have to ferry them back to the city.

While I was still scratching my head about this Harry said “Well, I’ll be damned!” and I looked round to see the chickens coming back. Some of them, anyway. And a sorrier bunch of birds you never did see. Talk about ruffled feathers! They were staggering and clucking like they'd just had the shock of their tiny chicken lives.

And of course they had.

The thing that puzzled and embarrassed Harry and me most was that, seeing as how our chicken rustlers were obviously totally inept (the birds were all back before we left) how had they gotten away from us so easily? There were no tracks into the farm, no tracks around the farm, and no tracks out. It was as though they could just become invisible and fly away whenever they wanted to. This is getting really eerie, I thought. Next thing you know we'll be getting reports of strange lights in the sky.

“There’s strange lights in the sky out at John Barnes’ place,” Harry Wills called me two nights later. “Want to come out?”

“Pick me up,” I told him.

It wasn’t John who’d called in; it was a neighbour about two miles down the road who’d seen the lights and thought there might be trouble afoot. But when Harry and I got there the lights - whatever they might have been - were gone. So were the chickens. Again. John and his missus were so sound asleep that Harry had to pound the door with his pistol butt to get them out of bed. The dog never did stir off the front porch and Harry had to check the animal’s breathing to make sure it still was.

Everything was very, very quiet in the yard. Too quiet, as they used to say in the old cowboy movies, just before some guy took an arrow in the chest. So we checked about.

We didn't find any chickens; but we found claw marks like somebody had just held a ploughing match in John's backyard.

Queerer and queerer it got in the next few weeks. The Barnes’ chickens came back all but one, and feathers in a nearby field suggested that some fox had been a bit luckier than our inept rustlers. Neither John nor Emmy Barnes had heard anything that night, and as it turned out that was the last chicken rustling attempt at the Barnes’ place. But it was the start of a whole God-damned epidemic around the other farms in the neighbourhood.

Throughout August you'd have thought it was the silly season at Innis Harbour. We had reports of mysterious noises in the night; lights in the sky; strange signals from boats out at the horizon; odd bursts of static on radios which weren’t even switched on. And then, naturally, the rumours started. It was a scouting party for an alien invasion. Russian or Martian; take your pick, both theories were around for a while. It was an ancient sea monster, awakened from its ten thousand year sleep, coming each night onto the land for a chicken snack (one hungry sea monster, I thought, judging from the percentage of chickens which repeatedly came back home the following morning!)

Now I'll admit I'm nobody's hero, but none of these theories bothered me especially. I'm not the type to have nightmares about sea monsters or

Martian invaders. I admit that the eerie noise that first night at the Barnes' farm shook me quite badly, but on the whole I wasn't particularly concerned or afraid at any time during the chicken rustling episode -- until Harry Wills clammed up. Now *that* scared me.

I hadn't heard from Harry for about a week, and I called him as much for social reasons as professional; Harry refused to come to the phone. This is where professional newspapering comes in. Harry Wills turning down a free lunch was something that set all my journalistic instincts quivering. So I called him again; and left another message. I tried to 'accidentally' bump into him, but could never seem to be in the right place at the right time. So when all else failed, I decided to follow him. Not even the ace reporters at those big Toronto newspapers have such exciting assignments.

I waited outside the police station in an old car I'd borrowed for the purpose, and when Harry drove out of town that Sunday evening I followed along right behind him. And got myself arrested. The mounties who had come up behind me (I hadn't even known they were there until they turned on their flashers) were very civil. They radioed Harry, who drove back to identify me and that's how I became part of the stakeout; and how I got my chicken scoop.

There must have been fifteen or twenty troopers under the trees at the Fredericks' farm that Sunday night. The Fredericks had been taken away to an Innis Harbour hotel (*the* Innis Harbour Hotel; there's only the one. If I'm going to boast about my factual accuracy, I'd better deliver it.)

At the first sound of the whistling we put in these special earplugs which the mounties had handed out, then all of a sudden this big black helicopter flew in over the sea and hovered above the farmhouse. The helicopter was blasting out a special signal, you see. An RCMP technician explained it to me, though I can't pretend I understood it all; or even much. The signal was mostly ultrasonic, and the frequencies were matched to brainwave patterns which -- well, as I said, I didn't understand all of it. But the upshot is, the sound put people to sleep. Dogs, too. But not chickens. While the helicopter hovered the chickens started such a squawking and a clucking, and then, one by one at first, then in twos and threes they flew up out of their coop and took off over the fields.

Then the ’copter came down. Two men dressed all in black hopped out and started stomping about the empty coop with their equipment beeping and booping and flashing in the dark (they were using metal detectors, I learned later). They were so interested in what they were doing that they didn't even notice the mounties (who were also dressed in black) until the cuffs were snapped on. The big black helicopter tried to take off right about then, but out of nowhere the sun seemed to switch on, and suddenly there were two giant twin-rotor copters which I hadn't even known were there, hovering up over the farm. The black helicopter’s pilot was no fool. He came back down and switched off his rotors.

I got the full tale out of Harry Wills that next evening, and he was so upset at having frozen me out that *he* bought the beer. Now *there’s* a story.

It was all related to the big Brinks robbery in Halifax the year before, you see. The boys who did that job high-tailed out of Halifax but took a wrong turn, and ended up out of gas on the coast road just outside Innis Harbour. Wouldn’t you know it? A brilliantly planned robbery it was, even the mounties admitted it. Then they got lost and ran out of gas! Well, as I’m sure you can well imagine, they weren't at all happy about sitting around with just under nine million dollars cash in the trunk; so they hopped out and buried the cash, still in the metal Brink’s boxes, under the chicken coop in the backyard of an abandoned farm. Except it wasn't abandoned; it just looked that way.

As you might have read in the Halifax papers or seen on the T.V., the whole gang was caught later the same week.

Now nine million missing bucks are worth spending a few dollars to locate, and that's what the whole chicken rustler episode had been all about. Apparently the crooks in jail weren’t able to be very specific about the location of the ‘abandoned’ farm. I don’t believe that they’d been thinking too clearly all that night. Anyway, the crooks on the outside, not knowing which particular chicken coop to dig under, had to check out the whole damned lot.

That ultrasonic transmitter thing, the source of the weird whistling-screaming noise, was intended to put folks into such a deep sleep that they wouldn't be disturbed by the portable digging gear that the men were using to unearth any metal that their detectors found. Their broadcasting gadgetry

was still very new -- the whole technology of the thing was still in the experimental stage -- and at first they had a lot of trouble getting the frequencies set just right. Hence drunken collie dogs which should have been, and eventually became, *sleeping* collie dogs.

When Harry Wills had called for help from Headquarters the experts there had very rapidly guessed what the whistles and lights added up to. That's when Harry got his orders not to breath a word of the stakeout plan to anybody in Innis Harbour, including newspaper reporters. *Especially* newspaper reporters. By then, of course, the bad guys had checked out just about every back yard chicken coop in the area. In fact if they'd drawn a blank at the Fredericks, the next farm on their agenda was ours.

It fits. We don't farm our property any more; and you could be forgiven for thinking it was abandoned. Especially if you'd driven by at night, while we were away on holiday last summer.

Now there aren't any chickens in our chicken coop. Haven't been for more than five years. My wife and I have been thinking about tearing the old thing down and putting in a small flower garden where the coop now sits. In fact, the more I think of it, the more the idea appeals to me. I think I'll go out there this afternoon and try a spot of experimental digging. You never can tell, there may just be a front page story buried out there, right in my own back yard.

Remember; you read it here first.

* * *

WIRED

Despite assurances, I thought when I closed my eyes that it would be for the last time. The surgeon-technicians said they'd done it a thousand times, and maybe so; but never on anything like me! I knew of the humanated factories, of course, and they've been humanating trucks and aircraft since the middle of the twenty first century. But never anything quite like me!

Most people think that humanation is a recent development, but it has its roots way back in history. They used computer controlled mechanical parts to repair damaged people as far back as the twenty first century. Even further, for some of the simple experiments. It started with mechanical hearts, which is understandable; I mean, what is the heart but a pump? Way back in nineteen something that was. By 2050 they had perfected limb replacements – that was the year human athletes picketed the Olympic Games, complaining that it was unfair to make natural human beings compete against mechanically advantaged persons. I saw their point. That was the year Peter Fynch set the 100 meter dash record at three point seven seconds, and the high jump at eighteen and a half feet. Unfortunately, he never did fully recover from the landing, even after they gave him another new set of legs.

Things really changed in 2073, when Jon Pringle was so badly mangled in an industrial accident that he needed an entire new body. There was damage to the skull, too, so they gave him a new one of stainless steel. The question of the year was "What is Jon Pringle?" Was he a human being with extensive electro-mechanical prostheses, or was he a machine, controlled by a human brain? Before anyone came up with a satisfactory answer, the boys at MIT further complicated the issue by wiring the earthly remains of Albert Ratcliffe into a '73 Ford. MIT donated the Ford to Ratcliffe's family; the last I heard Al was still in fine shape driving his great great grandchildren around. He's worn out five motors by now, and God alone knows how many mufflers he's gone through.

The principle for all these things is the same, all based on the 2044 patents for nerve connection, which made it possible to splice organic nerve tissue to electrical connections and have nerve impulses converted to electronic signals -- which can then operate various bits of machinery. This

allowed surgeon-technicians to give Peter Fynch his super-legs, and turn Al Ratcliffe's living brain into the control console for a Ford Pickup.

In Al's case, nerves which had instructed his feet to move were reconnected to the throttle and brake controls. By pushing his imaginary right foot to the floor, Al sends a nerve impulse to accelerate. Left applies the brakes. By turning his long-gone shoulders, he steers the car around corners. Other nerves open and close doorlocks; find a soft music station on the car stereo; switch on the air when his 'skin' feels too warm. Simple, really. But then Al was a very early model.

The first humanated factory appeared in 2108 in a small town in eastern Panamerica. It was also the first time that humanation had been requested by the donor rather than as the aftermath of some dreadful accident or illness. Simon Rollins, great grandson of the founder of Rollins' Forest Products, was sound in mind and body when he asked the surgeon-technicians to humanate him into his own factory. There was a lot of legal wrangling, but the humanated Rollins' Plant swallowed its first load of logs in February, 2108. I say *swallowed*, because the nerves which had operated Simon's mouth now controlled the input process to the plant. Brain impulses which had taken care of Simon's digestion now controlled, logically enough, the huge chemical pulp digesters in the factory. I won't dwell on the output control, but huge pipes poured a steady supply of liquid pulp to the waiting tankers. A large office, equipped with cameras, microphones, display screens and speakers allowed Simon to communicate with plant personnel and, when they bothered to drop by, family members. I'm told that he still reads the morning papers and plays a decent game of checkers.

So maybe I shouldn't have been surprised by what they did to me. When they consulted me, on the operating table, there was not much choice. The fire had burned most of my body clear away, and it's only thanks to my naturally thick skull that there was enough of me left to wire up to anything at all. Well the surgeon-techs were very good. They offered me a full replacement body, a super slim-line 2235 model -- but then suggested a very interesting alternative. I thought it over for a few minutes, and said "Yes!"

I opened my eyes to see the planet Earth hanging in space below me. There was a moment of vertigo – they'd warned me about that – and then the majesty of the scene sank in. I'm in stationary orbit, two hundred miles

above Earth; I can change that, should I need to, with rocket thrusters connected to nerves which once wiggled my toes. I am surrounded by huge chunks of rock towed back from the asteroid belt by humanated freighters – monstrous rocket ships, built expressly for that purpose. I talk to them on VHF radio, and I've made a number of good friends.

When I feel hungry, I reach for a hunk of asteroid. My right arm is seven hundred meters long. I put the rock into my mouth and chew. The rock is broken up into small pieces and passed through my 'digestive tract'; I've no idea how it works; but then I never knew much about the biological one, either. I know that my new one is a lot more efficient than my old one; the new one is nuclear powered. We won't go into the waste disposal process, except to say that the output system is rigged to fire the waste in a calculated trajectory which will eventually drop it into the sun.

I spit out the refined metal. It floats around me in shiny little spheres, each one a meter in diameter. I pick them up and throw them to earth. Yes, *throw* them. I am a *spectacularly* good shot. I admit that the practice shots were a bit less than accurate, but fortunately the one that slipped in my 'fingers' ended up in the Gobi desert. I can now drop them into the Pacific Ocean within a half kilometer of the pickup point, where the pure metal is retrieved and sent off for end-use processing.

Well I'd love to stop and chat all day, but Ernest just called on our special frequency to say he's on his way back from the belt with a load of ore for urgent processing. He's less than five thousand kilometers away, and braking hard. He'll be here in ten minutes, and there's a special override on this order, which means I'll start processing it right away.

Just as well. I'm starving. A whole load of iron-bearing ore! All for me! The entire thirty thousand tons of it! Yum, yum, yum! Can't you just taste it!

* * *

REDCAP

Life can be downright peculiar at times, don't you think? Oh, I know I'm not saying anything new or startling; it's just that every time I start to think I've seen and heard it all, something seems to come up to prove that I can't ever take *anything* for granted. What do I mean by that? Well the best way I know to explain myself is to tell you the whole story, and the best way to tell a story is to start at the beginning; and it began a long, long time ago.

It was coming up Christmas, 1958. I'd just turned eighteen years old, and I'd been out of work for most of that year, so I'd jumped at the chance to make a few dollars working at Ottawa's Train Station, helping out with the Christmas rush of mail. The work wasn't much, but then you might say it fitted my skills, so I wasn't complaining. Well, you don't get any guarantees in this life; that's always been my motto. You make the most of the chances you get, and whining about things was never the way to make friends or fortunes.

So there I was lugging sacks of her Majesty's Royal Mail from platform one to platform three and piling them into the van for Toronto and points west, when Murray gave me a nudge. Murray was a regular Redcap, but a good sort. He treated us casual workers like real people, which is more than I can say for most of the other regulars. Some of them wouldn't talk to us at all. "What do you suppose *he's* up to then?" Murray asked me in a loud whisper, looking over his shoulder in the direction of platform two. Well, I saw nothing but a young lad waiting to meet his girl off the six thirty from Montreal, so I said as much to Murray and got back to work. Murray used to read a lot of those spy books, and he was always finding mysteries where there weren't any and spotting Russian spies swapping information (secret train schedules?) so I thought nothing of it. Not right then.

The next time I noticed the boy was just after my tea break at seven, and I *did* think it was a bit funny then, since the six thirty had come and gone; but then I thought he was probably just a train fan who liked breathing in all of that fine steam and smoke from the engines. I had no trouble believing that since I've always been a bit that way inclined myself, so I let it be and thought no more of the young chap on platform two until the eight o'clock came steaming in an hour later.

The eight o'clock was the Trans-Canada. Five days she'd been coming across the vast cold country, and she was full of all manner of Canadians from here to there. Just as the big engine came puffing in, right at that split second before it steamed in between me and platform two, I saw a quick flash of red as the boy pulled something from his back pocket. That's a fancy handkerchief, I thought. But then I recognized the red object from the photo it had left on the back of my eye. It wasn't a handkerchief at all. It was a red cap.

I didn't need Murray to help me figure out there was something fishy going on, but I couldn't straight away figure out why the boy should want to dress up like a porter. Perhaps he's just playing at being grown up, I thought at first - I was very young myself, remember, and still ready to look for the best in folks. But that idea just didn't sit right, somehow.

Well I spent a few minutes scratching my head over the mystery of the thing, and I eventually reached the conclusion that whatever the boy was up to, it was nothing good. So I determined right there and then that it was up to me to put a stop to it. Off I went at a gallop down the ramp and under the lines, then up the stairs, puffing out steam to rival the great snorting engine sitting out on the rails. But by the time I came puffing and grunting up onto platform two there was no sign of the lad with the fake red cap.

After another minute or so my feet sort of took over my thinking processes, and I was running back down into the tunnel before I'd any clear idea where I was running to or what I intended to do when I got there. Then I skidded round the corner at about forty miles an hour and hit Murray head on. He was coming the other way to see what I'd gone tearing off after, and we both went down in a tangle of arms and whistles. I scrambled back to my feet and took off again at full throttle, but I got to the main entrance just in time to see my bogus Redcap jump into an old Ford and go chugging off along Wellington Street, past the Parliament Buildings in all their snow covered glory.

I stood for a few minutes, getting my breath back. I thought it possible that the boy had seen me take off after him, and had been scared away from whatever evil he'd been plotting. I decided that such was quite likely the case, and turned to go back to work, wondering how I was going to explain to the foreman just why I'd gone chasing off in the first place.

Well it took more of an explanation than I was capable of giving, and I lost an hour's pay for it; so when Murray came up ten minutes later and asked me to come with him up to the front lobby I wasn't about to take a chance on losing another dollar eighty five.

"Come on," he said, tugging at my sleeve. "You've got to see this. I think it explains what your fake Redcap's been up to." Well, I was just intrigued enough to risk the loss of another hour's pay, so I took off after Murray towards the front lobby.

As we came up the old stone stairs I could hear a hell of a racket coming from over by the tea-rooms, and it didn't take me more than a couple of seconds to spot the centre of all the commotion. She stood about four feet eight, weighed perhaps seventy five pounds, and looked to be maybe a hundred years old; but if you closed your eyes and just listened you wouldn't know whether you were hearing a mountain lion fight or a ward full of newborn babies an hour overdue for feeding.

When we got near enough to make out the words I put two and two together quickly, and I suddenly knew why my fake porter had waited through several train arrivals before putting on his fake porter's cap. He'd been choosing his prey; waiting for just the right combination of age, infirmity and gullibility. I knew, too, that I'd been wrong in thinking I'd scared him off before he'd had a chance to do his business.

The old lady had come right across the country, all the way from Victoria, to spend Christmas with her daughter, her grand-daughter and her brand-new great-grand-daughter. I supposed that there were some males in the family somewhere but apparently they didn't figure prominently in her scheme of things. She'd arrived here, three thousand miles from home, tired, lost, and confused. Then, as though in answer to an unspoken prayer, a nice young Redcap arrived to help her out of the train and carry her case up to the lobby and call a taxi for her. He'd told her to come up at her own speed; there was no need to hurry, because he'd hold the cab; but he'd better just run on ahead before all the taxis were taken.

But when she'd got to the top of the stairs - what do you know! No Redcap; no suitcase. Merry Christmas, Grannie! Welcome to the Nation's Capital.

The Station manager arrived about the same time Murray and I came up, and a couple of Redcaps took the old dear into the tea rooms to sit her down to a steaming cup of tea - the traditional British-Canadian reaction to disasters of all kinds. Murray tried to calm her down by pointing out how the thief would probably dump her suitcase as soon as he found out that his prize was no more than a case full of old ladies' unmentionables In all likelihood the cops would have it back to her in good time for Christmas. Yet far from calming the old woman this comment seemed to provoke a new wave of howling. In between sobs she explained that between her whalebone corsets and her lavender bath salts she'd stuffed her complete life savings, which she'd been bringing to her daughter for safekeeping. Over five hundred dollars. In used bills. Small bills. Eminently spendable bills.

Had he known, somehow, how to choose just such a target? Where do you go to learn a trade like that?

It was then that Murray whispered in my ear that perhaps somebody should start up a collection, so I borrowed his red cap and I started to pass it around. I put in two bits to get it going, but within ten minutes I felt so mean that I threw in another quarter. People were dropping in folding money. Big folding money. One fellow in a heavy racoon coat dropped in a twenty dollar bill. Tens were everywhere. I turned round to see a second hat making the rounds in the tea-room and another starting up outside. Perhaps the Redcaps felt a bit guilty that none of them had spotted the fake in their midst, not even when he came up through the barrier. So they were making up for their guilt by carrying their hats about to everybody in the station that night.

We collected six hundred dollars. I'd never seen so much money. It made me think maybe there *was* a Santa Claus after all.

The look on the old lady's face as Murray took her off to find a cab made all our efforts worthwhile. I've got to say that we all left the station feeling warm that night, even though it was twenty below zero on Parliament Hill.

As for me, I was the man of the hour. I never experienced so much back-slapping and hand shaking, not before and not since that night. I was the only one who'd spotted the fake, you see. I'd given my best shot to catching him, and when that failed it was me who started the hat going round

that replaced the old dear's life savings with a little Christmas bonus thrown in. I was a genuine hero; the man-of-the-moment. Or so I thought.

Murray and I kept in touch over the years. Christmas cards with a note inside and the occasional photo of growing families; that sort of thing. I moved around quite a bit before I finally settled down - in Ottawa, of all places. Murray and his family moved once or twice, then settled in Dundas, Ontario. I last saw him about a year ago. He was bed-ridden and in failing health. He told me something. A confession, it was; and an apology, of sorts.

"When you took off after Eddy at the station back then I thought it was the end" he told me. "If I hadn't sandbagged you up in the underpass you'd have ruined the whole thing." "The old lad's out of his head and rambling," I thought. But he wasn't. Over the next hour I got the whole story.

The "old lady" had been Lily Watkins, star of stage, screen and railway station. She was about thirty five at that time. The fake Redcap was Lily's son, Eddy, who must have been fifteen or sixteen back in 1958, but big for his age.

Murray was the local man. He had two main tasks; to prompt someone to start the hat around if nobody came up with the idea spontaneously; and to make sure that the Trans-Canada was held up long enough for a certain old lady to leave the station and a certain young one to get back aboard. For this he got five percent of the take, as did each of the other locals - one for each stop on the line. Five percent of six hundred is thirty bucks. I made eighteen dollars and fifty cents that day for ten hours hard labour.

Lil Watkins' cut was fifty percent of the take, or $300 from the Ottawa stop alone. If you take Ottawa as average, then with twelve stops along the line Lil would have taken home over three and a half thousand dollars for Christmas 1958 – a working man’s annual wage back then. Believe me, that would have made for a very jolly holiday.

I couldn't get mad at Murray; not after nearly forty years had blunted the memory. But something funny struck me. A memory of Murray nudging my arm, and asking me in a loud aside what I thought the young boy was up to on platform two.

"You tipped me to him, Murray, you old son of a gun," I told him. "Why'd you do that, if you were in on the take?"

"Never did like that Eddy," he said. "Conceited son of a bitch, he was. I was half hoping you'd tumble the bugger."

"You'd have been out thirty bucks" I told him.

"Would have been worth every penny."

Murray Watkins died last Christmas Eve. There was no need for tears. Murray was over eighty and he'd had a good life. He is survived by his wife Lily and his son Edward.

* * *

GOLD RIVER

I stepped out of the Airport terminal into a blast of wind-driven rain, a cold, swirling Nova Scotia drizzle which pried into the smallest gaps in my clothing and cut like a blade where it reached unprotected skin. I pulled my collar tight and jogged quickly to my rental car. By the time I'd started the engine heavy raindrops were splattering on the windscreen, and I pushed buttons at random until I found the wiper and de-mist switches.

The drive to Gold River took an hour. I pulled into the long driveway and parked next to Dad's old Ford 150, which glistened in the rain, making it look much newer than it really was. One of the front tires was flat.

I'd come to Gold River in response to a summons, though I doubted that Dad had intended to send one, nor did he realise that he had done so. At the end of an ordinary letter, full of the details of his seventy-second birthday, he'd added: 'If you could come to Gold River for a short visit I'd be very grateful. Sometime soon would be best.' It wasn't the 'sometime soon' that rang alarm bells, it was the 'very grateful'. I couldn't recall him ever using the word 'grateful' before.

We sat opposite each other in his small living room and neither of us knew what to say. I sat in the corner chair which had been my mother's and before that – when I was very young – my Grandmother's. Dad sat on the end of the sofa which had never been other than his. We stared at the television, which was always on.

"You've a flat tire on the truck," I said. "Driver side, front."

"Aha."

On the TV screen a large black dog was sniffing its way towards a fugitive hiding among stacks of pine planks in a lumber yard. The dog found its quarry, leaped at the man and grabbed him by the right arm, which was thickly padded. At a command from the trainer the dog released his captive and trotted obediently to heel. "It was good of you to come," Dad said, not taking his eyes from the set. "I know how busy you are at your printing factory."

"Oh, it'll run well enough without me for a little while. Your grandson handles most of the day-to-day stuff these days anyway."

"Aye, he's a good lad, young Bob. A good mind, he has. Your Mom and me, we were always very proud of you, you know; the way you'd got ahead, starting from nothing."

This was not true. It was only recently that he had recognized my climb from the shop floor of a small Toronto company to become the owner-manager of a large, successful printing plant. My father had worked all of his adult life at whatever odd jobs came his way. We had lived day-to-day, always moving towards an uncertain future, never knowing whether we would be able to pay the bills at the end of the month. I was sure that the stress of living this way had played some part in bringing about my mother's untimely death.

Dad and I had been uneasy with each other since I had been a small child. I had never known what he expected from me; never known how to please him. My earliest memories were of a distant, surly man, of whom I was always a little afraid. Throughout my teenage years he had been angry almost all the time, holding onto himself tightly against an inner rage which was directed against me, although I never knew exactly what I'd done wrong. My wife, Liz, a kitchen-sink psychologist, believes that my father was always jealous of me; at first because as an only child my mother's love and attention were focussed on me; later because my achievements placed his own small successes in a very poor light.

"Dad, are you well? You look tired."

"I've had a bit of a chest cold."

"Yes, you wrote me about that. Doctor McMillan sent you to Halifax for X-rays, didn't he? That's all O.K. now though, you said in your letter."

"Yes, it cleared up."

"Then why did you ask me to come out here?"

"*Do I have to have a special reason to want to see my son?*" He was instantly on the attack. The undercurrent of anger, of restrained violence

which had always been a part of him, was still there, just buried a little deeper than it had been. "You know damn well I can't be affording the cost of a ticket to Toronto; so how else am I going to get to see you then?"

He glared at me, but I would not rise to this bait. "Dad," I said quietly, "You know very well that there's a ticket waiting for you at Halifax Airport any time you want to come down for a visit. All you need to do is pick up the phone."

Deprived of combat he lapsed again into a sullen silence. On the television a plump Beagle wagged its tail in quick, small circles as it waddled between pieces of luggage at the side of an airport carousel. The dog stopped at a large grey suitcase and began to bark.

"I'm dying, John."

"Surely not," I said. "You're just tired, and a bit depressed. It's only a year since Mom died, and you don't get over a thing like that easily. Then this damned weather would depress a Saint! Just three more weeks and March will be gone. Everything will look different in the spring. Better." A proclamation of my father's impending death was not a new thing. Six months earlier I'd driven through the night to Gold River after he phoned to say that he'd been diagnosed with Emphysema and had only a few weeks to live. These false alarms were becoming more frequent lately.

"There's a spot on my left lung. They want to do some more tests, but they say it doesn't look good. The doctors noticed the spot when I got my X-rays."

"A small spot is nothing these days," I lied to him. "You go into the hospital one morning and you're out next day. They may do some radiation later, just to make sure. You'll be good for another ten years at least."

"I'm not having it treated."

"I don't understand."

"I watched your Mother die, son. I'm not strong like her; not brave like her; I can't go through what she did."

"Mom's cancer was well advanced by the time she got it diagnosed, Dad. She left it too late for treatment. It won't be like that for you."

"My mind's made up. McMillan said there won't be much pain, he's promised me that. You might not understand this, John, but I'm seventy two this year and I don't *want* ten more years, not like I am now. The thought frightens me more than this thing on my lung! It's just that……."

He paused, reluctant to speak. I let the words hang in the air for several seconds. I wanted to feel sorry for this tired, weak, lonely old man, but it wasn't in my heart to do so. We'd had a loveless relationship for fifty years, and it was only in the last ten that we had even become civil to each other. I found it inconceivable now that at such a late date we could bring love into the equation. I had promised Mom that I would not neglect him; that I would support him where I could, but I could manage little more than these basic kindnesses.

"What is it, Dad? Is there anything I can do?"

"I….. I'm scared, John. I'm afraid of dying. Not the cancer; not *just* the cancer. I've been over that so many times in my head that I'm getting used to the idea; It's not that."

"What, then?" I knew that I sounded callous; uncaring; cruel, even. He didn't seem to notice.

"I'm afraid of what comes next. I'm afraid to face my judgment."

I could not believe that he was being serious, remembering his often outspoken and vitriolic comments about the practices, beliefs and habits of local Churchgoers, but his face bore no hint of humour. He had never been able to stand humour directed at himself, and I knew that to laugh now would destroy him. "I didn't think you believed in that stuff," I told him, straight-faced, "You haven't started going to church, have you?"

"Well, no," he said. "I did consider it, though."

I looked at him then and saw that he was crying. A single tear trickled down his cheek leaving a shiny trail. I knew that he sought comfort from me; a few words of reassurance, of compassion. He wanted me to say

"everything will be alright." I sat, silent, doing none of those things. He looked away from me, stood up and walked to the kitchen.

"Would you like some tea, or are you still a coffee drinker, John?'

"Tea will be fine, Dad, thanks."

I followed him into the kitchen where he was stooped over the electric kettle. He seemed to be having trouble putting the small two-pronged plug into the duplex by the stove, and I saw that tears were flowing so fast that they blurred his vision. Fat drops fell from his cheeks onto the fake-marble countertop. He had not noticed that I'd entered the kitchen and I turned to leave, not wanting him to know that I had witnessed his loss of self control. I stepped through the door into the living room……..

……*and in that instant everything changed*. In the kitchen of the house which my father had built half a century ago for his new family, *he* became the frightened child, needing to be held and comforted, protected from the cruel realities of life, while I was the adult, watching the tears flow, knowing what was required of me but utterly unable to give it. Suddenly, finally, I knew that he had not been distant, uncaring. He had not ignored my achievements; he'd simply been unable to acknowledge them. The man was totally unable to express his feelings. How could I not have seen this before? My father was simply a product of his upbringing, as we all are. That which I had always craved from my father was never in him to give. Neither was it within me

I forced myself to walk back to him. I stood close behind him and said: "Dad!" He turned to face me and I stepped forward, put my arms about him and pulled him to me. I was surprised by the boniness of his shoulders, the frailness of his frame. He had lost a lot of weight during the past year.

He stiffened in my embrace, his arms by his sides, his neck rigid. I could sense his extreme discomfort, and I let him go. I turned again and walked back to the living room. I heard him moving items in the cupboard, looking for tea and sugar. I heard the refrigerator door open and close as he brought out the milk.

I knew that apart from whatever embraces he might have shared with my mother in secret, dark, private places, nobody had ever hugged my father before.

The next morning the rain had stopped and we walked for a while along trails through neighbours' woodlots. We spoke only of trivial things; the high cost of gasoline; whether he would take a new puppy from the litter of a friend's Shepherd bitch.

That afternoon we shook hands, and I left him standing beside the pickup truck. I had offered to help him change the tire, but he had been indifferent and in the end I'd dropped the subject. I saw him last in the rear-view mirror of my rented Cavalier, one hand raised in a farewell salute. I turned left onto the highway and did not look back as I left Gold River.

On the following Wednesday morning Reg McMillan called at nine thirty and caught me on the way out of the door.

"John, this is Doctor McMillan out in Gold River."

"Good morning Doctor. Is it about Dad? Is he ill?"

"I'm afraid he's gone, John."

"Gone where?" I asked, stupidly.

"He died, John. He passed away during the night. The VON nurse visited early this morning and when she got no answer at the door she called the RCMP. They found him in bed, in his night clothes. Everything suggests that he died peacefully in his sleep."

"But why, Doctor McMillan? I mean, of what? Surely not the cancer?"

"No, no. There will have to be an autopsy, but the cancer was in a very early stage. We were lucky it showed up when your Dad got his recent X-rays, since there wouldn't have been any symptoms for months. The prognosis for a full recovery was excellent, but your father ……well, I'm sure you know, he was reluctant to accept treatment."

"Then if not the cancer, what?"

"You're going to find my answer very strange. I think that your father found his 'off switch' and pushed it. He didn't *want* to live. Oh, I was working on him. I'd have convinced him to accept treatment in the end;. But he didn't give me that chance. He found a way to die, and he took it."

"Doctor, people can't just 'switch off'."

"Oh, they can, John; yes indeed they can. And they do; more often than you might believe. Your father saw nothing ahead of him but days of drudgery and pain. He'd had enough. If I thought I could get away with it I'd write 'tired of life' where it asks for 'cause of death' on the certificate. The autopsy will probably show that his heart stopped, and they'll put that as the reason. Heart failure. But there was nothing much wrong with your father's heart. I presume you'll be coming down for the funeral."

"Of course."

"We'll speak then."

"Thank you, Doctor. Thanks for calling."

I told Liz what had happened and asked her to book our tickets. I kissed her on the cheek and turned to leave.

"Where are you going, John?"

"I'm going over to Bob and Alison's house. I'm going to hug my son."

"Bob will have left for work already….. you're going to do *what*?"

"You heard me. I'll stop by the office, then, and hug him there. I'm going to tell him that I love him."

"He'll think you've gone insane."

"He'll have to get used to it. After that I'm going to Alison's to hug my grandsons. I'll probably hug Alison, too." A thought struck me. "She won't think I'm coming on to her, will she, Liz?"

"You're her fifty year old father-in-law, John. Alison will hug you back. She'd have hugged you half to death already if she didn't think you'd bite her nose off for trying."

"Yes," I said, sadly. "I know. But she'll have to get used to it, too."

"Can I at least call and warn them?"

"No. Let it be a surprise."

I closed the door behind me. My grandfather had been a hard man who believed that any show of emotion or affection was a sign of weakness. He had learned that from his father, back for generations, probably forever. He taught my father, and, without even knowing he was doing it, my father taught me. And had I taught my son? I wondered whether Bob ever hugged his boys and told them that he loved them.

It was time to break the pattern, if it wasn't already too late; at the very least I had to ensure that the cycle ended with my grandsons. It wouldn't be easy, it wouldn't be swift, and I wasn't even certain that I knew how to go about it or that I was capable of doing what needed to be done. But I was ready to try. I *had* to try. I started the car.

* * *

THE DOG CATCHER of INNIS HARBOUR

If you come to Innis Harbour on foot you'll likely follow the coast road, and if you've the time you could come by a public footpath that brings you down to the same place as the road in the end, but by way of meadows alive with cornflower, and hedges gone wild with lupin and dog rose. It's a pleasant little town; a quiet place, mostly; not at all what you'd imagine as the setting for a tale of crazed packs of hunting dogs stalking the local kiddies. Well, perhaps I'm exaggerating just a little.

It's not a common thing, this business of wild dogs bothering local farmers, but it does happen from time to time. Mostly the dogs are city pets dumped by owners who want to be rid of their animals but haven't the sense or the stomach to do the right thing. They have visions of their unwanted pet, hand fed and pampered all its life, learning how to survive in the wild. Fact is, Rover usually ends up dying slowly and painfully -- unless he runs foul of some farmer who ends things more humanely with a shotgun blast.

But some make it; more's the pity. A dog that's dropped in the country young enough and healthy enough can sometimes survive. And dogs have a natural instinct to hunt in groups; if two survivors come together they can hunt more than twice as effectively as one. A pack of three gets serious. And if one of the pack is a female, we're talking a whole different kind of trouble.

In the summer of 2002 the township found itself stuck with a good sized dog pack roaming loose around neighbouring farms – five, maybe six dogs, by best reports. It wasn't thought to be a serious problem at first, but then Nova Scotians don't usually wait for things to get out of hand before they go off looking for answers. So right about this point the Innis Harbour folks naturally turned to Howard Bean. Howie was the township's bylaw enforcement officer -- dog catcher, that is, appointed three years previous by the Regional Municipality up in Halifax.

Between 1999 and 2002 Howie hadn't done a lot for the township, mostly because there hadn't been a lot to do. In some ways a dog catcher is like the sheriff back in the old wild west; most of the time folks wonder if he's worth his paycheque. His work seems to involve no more than polishing his badge and his six shooter and locking up the town drunk on

Saturday night. Then one day the James gang rides into town, and suddenly it's a whole different kind of ballgame.

When the canine version of the James gang rode into Innis Harbour, Howie Bean was probably thinking right along these lines, though we didn't know it at the time. At first nobody even thought to talk to Howie about the problem. Folks just naturally assumed, we have a dog problem, we have a dog catcher, the one just cancels out the other. And when folks saw Howie saddling up his trusty mount (a '97 Ford pickup), strapping on his six shooter (a 303 hunting rifle with telescopic sights) and heading out to round up the bad guys well, folks just kind of shrugged and thought, that's the end of the dog problem at Innis Harbour.

It wasn't.

I think the word I'm looking for is "inept". Howie never seemed to be able to be where the dogs were. He was very good at going where the dogs had *been*, but that didn't accomplish an awful lot. Now and then he got off a shot at a retreating tail, but if he did any real damage only the dogs knew about it. So after a few weeks of this business the Mayor decided to call in Howie for a little chat.

In a few words the mayor politely asked Howie just what the hell he was doing about the situation. In a few words, Howie explained that he wasn't doing much. Councillor Harry Clay, who was in the Mayor's office at the time, farms just outside the township, and he'd had a cow miscarry due to dog pack harassment the week previous. He asked Howie a lot less politely than the mayor, and in even fewer words, just when we could all expect to see a few dog pelts tacked up on the door of Howie's shed. Howie admitted as how he didn't know.

"Don't you have *any* ideas, Mr. Bean?" the mayor asked.

"Maybe we could put out some poisoned Alpo?" said Howie.

My law practice takes me to Halifax quite often. A lot of the work has some tie-in with Regional Government, and over the years I've got to know the people involved quite well. The bureaucrats, that is. The politicians come and go. I was having lunch with George Matlock from the Fisheries Department one Wednesday while the dog business was going on,

and George was holding forth in defence of some recent screwup made by some minor official in his department. Half in jest, I said that the man sounded "about as competent as the Innis Harbour dog catcher." George raised an eyebrow, so I explained. Then I forgot it. But George didn't. It must have stung him for some reason, because a week later, at the end of a business meeting, he brought the subject back up.

"You know, Angus, I was talking to a friend of mine about your dog catcher, and he says it just can't be. He was on the board that selected the man. A Mr. Bean, isn't it? Well the selection committee unanimously agreed that he was ideally qualified for the job. A degree in veterinary science, three summers trapping experience, in perfect physical shape and a crack shot. He'd won awards for marksmanship, apparently. I can't for the life of me see what you people up there are complaining about."

It wasn't an important point, and I shrugged it off. But then driving home I thought it over and began to suspect that something about this entire episode smelled more fishy than doggie. I turned the car about and drove back to Halifax. With George's help, I got access to Howie Bean's personnel file, and made a couple of photocopies. One point in particular jumped right out at me.

I wasn't sure exactly how to handle it at first, but on thinking it over I decided that Bean was a decent enough chap, despite what I'd found out, and deserved a break. So I called him up and invited him to drop by my office. He didn't want to come at first, but changed his mind fast enough when I explained what it was about.

"It's concerning your interview in Halifax, Mr. Bean" I told him the next morning.

"That was a long time ago, Mr. MacIntyre" he said..

"Remember it at all, do you?" I asked him. He nodded.

"Well" I said, "That's strange, seeing as how you weren't even there, Mr. Bean."

"I don't know what you're referring to Mr. Macintyre" he said, but his eyes said he knew alright.

"Well," I told him, "The man who took that interview was missing the little finger on his left hand." I dropped the photocopy of Bean's file on the table between us. The section on distinguishing features' was underlined in red. "When did you grow back your pinky, Mr. Bean?"

He had the grace to smile.

I offered Bean a week's notice before reporting what I knew to the Personnel people in Halifax. I'd heard of such scams before; renting somebody to take an exam in your name, or, as in this case, sit a selection board. Naturally it only works where the appointment is to a remote location with no chance of the appointee bumping into the folks who hired him. I wondered if there was any chance of tracking down the fellow who'd sat the board for Bean, and decided that there probably wasn't. I wondered how many other positions across the country this "perfectly qualified candidate" had landed for his clients. I wondered what fee he charged. I wondered how many well qualified candidates he'd beaten out, to see the job given to inept twits like Bean. I stopped wondering.

Howard Bean packed his belongings that Thursday evening, and loaded his pickup to leave the following morning. He drove slowly through Innis Harbour at first light. On his way through the town Howie saw the dog pack. The dogs had been foraging nearer and nearer to the town, becoming ever more confident with each foray. Well, Howie thought, it's somebody else's problem now. But as he pulled away he caught a flurry of activity in his rear-view mirror. A small terrier ran out of a nearby yard and began yapping loudly at the dog pack. One of the dogs turned and bared its teeth at the challenger. The terrier didn't hesitate. Suddenly there was total chaos in the dirt by the side of the road. A second dog joined in the fray, and a third. The rest of the pack looked on indifferently.

Howie reached back for the rifle that wasn't there. From the same yard, two small children ran onto the highway, shouting to their pet: "Ginger, Ginger. Stop fighting!" With no more hesitation than the little terrier had shown, the two young boys threw themselves into the melee. And the dog pack turned on them as one.

Howie didn't pause to think. He was out of the cab and into the swirling mess before he was consciously aware of what he was doing. He

picked up dogs and hurled them bodily away. By the time the noise of sirens frightened the pack away there wasn't much of a pack left, and by the end of that afternoon a crew of sharpshooters from local farmers and fishermen had disposed of the remnants.

Howie and the two children were taken to hospital, badly mauled.

I didn't hear anything of the battle until much later, and by the time I heard of it I'd already mailed off a letter to Halifax with the details of my conversation with Howie. It was about a week later that the Director of Personnel called the Mayor of Innis Harbour to say that they'd be sending out a new dog catcher for the town. Of course, the Director got himself an earful. There was no way on God's green earth that the town of Innis Harbour was about to let go of the best damned dog catcher anyplace south of the North Pole.

"But," said the director, "Howard Bean is a fake. We've got the proof. The little finger of his left hand....."

".....is missing," said the mayor. "We know that. Doesn't bother us, and it shouldn't bother you. Now you just leave our dog catcher alone. There's enough things wrong with Regional Government; you don't need to waste time meddling with things that don't need fixing."

Of course, I got an earful, too, but when I found out the details I swallowed my pride and took my licks with as good a grace as I could muster. I admitted as how I must have been mistaken on the matter of identifying features.

You see, it seems that one of the dogs got in a lucky bite during the fray, and bit off a little souvenir of Howie Bean. And when Howie's stitches come out, why, he'll meet the description in his personnel file perfectly.

* * *

FAREWELL SPEECH

I got off the bus by the library on Churchill Avenue this morning and walked the rest of the way. I knew that I would be at least twenty minutes late, but what can they do about it? Sack me? On my last day – and my birthday on top of that? I strolled along Churchill to the High Street and suddenly felt guilty as hell and started to walk faster. By the time I cut through the courtyard and up the steps to the loading dock I was almost running.

The courtyard is still cobbled. Fairfield's gets a grant from the City each year for upkeep because it's supposed to be a 'heritage' place, dating back to when the brewery was first built in 1886. I don't think anybody but me knows that these particular cobbles were put down in 1952 to replace the originals, most of which had been worn thin, or loosened by the horses hooves and kicked out into the street. Old Mr. Fairfield (Mr. Alexander, that is, who retired in 1953) wanted to maintain the look of the cobbled yard for sentimental reasons, and had a blazing row with Young Mr. Fairfield (Mr. Samuel) who wanted to concrete over the whole yard. The old man won, of course, since he was still The Boss. Nobody knew then that he would retire the next year; he was only 68.

How do I know all this? Why, I was here, of course.

I was fifteen in 1952. Yes, that's right, 1952! I'm sixty five today, and I've worked for the Brewery all that time, fifty years. The day I first reported to work, as a Drayman's Assistant, was my fifteenth birthday, and they were laying those fake cobbles that day. I had to come around through the offices, and got shouted at for coming in there with my workboots on. I guess there are no records about the cobbles, which is how the current Mr. Fairfield (Mister George), how he manages to get City money to keep them fixed up. Mr. George was born in 1955, the day I moved indoors to become a Cellerman, rolling those great wooden barrels around. We all got the afternoon off, the day Mr. George was born.

I thought about putting it into my speech this afternoon, about the cobbles being fake, but I decided not to. It's small potatoes anyway, a few fake cobblestones, compared to the things *I* know. My speech is just going to blow the roof of this establishment, I'll tell you. I've even considered

calling the Chronicle-Times, to get a reporter down here, but I reckon it will get back to them fast enough.

I think I'll start like this: Somebody will say a few words about how they'll miss me, and then I'll say: "I'm sure you'll all miss me just as much as I'll miss all of you; which is to say, not much. By next week you'll have forgotten I ever worked here, and I'll have forgotten what you all looked like. But before I go, I'd like to share with you some of my favourite memories from half a century at Fairfield's Brewery. Perhaps I can start with the fire of 1959, and tell you what happened on that night in August, after the fire was out and the firemen had left."

This is what I'll tell them: The fire was in the office, you see. The little glass-walled rooms around the edge weren't there then, and neither were the cubicles. There was just one huge room, and desks in rows. This was before I moved to the office; I was still working down in the cellars, and I was on the nightshift that week.

About two o'clock Mr. Wallace came down to the cellar. He was Head Clerk back then, I guess that would be Director of Finance today. Mr. Wallace asked my foreman if he could borrow a 'young man with good muscles and a sensible head' and the foreman sent me. For about an hour Mr. Wallace had me carrying these cardboard boxes full of papers, and stacking them in cupboards in the burned out part of the office. I didn't see the sense of it, but nobody asked me to. At the end of it, Mr. Wallace said "Thank you, Wilfred. Now if anybody asks you about this, you tell them you don't know what they're talking about. You were never here, shifting boxes in the middle of the night. You never left your job in the cellar."

"Yessir," I said "But……."

"I've already sorted this with your foreman . Your cards will show that you worked a full shift and your pay-packet will be made up accordingly." Then he slipped me a twenty dollar bill. That was a lot of money in '59; it would buy you a whole shopping cart full of groceries, for example, or take Mrs. Prentice and me out for a good meal, plus drinks and a generous tip. Well I went out of the office, but I didn't go to the cellar right away – after all, the foreman didn't know when to expect me back, did he? So I hung about a bit, and just as I expected, I soon smelled smoke. I peeped back into the office and there was Mr. Wallace, in his neat black business

suit, standing with the fire extinguisher in his hand, burning up the boxes full of papers.

There was a big fuss from the Taxman that year, about the important papers that got accidentally burned up in the office fire, and Mr. Wallace was reprimanded for not keeping backup copies. Reprimanded, right, but he still ended up driving a brand new Chevvy Impala when the new models came out in September that year. Well I kept my mouth shut for forty three years, which I think is good value for twenty dollars.

I'll pause to let that sink in, then I'll say: "Now I'd like to tell you about the strange noises that came from the third floor through most of the summer of 1982."

I moved into the office and got my clerk training in 1961, after my accident. I'd been stacking Hogsheads – huge barrels that held 54 gallons of beer. We don't have them anymore, or any other wooden barrels for that matter. A full Hogshead weighed close to six hundred pounds. I was working with Clive Barrow, a good man if you needed muscle but don't ever ask him to think. We were just setting a Hogshead in place when the silly fool sneezed, and let go his hold. The barrel dropped and spun, and the steel-banded edge slashed across my left arm like a hatchet blade. They got me to the hospital with the arm hanging off, and the surgeons stitched it back on. But it never did work right, and still doesn't.

I've got to admit that Fairfield's were good about it. They got me the compensation money that I used for a new car that fall, and they retrained me as a clerk, where my semi-useless left arm was not a serious problem. They set me up on a desk in the office, and everybody there did their very best to make me feel at home. You'd have thought I was a war hero.

By 1982 I'd been clerking for twenty years and was still at Clerk level three. Kids from *school* started off at clerk level three. I was getting ready to take the tests for level four (again) and I stayed late at the office to study because it was nice and quiet after the girls left at six o'clock. About seven thirty the noises started.

I was on the second floor, close to the elevator, and when I first heard the noises I thought that's where they were coming from. I pushed the button and the doors opened, but when I got in it was clear that the noises

were coming from the third floor. It sounded like somebody fighting, some woman, and I thought maybe somebody had broken in, and surprised one of the cleaners, and she was fighting for her life up there. So I pressed '3' and went up and leaped out of the elevator ready for battle, one weak arm or not. There was nobody on the floor. The sounds were coming from young Mr. George's office. Mr. George wasn't the Boss back then, of course, just a young man still learning the business. He'd been married for about three years at that time and had two baby girls. Well, it wasn't him doing the yelling, it was Miss Jefferson, his secretary, and she wasn't being beaten up, and I don't think I need to spell it out in any more detail than that.

The noises went on all that summer. I failed the Clerk level '4' test.

I thought that it might be appropriate to go from there to our courier service. In 1991, shortly after Mr. George had become The Boss (he was the first Boss to be called *Company President*) Mr. French retired. Mr. French had been a Clerk level 7 in charge of Purchasing for the previous sixteen years. Mr. George decided that a single clerk was not enough to do purchasing any longer, although nobody had complained about Mr. French's work, not to my knowledge. Anyway, Mr. George hired a friend of his from University, Mr. Parkinson, and made him Chief of Procurement as a level 1 Manager; then Mr. Parkinson hired three administrative staff – and a level seven clerk. Well, nobody asked for my permission, nor needed it.

For the last five of Mr. French's years we'd used 'Bike Boys' courier service. They were not a particularly well organised lot, and their couriers were a bit on the scruffy side, but when you wanted a small delivery made across town, or something picked up and brought to the office, Bike Boys would have it there before most courier services had finished their paperwork. Well Mr. Parkinson didn't just give contracts to people, even if we knew they could do the job and do it well. Mr. Parkinson's office called for *Tenders.* They got five. Four of them were between twenty and twenty five thousand dollars. Bike Boys quoted twelve. Triple A Courier Services got the contract, even though theirs was the highest bid. The others were rejected for various reasons. Bike Boys' bid was tossed out because it was considered 'frivolous' – which was Mr. Parkinson's way of saying he thought that they were just joking, and didn't mean their bid to be taken seriously.

We've had so many problems with Triple A that my file became too fat for it's folder and I had to open another. The files have been kept in Mr. Parkinson's office for a year now, and I send new complaint notes up there to be added. They must be on their third folder. Triple A raise their rates in mid contract, which Bike Boys had been told was illegal. Bike Boys went out of business in 1998. Triple A now get the contract every year without tenders under a new rule which Mr. Parkinson made. Triple A is wholly owned by Andrea Connelly, which is Mrs. Parkinson going by her maiden name.

From there I might briefly mention that, as I found out completely by accident, the Fairfield Fleet List (our delivery trucks and other company vehicles) includes three private cars, owned by Mr. George's wife, Mr. Parkinson's wife and a young woman who isn't even on our payroll. She is a junior with OMA Consultants, who did some work for Mr. George the year before last. I couldn't find any trace of her in company records, but it's her car alright. Then I thought I'd say a few words about the new carpeting in the executive offices, which we have paid for three times. It's the same invoice with different names on it, and it was signed 'approved for payment' each time by Mr. Pa……

What's going on? it's only …. God, is that the time already? They're bringing in a cake, everybody is singing 'Happy Retirement to you'. I haven't got my speech ready. There must be fifty people around my desk, and they're still coming in. Great Heavens, Mr. George is here himself. What's he saying?

"…… and I couldn't believe it, when I was told that Wilf Prentice had been here fifty years. I thought it was closer to eighty."

Everyone is laughing.

"Of course, Wilf hasn't *worked* here for fifty years; I mean, for a start, he didn't work weekends, which adds up to a hundred and four days a year, or six years total. So if we subtract that, Wilf has been here for *forty-four* years. Then of course, we have to take off vacation time, at three weeks a year, and sick leave……."

It's a joke speech. Mr. Parkinson did it for one of his clerks last month. He started with twenty five years and then subtracted weekends and

public holidays and sick leave. It got silly in the end, taking off bathroom breaks and time looking for lost files, things like that. In the end it was down from twenty five to about three years. Somebody should tell Mr. George it's been done. I'm not ready. How do I start? I say "I'm sure you'll miss me as much as I'll miss you, which is to say not very much." Yes, that's right, but what do I say then? Oh my God, he's finishing.

"……..so it gives me great pleasure, Wilf Prentice, to present you with this Gold Rolex watch in token of your six years of service with Fairfield's Brewery."

They're all laughing and clapping. Somebody's shouted for a speech, and I'm not ready. They're making me climb onto my desk. It's a sea of faces. I think the entire brewery is here. The cellarmen are here! They all have spotless white coats now, like doctors, and I don't think they ever *see* a barrel. The office is full to bursting, and people are crowding at the elevators. Oh My God It's Gone Quiet! They're waiting for me.

"Fellow employees of Fairfield's Brewery. Friends." They're cheering like mad, and I didn't start my speech yet. "I am going to miss you." They're cheering again. What comes next. "I'm going to miss you, I'm sure, as much as you're going to miss me. Which is a lot." No, that's not right. They're cheering. They're going mad. They've climbed onto desks and they're going mad. Oh God No! I'm crying. I can't stop it. The tears are running down my cheeks in a torrent. I don't know what to say.

I think I said that last part out loud. "I don't know what to say." They're pulling me down! They're carrying me on their shoulders. They're singing 'He's a Jolly Good Fellow'. Even Mr. George is singing.

But I haven't made my speech.

They carried me through every part of the brewery, and everywhere we went, people stood up and applauded. Most cheered. At the end they took me out to the loading dock and put me into Mr. George's Limousine. He said to me "Come in to clear out your desk any time you like, Wilf. And always remember, Fairfield's doors are never locked to you. Drop by when you're in town. Bring Emma. We'd love to see you both. I mean that sincerely.

They're cheering as the limo moves out. I'm waving to the crowd at both sides, like I'm the King of England on the way to my coronation. I'm going home in the President's Limo.

I don't know what Emma is going to say when I roll up in the Limo at a quarter after four. Supper isn't for two hours yet.

* * *

A MURDER OF CROWS

"Birds of ill omen," Dad said.

"What are?" I asked him.

"Crows," he said. "Any big, black birds. People say they bring messages from the spirit world; bad news, mostly. Warnings of plague, pestilence and death coming." I followed his gaze. Across the canal, about fifty yards ahead, a big black bird sat on an upper limb of a dead elm.

"Nothing wrong with your eyes," I laughed. "But why such gloomy thoughts today?" The nurses at the Lodge had warned me that, at eighty three years old, Dad was letting go of life. He had given up most of his interests, including the theatre, which had been everything to him.

"The crow has just the right sized brain," he said, ignoring my question. "A really small brain is of no use to the spirit world, you see; nothing to get hold of. And what's the use of trying to get a message across by way of a housefly or a bee anyway? You'd simply swat the damn thing. Yet animals with larger brains usually have a will of their own and can be difficult to control. A spirit can sometimes take possession of a dog or cat I understand, but not for long and not very effectively. So it's crows, usually. Sometimes a raven. You know, like in Poe."

"Yes," I said. "Poe."

We walked for a while, and I thought the subject had been dropped.

"Before bubonic plague hit in 1665 there were great clouds of black birds over London," Dad went on. "Those who heeded the warning and left the city were spared."

"So the spirit world knew that the Black Death was coming?" I asked him. Dad looked at me as though I were five years old and had asked whether the sun always rose in the east. "Of course," he said.

“And the Great Fire the following year? Did the spirits know about that in advance, too?”

“Yes.”

By the time we turned to walk back along the towpath to the Lodge the light was fading. The large, black bird still sat on his perch in the dead elm.

“Could a single bird carry a message?” I asked “Or would you need whole flocks of them?”

“I should think a single bird could do it; but not that one. He’d be much more obvious if he were trying to tell us something. He might hop down to the path and walk along with us; or fly close overhead and call to us; and he’d keep at it until the spirit was sure that we'd got the message; then he could let go his hold on the bird.”

As though on cue the big bird spread his wings to the night wind and lifted silently into the sky. We watched until we lost sight of him against the darkening clouds.

“Was that a message?” I asked.

“No,” Dad said.

* * *

My father died two days short of his eighty fourth birthday. It rained at the funeral and great armies of dark clouds marched overhead. The rain was cold but I turned my face up to it, letting the drops run down my cheeks. I held my hat in my hands.

I didn't hear the words.

I walked past the old church to the parking lot, where my car now stood alone, glistening, waiting to take me home. When I heard the sound I turned and looked to trace its source, but the rain poured down and blurred my vision. I put on my sodden hat, pulling down the brim to afford some protection against the wind-driven droplets, and the sound came again. I

saw him then, black against black, as he left his perch on the steeple and flew down over the grey slate roof to land on the wet flagstones.

"CAW."

"I know," I told him softly. "You're a messenger from the afterlife, come to tell me that Dad arrived safely, yes?"

"CAW," said the bird.

A second bird landed to stand with the first, and both hopped towards me. As I watched a third bird dropped from the dark sky to join the line, then a fourth.

"Now I *know* you're spirit messengers," I smiled at the birds. "Dad's sent a chorus line!"

The four lined up on the path and hopped towards me in perfect formation. I stopped smiling. There was something not natural about the performance of these big, black creatures.

Movement at the corner of my eye caught my attention. From the copse at the bottom of the churchyard a dozen birds lifted into the sky and flapped raucously towards me. More left the trees as I watched. The birds were suddenly all about me, hopping in tight circles at my feet, and flying around my head, all calling to me.

And suddenly I believed. We pride ourselves on our understanding of the universe, but in truth there are some areas of knowledge in which we haven't even opened the books.

"Reading you loud and clear!" I yelled to the sky. "Message received and understood!"

The birds lifted up and away with no sound but the flapping of their wings. In seconds they were back in their distant trees.

"Are you alright?" The voice came from the church door, where a shadowy figure sheltered beneath the overhang.

"Yes, Vicar!" I called back. "I'm a little damp, but in good spirits."

"Oh, I meant about the birds," he yelled across the yard. "I saw them leave the trees and I thought the children were here again. They bring bread for the crows, you see, and at this time of the year the birds can be quite dangerous. There must be several hundred of them in the woods, and when the children come to feed them I've seen the sky turn black. I swear there will be an awful accident one of these days. We try to discourage it you know, the feeding. Are you sure you're alright?"

"Yes," I said, and opened the door to my car. I started the engine, but sat for a while. So *that* was the explanation! All perfectly reasonable and mundane. Nothing magical or mystical, just a flock of crows, trained to come in search of food whenever they saw children in the churchyard. The dim light and poor visibility had obviously tricked them into mistaking me for a source of food.

I put the car into gear and moved forward, stopping at the gate which led onto the main road…. and as I paused to check traffic a huge black crow, larger than any I'd seen in my life landed with a heavy thud on the hood of my car. The bird stared through the smeared windscreen and looked directly into my soul.

"CAW," said the crow. It spread great black wings, the feathered tips almost spanning the windscreen for the briefest of instants; and then it was gone.

* * *

FABLES FOR THE THIRD MILLENNIUM

THE ANGEL'S BARGAIN

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Albert Armstrong was a *good* boy. He sang in the church choir and was always polite to his elders, especially his parents. He believed that as a result of his good and virtuous habits God would keep him safe within His Mighty Hand. It therefore came as a shock and disappointment when, at the age of seventeen, he sat with his mother in the doctor's office to hear the bad news.

"I'm truly sorry, Mrs. Armstrong, but there is absolutely nothing I can do."

"But why, doctor? I mean, how did this happen?"

"It started before Albert was even born, my dear. The defect was present in his genes, and was there from the moment of conception. It wasn't anything he did or didn't do, or anything you could have prevented. I've put Albert's name on the waiting list for a transplant. You must face the fact that without a transplant his heart will not last past his eighteenth birthday."

"But why, father?" Albert later asked his parish priest.

"We cannot look into the mind of God," the priest intoned. "His thoughts are too mighty for us to understand, and His Ways are too deep."

'Very useful,' Albert thought. "Then what must I do to get God to help me?" he asked the priest. "I pray every night and I always……."

"God does not make bargains, Albert; only the Devil makes bargains, and his price is more than any sane man would pay."

"I'd pay it, father! I don't want to die. I don't want them to cut my heart out and put in a heart from somebody's dead body. I *would* make a deal with the devil, I would!"

"Now you don't mean that, Albert. Think of what you're saying! What if the Devil should hear you?"

"I hope he *does!* I hope he *does!* Are you listening, Satan? *I'll do whatever you want!* Just don't let me die!"

The Devil, of course, heard Albert's plaintive cry very clearly,

since he has ears everywhere and is *always* listening. When he arrived that night in Albert's bedroom the Devil turned out to be a small man, very neatly dressed in a black three-piece suit, black shirt, shoes and socks, with a midnight blue necktie his only concession to colour. He seemed polite and friendly, and Albert took to him immediately.

"Let us understand the bargain clearly, the Devil said to Albert. "I will fix your heart, and in return when your body dies, your soul will belong to me."

Albert had read Faust and knew that the Devil would try to trick him at every turn. Every word in the deal, each shift of emphasis, could change the meaning entirely. He had to be extremely careful.

"The doctor said I could die before I even turn eighteen. Well I want twice the lifespan. Twice."

"Agreed," said the Devil.

"And what does it mean, that you get my soul?"

"Only that you will live with me after the death of your body."

"You mean that I will go to Hell and be tortured in the flames?"

"Oh, Albert, you've really spent too much time in church. Hell isn't nearly as bad as they paint it, and we do *not* torture people. Of course, some folks tell me that the constant 140 degree Celcius temperature can get on their nerves after a while."

"Agreed, then," said Albert. "I've always enjoyed the heat anyway. Do I sign in blood or something?"

"No need," said the Devil, and though he was still smiling the expression looked somehow sinister. "The deal is made. I will see you in thirty six years."

Albert graduated from University with a degree in Financial Management and joined a large investment company, where he received a good wage and regular promotions. Despite several promising relationships he did not marry.

The time passed pleasantly, but too quickly. On the evening of Albert's thirty-sixth birthday the Devil showed up in his true guise, resplendent in a blood red tunic and sporting a magnificent set of horns. His

long tail swished from side to side in anticipation of the closing of a deal, and his exposed teeth could in no way be called a ‘smile’

“Time’s up, Albert. I’m here to collect on our deal.”

“Fraid not,” said Albert, not stirring from his leather recliner by the fireside. “There’s no getting out of it,” Satan responded, and there was no longer any doubt about the significance of his bared teeth. “You got your double lifespan, and now I get...”

“No I didn’t,” Albert said, unruffled. “Check your contract. I distinctly remember asking for twice the lifespan; *the* lifespan, not twice *my* meager allocation. I don’t know what you think is *‘the’* lifespan for a human being, but I believe the bible defines it as three score years and ten; twice that is a hundred and forty years, which means you still owe me a hundred and four.”

From the direction of the red glow came a stream of curses which Albert, given his sheltered upbringing, did not recognise. “Arbitration!” the Devil screamed.

Albert’s ears popped and he found himself in an open space in which he apparently had no body. At one end of the space a red cloud was throbbing frantically, and at the other a white light was pulsing slowly. Albert found the white light too bright to look at directly, which he thought strange given that he had no eyes. After some time the white light stopped its slow throbbing and spoke. Albert heard the voice quite clearly through ears which he didn’t have, and the sound seemed to echo in his head, which was also missing.

“I find for the defendant Albert Armstrong,” said the voice. “The human lifespan is indeed threescore years and ten, give or take a decade or two, and may be amended only in specific instances with the explicit permission of Our Lord. Under the terms of the agreement you therefore owe Mr. Armstrong an additional one hundred and four years. I am surprised at you, Lucifer, leaving such a loophole. You should use the services of a capable lawyer in these transactions. God knows, you’ve plenty down there to choose from.”

Albert wasn’t sure, but he thought he heard a chuckle in the voice.

* * *

In the early hours of the following morning Albert awoke suddenly from a deep sleep to see an Angel sitting on the end of his bed. At least it looked like an Angel. Before he could clarify this the apparition spoke. "Of *course* I'm an Angel," it told him. "In fact I'm your *Guardian* Angel, and you can thank your lucky stars I'm here! I wasn't told the details, but apparently you've really pissed off Old Nick. All the Fiends of Hell are going to be after you!"

Before Albert could register surprise that an Angel would use the term 'pissed off' the being continued. "And if you think you'll get any protection from Above because you did some fancy legal footwork, you'd better think again. There are limits to what Nicodemus can do to you while you're on Earth, but they're very wide. If you're lucky you'll only lose your job, your health and all your worldly possessions. You'll still end up in the gutter, but you may get to keep your mental faculties and at least some of your five senses. Or how would you like to fight cancer for an entire century? Or MS? Maybe some nice mental illness like schizophrenia? All of the above? Oh**,** nothing would kill you, though you'd surely come to wish that it *would."*

Albert was now fully awake, and fully terrified. He had not thought this through, he realised. He had never considered such possibilities. "What can,,,,,,,,,,"

"What can you do about it? Precious little. You really should have thought about who you were dealing with before you picked this particular fight. All I can promise is that if you do *exactly as I tell you*, I think I can protect you from the worst of it. So that's my offer. Take it or leave it."

"First I want to know...." Albert began. "Take it or leave it!" the Angel insisted.

"Ok, I accept," Albert said, "But first I have to know…." The Angel blew him a kiss, and when it landed on his eyes he was returned instantly to the deep sleep from which he'd been awakened.

When he next awoke the Angel still sat on the end of the bed, looking somewhat less substantial in the morning sunlight. "There's no point going into work," she told him. "You'll only find that all your cases have gone sour, the taxmen are doing a surprise audit, your secretary is suing you for sexual harassment, your partner is missing and a large amount of money has disappeared from your business accounts. More importantly, when you're in a crowd I can't always sort out your spirit from those around you, and if I'm distracted for a fraction of a second you could end up under a bus or falling out of a high window. Nicodemus has to give you another century of life I understand, but nothing says that you can't live it out in a wheel-chair or a hospital bed."

Albert was shaking again. “But if I don’t go to work how will I live?” he asked. “My savings are good for a year, maybe two if I economise, but……”

“We really have no choice in this but to run and hide,” the Angel said, ignoring Albert’s plea for attention. “That’s not going to be easy on this tiny planet, where Nick has eyes and ears everywhere. At the very least we must get out of the city. I think I know a place deep in the South American jungle which should be fairly safe. Now call the office, resign, sell your share of the business, don’t leave any ties and don’t drop even the vaguest hint about where we’re going.”

“I don’t *know* where we’re going,” Albert positively screamed, *“or what I am going to use for money!”*

“Oh, stop your wailing, boy. We can’t risk having bank accounts in your name, and anyway money is the very least of your problems; everything you want or need will be brought to you, wherever we go.”

“Everything?”

The Angel sighed. “Ah yes. It’s been a very long time, and I’d almost forgotten how young flesh makes so many demands.” She snapped her fingers and the doorbell rang. “Go and let her in,” the Angel said. “If you don’t like the blonde there are brunettes and redheads in the car. Excuse me if I don’t stay for the debauchery.”

Two weeks later Albert thought that he’d found heaven. The Angel had assured him that from the air the compound appeared to be just another stretch of dense jungle, and,since Satan did not work well with wild animals, his eyes and ears in this place should be severely limited. While the Devil’s minions would be searching every city on earth from gutter to rooftop, the Angel believed that Albert’s chances of living out his lifespan undiscovered here were very reasonable. And he had everything! *Everything!* He was the master of a sizeable estate. He had a smart sailboat on his own private lake; a huge mansion, with an Olympic sized pool; Satellite television — one way signals only; the Angel had warned that Satan is no stranger to high technology and was probably monitoring every telephone call on earth for news of Albert’s whereabouts. His home theatre was the size of many commercial installations, and his huge party room opened onto the swimming pool, which looked lovely in the evenings with its underwater floodlights turning the water turquoise.

If Albert missed the company of his few close associates, the many new friends supplied by his Angel provided ample reparation.

* * *

Looking back, it was hard to put his finger on the exact point at which things had started to go sour. Neither did he know when his occasional evening glass of brandy had become a two-bottle-a-day habit, but he suspected that it had developed rapidly over his second year of captivity. He had started to think in terms of ‘captivity’ as an apt description of what he’d previously called his ‘witness protection program’. Certainly, his Guardian Angel was doing everything possible to make his forced isolation as comfortable as possible, and if he ever doubted the soundness of her plan he had only to call up the picture she’d described of the revenge that Satan had in mind. He saw himself in an Intensive Care ward, semi-conscious, tubes in every orifice, a cocktail of drugs dripping into his veins and puzzled doctors clucking over him, whispering “It’s a miracle that the man is still alive.” Albert blessed his Angel daily, and the Good Lord who had sent her. He could well believe how the Devil’s wrath increased by the minute, and shuddered to imagine what it would be like to face such anger. His Angel had made it perfectly clear that, should Satan discover their whereabouts, her small powers would be a candle flame against a gale.

Albert hated feeling trapped, at the same time thinking that such feelings were an affiont to the being who went to such enormous efforts to keep him safe and happy. Nevertheless, his surroundings looked more and more like a gilded cage, and he felt daily more and more like a prisoner within it.

His new friends brought gifts to him, powders to be sniffed and smoked, liquids to be ingested or injected, but his Angel intervened to prevent their effect. She warned him how such substances could corrupt him, and how the ease of mind which they initially brought would rapidly turn into something which could consume him. Unaffected by these pills and powders Albert returned to his beloved bottles.

His first suicide attempts came halfway through his third year of captivity. He climbed into a hot bath and slashed his wrists. They did not bleed. He climbed to the highest peak of his mansion and hurled himself to the concrete a hundred feet below, where he lay for a while and then rose and walked away, unbruised and unscratched. Firearms in the house would not fire for him; no blade would hold an edge sharp enough to cut his flesh. In the end he gave up, and reluctantly accepted life.

He lost his appetite for the fine food and drink which had so pleased

him earlier. He ceased to enjoy the company of his ‘friends’ and stopped calling for them.

And the disapproving glances of his Angel shamed him to the core.

In the end he took to his bed. He realised that his emaciated body had become so weak that if the house were to catch fire he could not rouse himself to escape. He didn’t care. He lay on his bed, not eating, not drinking, wanting to die, but knowing that his Angel would not allow that to happen.

He lapsed into fitful sleep, fearful of the nightmares which always came. And as he closed his eyes he saw a strange thing; the golden radiance which surrounded his Angel seemed to turn pink, and then red; her golden halo was replaced by a set of large, pointed horns.

“Damn,” the Devil realised that he had relaxed a little too early. It was difficult, keeping up this outward appearance day after day. But it was worth the effort; he now had the Armstrong fool exactly where he wanted him. “It was only an hallucination; a trick of the light” He slid the thought easily into Albert’s mind and watched the man sink into a deep, troubled sleep.

“Sleep well, fool,” he murmured. “Enjoy the dreams I will send you. And tomorrow you are mine again. All of your tomorrows for the next hundred years.”

* * *

A Chinese proverb warns “Beware of what you wish for; You may get it.”

American psychologist Abraham Maslow long ago explained how a man has many needs, and will strive to satisfy them according to a sequence of priorities. Basic needs are for food, water and air, without which he will die. When these are satisfied he will seek to fulfill higher needs, such as a finding a warm, safe place to sleep; and then above this are social needs which can include a spouse, a family and a circle of friends. But his highest needs, at the very top of the pyramid, relate to the need for meaning in his life. He must achieve success by his own efforts, and he must know that his achievements are respected and revered by his peers. It is essential to a man’s well-being that he should feel needed, wanted and appreciated by the society in which he moves.

The Devil knows well that in order to destroy a man you need only provide all of his basic wants and needs and then make it clear that nothing is expected of him in return. Eventually he will come to feel unneeded and unwanted; he will feel his existence to be pointless — as it will be.

And he will live in Hell on Earth.

* * *

THE SHOEMAKER'S CHILDREN

A Fable for theThird Millennium

Like his father before him, Tom Lastman made fine shoes. They may have cost a little more than the footwear you could find down at the market on a Saturday morning, but everyone said that a pair of Lastman shoes would easily outlast five of the cheaper ones. Some claimed that Tom's shoes were handed down from generation to generation in their families, and that their children wore Lastman-made shoes which once graced the feet of their grandparents. Others said that this was a story put about by the Lastman family to sell shoes, and fights had started over this issue in many a bar on a Friday night after work.

Tom did so well that he opened a second shop in a nearby town, and then a third. The three shops did well, all operating on the Lastman principle that it was good economy to pay a little more for a pair of shoes which would probably outlive you.

Tom Lastman had three sons, and when he made his will he thought how splendid was the numerical relationship of son to shop, and so he left one to each. He then promptly died, passing out of the story before we even got a chance to get to know him properly.

At the wake the sons drank well and not too wisely from old Tom's cellar, and afterwards they went down to the pub, where they toasted and roasted the old man by turns, generally agreeing that he had performed well in the role of Dad, and had left them with few complaints. The three were on the point of calling it a night when a fresh flagon was brought to their table not by the serving maid, whose beauty and desirability had been increasing throughout the evening, but by a well dressed young man who poured four steins, including one for himself, and joined them at their table.

"Forgive the intrusion, gentleman," the newcomer said, "But I knew your father by his excellent reputation, and I feel it remiss of myself that I did not contact him with a view to establishing a professional relationship. This I hope to rectify by establishing such a relationship with the three of you. My card." The card read:

TechnoMagics Corporation
Hi-tech Solutions for Industrial Problems
Richard Chipset: Sales Representative.

Ron, the eldest of the Lastman boys, took the card and held it up to the light of an oil-lamp which flickered above his head. "Magic, boys," Ron

told his brothers. “He’s selling magic.”

“Quite right, too,” said Mr. Chipset. “Magic to amaze you. Magic to make your lives easier. Magic to make you rich!”

“What kind of magic would that be, Mr. Chipset?” asked Don, the youngest Lastman .

“Any kind you like, dear fellow. Any kind you want. Any kind you need. Call me Dickie. Everybody does.”

Pushing back his chair with a loud squeak, the salesman stood. From the inside pocket of his smart blue blazer he drew a slim wand, black and tapered. Holding the wand in his left hand he twisted a control on the end with his right, and pointed the implement at a distant dingy wall at the back of the inn. The few other patrons, as well as the innkeeper and his barmaid, were by now watching as intently as the brothers.

“TEK-NO-MAGICS,” intoned Mr. Chipset. “Gigabite and Megahertz, Microchip and Pixel.”

The lamps spluttered and went out, leaving only the dim glow of a streetlamp which seeped in through a dirty window. In the darkness the body of the TechnoMagics salesman seemed to gyrate slowly as he continued his incantation.

“Cable-network-online-printer,” he hissed. “Shared-logic-intelinside,”

The last words were the merest whisper. The room was deathly silent, save only the innkeeper’s asthmatic breathing.

“LASER OUTPUT!” screamed Chipset. From the tip of his wand a bar of scarlet fire lanced across the room to burn its message into the dirty yellow plaster.

“MINIS! MINIS! TECHNO HAS ’EM”

The lamps spluttered back to life, although the room was now eerily illuminated by the light from the blood red letters, which glowed in the wall like hot coals.

“You’ll be paying for the repairs to yonder wall, Chipset” said the innkeeper.

The salesman ignored the comment and resumed his seat at the table. “Now gentleman, let us speak of the conversion of your footwear factories

into paragons of productivity by means of the miracles of Technomagics. And, you lucky lads, if you sign today you'll get an additional home computer thrown in free, a video game entertainment unit for the kids and a five percent kickback under the table. So who'll be first to put his mark on the bottom of a contract?"

Ron was the first to find his voice. "I'll have none of your satanic devices in my factory, Chipset," he hissed. "Infernal machines taking food from the mouths of hard working shoemakers, indeed! Machines that can think, you say; Machines made in the image of Satan, I say! I'll have none of it, I tell you. Not in my shop! Never in my shop." Kicking his chair to the floor Ron stormed out of the room. The sound of his hob-nailed Lastman boots on the cobbled street faded rapidly into the distance.

"Well, we know where *he* stands!" Chipset purred around his omni-present smile. "What about you then, Don?"

"I'm all for it!" the youngest Lastman enthused. "Thinking machines to run my equipment! No labour problems and no payroll! It's a dream come true. All I'll have to do is laze around dictating memos to my secretary and taking long six-martini business lunches. That's the life for me, Chipset! Where do I sign? (Oh, and do you think you could throw in a copy of Grand-Theft-Auto 99 with the video game set?)"

"Done, done and so you will be. Sign here, here and there."

Smiling broadly, Don Lastman left the inn after his brother.

"And you then, Jon? With the option of a large screen plasma T.V. in place of the games unit if you so prefer. Sign here and here

"Not so fast, Chipset," the middle Lastman brother pushed the contract back across the table. "I see some possible use for your magic machines, but we'll talk about it in my office tomorrow after the rum fumes have cleared from my brain. You know how to find me, I take it?"

"You betcha," Chipset said. "Shall we say two p.m.? Are you sure you wouldn't rather do lunch?"

"Two it is then," Jon said, swaying gently as he made his way to the door.

* * *

Ron Lastman had labour troubles almost from the first hour. In fact it was ten minutes after nine on the first Monday morning, his chair barely

warmed by Ron's butt, when a small group of men entered his office without knocking and took up a confrontational stance on his green shag carpet.

"We represent the new Cobblers United Craftsmen's Unified Union," the biggest of the men said. "CUCUU for short. We're here to deliver a list of our demands."

That's nice," Ron said, intending to diffuse the situation with charm and a cooperative manner. "If you'd kindly leave your list with me I'll be sure to study it carefully and get back to you next week to begin negotiations."

"The list is outside on the forklift truck," the big man said. "And the demands are not negotiable. It's pay up or we're all out. We expect the new pay scale to come into effect immediately and the paid holidays to be retroactive for the last five years. We may have a little flexibility on the question of company cars for all employees, but not much. And overtime at time and a half after four hours in any twenty four hour period is a given." Ron sighed. "Well, I'll look at the list as soon as I finish my morning coffee and I'll be back to you with my comments before noon. I can't be fairer than that now, can I?"

"Comments? What comments? We don't want your comments, Sunshine, we want your signature on the collective agreement. I told you we're not here for negotiations, we're here for your answer. Now is it 'yes' or is it 'yes'?"

The strike didn't last long as the new union and Ron's shoe factory went bankrupt together at the end of the third week.

"We won!" chanted the men, marching arm-in-arm to the unemployment office.

"I guess you did," said Ron, marching with them.

* * *

Don Lastman had a fine time the first week, while the TechnoMagics technicians installed their thinking machines in his factory. Don spent the time driving around in his company car and taking his new secretary for three-hour business lunches. The following Monday morning the mayor was on hand to press the 'Go' button, and the local paper featured the picture on their front page under the caption 'Local Shoemaker Goes Hi-tech.' Everyone said how smart Don looked and marveled at how he'd found such a well-built secretary who could type at seven words per minute with hardly

any errors.

The machinery's productivity was tremendous. In the first eight hour shift, when a manned shop might have produced twenty or twenty five pairs of shoes, the automated TechnoMagics machinery produced seven hundred and twenty four shoes. This result was somewhat marred by the fact that all seven hundred and twenty four were left shoes, but this was rectified the following day when the equipment whooped and growled and spat out seven hundred and twenty four right shoes. It was a real pity that some glitch in the program caused all of the shoes to be a man's size sixteen.

An order for five dozen spiked running shoes was filled in two days, whereas the same order could have taken up to two weeks if the shoes had been hand-made. Of course, a *human* cobbler would probably have known that the spikes were intended to go on the *outside* of the shoe.

On the fifth day the automated plant produced two hundred ballet slippers, made out of cardboard, and one hundred boxes in which to ship the slippers, all made from the finest Doeskin leather. The automated shipping machinery then sent the entire shipment to Anchorage, Alaska, while the Royal Ballet in Winnipeg received a shipment of seventy pairs of Mukluks.

By the end of the first month Don's profit and loss statement was clear, simple and decidedly lopsided. His expenditures ran to six digits while his income, in round figures, was a round figure. When Don met Ron at the unemployment office it came as a shock to both brothers.

* * *

Jon Lastman spoke at length with Dickie Chipset and then spent the next day at TechnoMagics Head Office. He spent a particularly long time with the designers in the engineering department, and saw demonstrations of various types of magical thinking machine. In the end, Jon decided that he would not allow any kind of equipment to take over the work of his craftsmen, since the reputation of his products rested squarely in these men's hands. However, Jon saw many possibilities for the magic machines in his office, warehouse and shipping departments, and before he left he placed a substantial order.

The equipment arrived and was installed. The mayor was not present to press the 'Go' button, and the entire operation was low profile. The teething troubles began the following day and lasted through the first six months. Fortunately most of the serious blunders made by the magic thinking machines were caught by the men, who did *not* make one thousand pairs of ladies' shoes with three-foot heels, even though the specifications called for this. The correct order — ten pairs with three-inch heels — was

produced and dispatched. The machines accurately added up columns of figures, kept track of stocks, and simplified the office routine immensely.

Jon Lastman and his little company prospered, and in due time Jon opened a second factory in an adjacent town, and later a third. His wife bore Jon three sons, and in the fullness of time Jon made his will, leaving a factory to each son. He also left them each a letter to be opened in the event of his death. The letter read:

"*Dear Sons:*

There is magic involved in the making of a fine pair of shoes, and it is important that you learn to use this gift wisely and well. There has always been magic in the world; it has appeared in many guises and it has been called by many names. Once it was called sorcery, once wizardry, it has been called witchcraft and alchemy and, more recently people have come to know it as high technology. Regardless of what it may be named, magic is a poor slave and a worse master. Never let magic do your thinking for you or make your decisions, and if you use it to work for you, be vigilant always. Do this, and you will make good shoes and run a good business. And you will thrive and prosper.

And, in the fullness of time, they did.

* * *

THE SQUIRREL'S TALE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

You've probably heard that the Lion is the King of Beasts, and this may indeed be true, today; but it was not always so. In the beginning the animals went their own ways and for the most part this suited everyone perfectly well. Oh, there were always little disputes such as who had prime rights to a fine watering hole, or whether the fox should pay compensation for eating somebody's uncle, but by and large they all got along.

There were two problems, however, which the animals feared greatly, and which they faced each year with no hope of solution. The first of these was the spring flood. The river which ran through the centre of the forest was for most of the year a calm and gentle thing, but when the spring rains came the river changed into a raging monster. It roared out its anger as it rampaged through the forest, climbing over its banks to flood the burrows of small animals who had made their homes too close to the rising waters. Many beasts, large and small, were snatched from the banks to be carried away by the torrent and never seen again.

The river's anger subsided by early summer, and the animals enjoyed a few weeks of calm before the next terror was visited on them. The fires. These could start anywhere, and drive in any direction at the discretion of the winds. No place in the forest was safe. Many small animals who normally sought refuge in the treetops would find to their peril that this was now the *least* safe of havens. Others, crazed with fear, simply ran in circles until first exhaustion took them, and then the merciless flames.

Every year the animals faced the waters and the flames with whatever grace and courage they could muster, but with little hope.

But then, one fme spring morning, high in the treetops, a squirrel awoke from his long winter sleep with the memory of a dream. In his dream he had seen a creature in a golden crown, who had brought all the animals together to fight the twin scourges of the forest.

"Yes!" thought the squirrel. "That is what we have been missing. We need a *Leader!"*

So the squirrel called a meeting of the animals, and each sent a representative to the great clearing at the centre of the forest. It was the first time this had happened since the man and woman had been cast out after some funny business involving an apple and a snake. The snake would never

talk about it afterwards.

"Animals of the forest," the squirrel began, "Since the beginning of time we have been subjected to the terrors of flood and fire with no hope of an answer. This is because no individual animal can hope so solve such a complex problem. But if we all work together, and all contribute our talents, we can beat these perils. A *leader* will bring us together; a *leader* will combine our efforts; a *leader* will beat the waters and the fires!"

A *Leader!* What an idea! "Yes," said the tortoise, "An idea of much merit. But who will be our leader?" The question spread through the crowd, and everyone began to talk at once until they were silenced by a great roar.

"A Leader must, above all, be *brave,"* said the Lion. "The Lion is the bravest animal in the forest, and therefore the obvious choice. Furthermore, I will bite the heads off any who oppose me."

"Hooray for the lion!" cheered the animals, seeing the logic of his argument.

The following week the animals gathered again to hear the lion's plan. "For the floods in the spring," the lion began "We will all learn to swim. Animals who are natural swimmers will teach those who are not, and we will practice in the summer when the river is calm. Then, when the floods come, any animal caught in the waters will simply swim to shore."

"As for the fires, we have been looking at the problem backwards. By running *away* from the fires we are simply challenging the fires to a race — a race we mostly lose. Instead, we will run *into* the fires and through them, to a place which has already burned. Our calculations show that even the smallest and slowest of animals can do this with a chance of survival. The key is not to fear! It is important to run hard, without hesitation. But you will *not* hesitate, for we will be right behind you, and we will bite the heads off any who turn back."

"Right!" said the tortoise, his voice dripping sarcasm. "Brilliant!"

The lion's plan was put into effect the following spring, with disastrous results. The calm waters of summer had not prepared the animals to deal with a roaring current. Weak swimmers were pulled under immediately and swept along by the rushing waters to an unknown fate.

The survivors scarcely had time to recover before they had to apply the second part of the lion's plan, for the fires came early that year. It is easy

to speak of courage in the safe surroundings of a forest clearing, but it is quite another matter when you are so close to the flames that the heat is causing the ends of your whiskers to curl. Many animals turned from the inferno to face in preference the lion's jaws, only to find themselves looking at the other end of the lion. Retreating. Fast.

Two weeks after the last ember had ceased to glow the squirrel called the animals back to the clearing.

"We will not blame the lion for the unforeseen difficulties," he began. (Some foolish animals had made the mistake of openly criticising the lion for the failure of his plan). "However, we must now choose a new leader."

There was silence in the clearing for long seconds. "Humph!" said the elephant at last, "The prime requirement for a leader is not courage, as we have found to our cost!" (The elephant had no fear that the lion would try to eat him) "A leader must be strong and work hard, to set an example for those who follow. We elephants are the strongest animals of the forest, and the hardest workers. I will be your leader!"

"Yeah for the elephants!" cried several animals.

"Here is our plan," said the elephant a few days later. "My colleagues and I have invented a thing called a 'firebreak'. All the trees in an area five miles long and half a mile wide will be removed. When the flames arrive at this area they will find nothing to burn, and the fire will die. The animals on the side with the fire will only need to run to the firebreak, and they can then safely cross to the side where the fire cannot reach." The elephant paused for applause, which was thunderous. "Furthermore," he continued as the crowd hushed, "The larger trees will be tied together with vines to form a platform over the river which can be safely crossed even during the floods."

Work on the firebreak commenced the following day. It ended the following week. Although the elephants worked long and hard they had seriously overestimated the capacity of the smaller animals for this kind of work. While the squirrels tried their best, their ability to move large quantities of wood for long distances was limited. And the hard work sharpened the appetites of several animals so that their natural hunting instincts were hard to fight. A group of chipmunks eating lunch *became* lunch for a hungry fox. The rest of the chipmunks left. Eventually even the elephants had to give up.

When the fire arrived it leaped the incomplete firebreak with ease. Several animals who would normally have outrun the flames were so tired from their physical labours that they, too, became victims. The few trees

which had been dragged to the water's edge remained where they lay until the floods of the following spring lifted them away to an unknown destination.

"Who will be our leader now?" asked the squirrel, cutting back on his usual rhetoric.

"I will," said the ape with surprisingly little hesitation. "We have erred in assuming that a leader must be strong and courageous. Intelligence is the driving requirement of a good leader, and we apes are known to be the most inteffigent of the forest creatures. I will be your leader."

"OK for the apes" said one or two animals.

"In anticipation of this development," said the ape, "We have already addressed the problems, and I have here a plan to beat the floods and the flames,"

"Wow," said some of the animals, impressed despite their misgivings.

"A bunch of planks tied together with vines is not a bridge," said the ape, with a sneer directed at the elephant. "*This* is a bridge!" With an elegant flourish the ape unfolded a large blueprint. Attached to the top was an artist's impression.

"A heavy central span will carry the bigger forest animals," the ape explained. "The supports for this span will be the trunks of large trees, which will be anchored deep in the riverbed, far enough out into the river that they will be safe from the fires. At each side of the central span will be a cantilevered walkway to be used by the smaller animals, and above the bridge, attached to the tops of the support beams, will be a rope bridge for use by the more agile animals. In this way the entire population can flee the flames, or cross the flooded river, in total safety. All animals will be required to contribute to the construction according to their abilities. Beavers, for example, will play a key role in building the underwater anchorages. Squirrels will be involved in construction of the overhead rope bridges. Elephants, of course, will do the heavy work for which they are best suited."

Even the most jaded animals were impressed by the genius of the concept. The animals went to work with renewed enthusiasm.

Three weeks later the bridge was finished. Everyone agreed that it was a beautiftul piece of work. It crossed the river at the widest point, and reached high above the tallest of the trees. Birds who flew over the bridge

came back full of wonder. “Can’t wait to try it out,” said the tortoise. He didn’t have to wait long.

The fire came at night, while many animals were sleeping. The alarm was given by a night-owl, who saw the flames while he was flying high over the forest, looking for his supper. The animals were very frightened at first; then they remembered the bridge. A thousand animals — including a hundred elephants -- ran as fast as they could towards the bridge.

“Elephants go to the main bridge” screamed the ape. “Deer, you go to the side bridges. Squirrels, use the overhead vines. No, no, I said *deer* to the side bridges not rhinoceroses! You guys are far too heavy! Squirrels, you must go overhead! If you use the main bridge the elephants might step on you! No, of *course* Hedgehogs don’t have to climb the vines!”

Overhead vines caught fire from flying sparks and several small animals were trapped in the flames high above the frightened elephants. The ape screamed louder and louder but nobody was listening. Four hundred elephant feet hit the bridge at the same time. The supports for the bridge were held in the riverbed by a mix of sand, small pebbles and clay, which had been too difficult for the beavers to understand (they had spent most of their time playing underwater tag anyway). The main supports began to shudder and shake.

With a thundering groan the supports gave way, and the bridge fell into the river with a tremendous splash. It drifted to the centre of the river and floated away with the current, spinning slowly. Here and there small fires broke out on the floating bridge as hot coals fell onto the wood. On the bridge, two hundred animals cried out in vain for help, while from the depths of the forest came hundreds of terrified beasts, heading in vain towards the place where the bridge had been.

When the squirrel called all of the animals together few arrived at the clearing. “I really thought the ape’s plan would work,” he said to the tortoise. “Too much intelligence, too little wisdom,” replied the tortoise.

“*Wisdom!*” said the squirrel. “Of course! Thats it! Not strength; not courage; not even intelligence; *Wisdom* is what a leader needs.” All eyes turned to the owl.

“Owl,” said the squirrel “Your wisdom is legend. Everyone knows that the owl is the wisest creature in the forest! Will you be our leader?”

“Ah,” said the owl “Let me see if I’ve got this straight. If I succeed, you will expect me to solve harder problems, but if I fail you will call me

names and turn your backs on me, as you did to those who have tried and failed."

"That's right!" cried an elephant. "That's just what they did!"

"But more importantly," the owl continued, "You are asking me to solve problems which do not concern my kind. The flooding of the river and the burning of the forest pose no problems to those with wings. So, thank you, but no. I think that perhaps I am too wise to take such a job." So the owl spread his great wings and lifted off into the night. One by one the animals left the clearing, until the squirrel was alone in the dark woods. "Who will be our leader?" he asked; but there was no one to answer.

A light snow began to fall, for winter had returned to the forest and it was once again time for the squirrel to begin his long sleep. And then, snug in his bed, high amongst the treetops the squirrel realised the most important truth of all.

A leader does not need the courage of the lion, nor the strength of the elephant. He does not need great intelligence, and he doesn't even need a large amount wisdom. But he needs a little of all of these, together with a kind heart and a healthy helping of common sense.

Yet even as the thought formed, so came the onset of his winter sleep, and so the squirrel closed his weary eyes as a gentle snow fell over the forest, and the animals thought no more of leadership for a long, long time.

* * *

THE WORKSHOP COMMITTEE
(or *How Santa got the Sack)*

A Fable for the Third Millennium

"Look at this, everybody!" Santa burst into the Elves' Workshop positively brinming over with enthusiasm, waving a large sheet of paper on which some type of motor vehicle was sketched in bright red crayon. "Look at my great idea. It's the perfect toy. I was up most of the night working on it. It's basically a Big Red Truck, which is what most boys want anyway, and it's got a ladder and a bell which both work, but I've also added….." Santa looked up from his sketch and noticed for the first time that the elves were not at their benches but gathered in a tight circle at the centre of the shop. "What's this?" he asked.

"Santa, we need to have a few words with you," said Alvin, the oldest of the elves.

"If this is more of that Political Correctness business, half of my elves are already lady elves, and if I hire any more females you'll be complaining that the *men* are under-represented," Santa replied, his enthusiasm rapidly waning.

"Santa, we've mentioned several times that calling us 'my elves' is a very patronizing thing to do, It implies a sense of 'ownership' which is entirely inappropriate these days." Alvin said. "Anyway, it isn't about that. We'd like to discuss the way you run the shop."

"Same way as I always did, except for the new washrooms." Santa folded his sketch and stuffed it into a pocket of his red tunic. He looked around for a chair big enough to sit on, knowing that this 'discussion' could take some time.

"Please understand that we're not complaining, exactly," Alvin continued. "You've always been fair and open with us. It's just that now we're in the Third Millennium, and you see, well, your dictatorial management style is just a tad out of place."

"Dictatorial?!"

"Now don't get upset. We're not calling you a tyrant or anything like that, it's just that we'd like to have a little more say in how things work. In choosing what toys are to be made, for example. And we'd like to take a

look at the ‘Naughty or Nice’ list once in a while to make sure we’re all on board with your selection criteria.”

“You want *what? Nobody* sees that list but me and Mrs. Claus.”

“Well we can put that aside for now, if you like. What we’re really saying today is that, to come right down to it, we want to form a Workshop Committee.”

“To do what, exactly?” Santa had moved from ‘enthusiastic’ through ‘wary’ to ‘upset’ and was now edging towards ‘annoyed’, with ‘angry’ coming closer by the second. “I think you’d better explain.”

“Well, you’d still be in charge, of course. I mean, you can be the Chairperson of the Committee if you want, but we would like to have some of our workers, five or six I think should be about right, at the meetings with you. See, for one thing, instead of coming into the shop with a new idea it could be presented at the meeting, and the shop work would not be disrupted.”

“I don’t see much shop work to disrupt at the moment,” Santa observed.

“And we’d like to input our own ideas,” Alvin continued, ignoring Santa’s sarcasm. “Ideas for new toys, for example, or better work procedures, or improved safety, or…….”

‘Well,’ Santa thought, ‘If it’s only five or six that still leaves 95% of them at their workbenches, which would be a substantial improvement.’ “O.K.” he sighed. “If I agree to give it a try will you all get back to work? Christmas is only eight months away, you know.”

“Agreed!” said Alvin.

A good deal less jolly than when he had entered, Santa left the workshop in search of a large glass of Santa’s Little Liquid Helper.

* * *

As Chair of the Workshop Committee, Santa called the first meeting of the group to order, banging on the table with the small wooden gavel which the elves had made for him. “Right. Now I want you all to look at this; it’s the perfect toy. It’s basically a Big Red Truck, which is what most boys want anyway…….”

“If I may,” Alvin interjected, “I know how busy you are, Santa, so

you probably didn't have a chance to read the 'Rules and Procedures for Meetings' document I sent you. However, paragraph 17 specifically prohibits the Chairperson from making submissions to the committee. The Chairperson, you see, must be free from perceived bias, and able to enforce order without prejudice. If you'd like, I would be happy to submit your idea to the Design Subcommittee on your behalf, or you could always choose to step down as Chairperson and participate actively in the work of the committee. Your choice, Santa."

"Hmph. Yes, Alvin. I think that I'd rather participate than sit here like a stuffed dummy. Is that allright?"

"Of course Santa. As Vice-chair, then, it falls to me to take over as Chairperson." Alvin moved to the head of the table and rapped smartly with the gavel. "As Chairperson of this committee I suggest that we relax the rules a little until Santa has had a chance to study our 'Rules of Order' booklet. Perhaps on this occasion we could give Santa a little leeway? May I have a motion to that effect from the floor?"

"Yes, good," said Santa without waiting for motion or vote. "Now about my Big Red Truck, it's the perfect toy……."

"If I may, Santa," Alvin once again broke in, "That's a value judgment which is no longer yours to make. It's up to the Design Sub-committee to determine if your idea is 'perfect'. Joyce, as Chairperson of the Design Sub-committee, have you completed your value-determination study of Santa's toy?"

"I'm afraid I haven't had a chance to look at Santa's idea yet, Chairman."

"Well, let's take this as an opportunity for Santa to formally submit his idea for evaluation."

With gritted teeth which could in no way be mistaken for a smile Santa slid his sketch across the table.

"Oh, no," said Joyce, shaking her head for added emphasis. "I'm afraid we can't accept this, Santa. There's no indication of materials used; no quantities; no time estimates for manufacture. And I don't see *any* cost data, anywhere. There aren't even any *dimensions*, for Heaven's sake! This could be six inches long or sixty feet. Oh, no Santa; this won't do at all. What I have here is a crude illustration of what might or might not be a child's toy. Anyway, even from this sketch I have a strong suspicion that it is never going to survive the scrutiny of the Psychological Impact Sub-committee. What do you think, Mavis?"

"Oh Santa," Mavis smiled, "You have such a lovely child-like charm, you know, with your little crayon drawings; but just *look* at all that red! That bright red colour has so many unpleasant connotations; blood, fire, danger, that sort of thing."

"Ii's a Fire Truck!" Santa positively growled.

"Why not use a lighter shade of red, at least," Mavis suggested, still smiling. "Maybe something closer to Bubblegum Pink, Number *RR-5 6/a* in the Colour Guide attached to our Psychological Impact Submissions Guidelines booklet? With nice Denim Blue stripes, or perhaps a checkerboard pattern."

"A Big Pink Truck with Blue Stripes is not exactly what I had in mind," Santa sighed. Having moved beyond anger he had begun the slide into quiet capitulation.

Alvin banged his gavel. "Yes, well, I think we've spent enough time on this truck thing. Perhaps one of you might like to volunteer a little time to spend with Santa, to bring him up to speed with our new design and production protocols?"

"I'd be glad to do that," said Mavis. "I'd need to take a leave of absence from the workshop, though, and do the briefings during working hours. My leisure time is so vital to good workplace behavior, teamwork, and interpersonal relationships, you see."

"Of course, Mavis," said Alvin, "How could anyone possibly argue with that?"

* * *

Santa stared at the productivity chart, unable to believe his eyes. Since it was now the middle of September the graph should be nudging *85%*, while it actually stood below thirty. If the number didn't hit 100% by Christmas Eve there would be empty stockings on the twenty-fifth, and the repercussions would be unpleasant, to say the least. He tried to recall what had happened to the last Santa who had failed to meet his December deadline, but couldn't recollect such a thing ever happening in the long history of the Santa business.

As he strode briskly into the workshop he was stunned by the resounding silence. His footsteps echoed in the cavernous room, One solitary elf sat at his bench, apparently absorbed in a small pamphlet which lay open on the work surface.

"Oh, hello," the elf said as Santa approached. "They sent me in here to study because it's so nice and quiet in here these days. They said they won't let me back on the Financial Projections Sub-committee until I can demonstrate that I understand Supply Side Economics. I find it hard, though; don't you?"

"Where is everybody?" Santa exploded. "Don't they know that Christmas Eve is only twelve weeks away? Where are the toys? There should be a thousand Raggedy Anne Dolls over there; six hundred electric train sets! Where are the Teddy Bears and Dollies' Tea Sets? What the Hell is going on here?"

"Well," said the elf, his cheeks scarlet, "I never would have believed that I'd hear such language in this workplace! And from Santa himself, of all people! Since you ask, the schedule board is on the wall behind you. I think you'll find that the Finance Subcommittee is working in Syndicate Room seven, the User-Demand Projections Group is having a Teambuilding Away Day and has gone for a sleigh-ride, the Environmental Sensitivity Advisory Unit is experimenting with a new line of paints, and the 'Let'sDrag-Santa-Into-the-Twenty-First-Century' crowd has gone on a field trip to SONY to look at their new line of large screen TVs. I'm not sure what the Methods and Standards people are doing, but Clarence was in here earlier looking for his stop-watch."

"Isn't *anybody* working?" Santa howled.

"Oh, Santa, that *is so* insensitive. We're *all* working."

* * *

When Alvin called the December meeting of the Workshop Committee to order nobody noticed at first that Santa was missing. He often missed these meetings lately. He had spent the last few in the shop, working furiously at the sewing machine to produce Dolly's Wedding Day packages, mumbling under his breath all the time. There was some confusion regarding what he was mumbling, as Alvin refused to believe that Santa would use those words.

Alvin picked up the gavel to call the meeting to order, but before he could rap on the table the door to the committee room blew open and a stranger entered. The man was tall and broad shouldered, with slicked-back dark hair, long and curly at the back, and a smartly trimmed Vandyke beard. His dark blue pinstripe suit was immaculately tailored and a gold Rolex watch glittered on his wrist. He was puffing and chewing in turns on a short

fat cigar. Without a word the stranger sat down in Santa's chair, which he tipped back to place his custom made reindeer-leather boots on the rosewood table.

"I don't know who you are, or who you *think* you are," Alvin spluttered, "Or *where* you think you are if it comes to that, but if you wish to participate in this meeting you should first read the "Principles of Behavior" appendix in our "Rules of Order" booklet. And furthermore, smoking is strictly forbidden everywhere on these premises, so I'd be much obliged if you would

"Shut up, Alvin," the stranger drawled around his cigar.

"And I'll thank you not to address the Chairperson of the Workshop Committee in such a manner. Where's Santa? Does he know that you're here, whoever you are?"

"He's out, I'm in, and you're all in deep doo-doo. Meet your new Santa, boys and girls."

"You're ... How'? They can't do this. They can't replace Santa without due consultation You'll not get away with this. I'll either have a full explanation and apology or I'll ….."

"You'll what?" The new Santa slipped his feet from the table and his chair came down with a thump. He glared at the Chairperson of the Workshop Committee. "What will you do, Mister-slash-Mizz Chairperson? Call a strike, maybe? How, exactly, would I know the difference? There hasn't been a toy produced in this shop for four months, and we've only three more weeks before Christmas Eve. What exactly are you threatening me with?"

"I would hesitate to use work stoppage as a weapon," Alvin replied coolly, "But under the circumstances you leave me no choice. And in case you're thinking of sending in scab workers, we will occupy the workshop. You'll never have the toys you need by Christmas Eve."

"Well I'm relieved to hear you say that, Mister Chair, because it saves me the trouble of sacking you all. I wish you well for your sit-in. Perhaps you've forgotten that this is the North Pole, and that it's going to get damn cold damn fast when we cut the power to the building. And if you survive the winter I'd suggest you find yourselves some hard hats before spring, when the wreckers move in to pull the old place down."

"Then how, exactly, do you intend to get the toys produced?" Alvin blustered.

"We're out-sourcing," Santa snapped, grinning around his cigar. "Our make-or-buy calculations already had this place down as a major loser, but your performance of the last few months has persuaded us to move up our schedule. Anyway, you guys are welcome to stay in the workshop as long as you like. The power goes off tomorrow morning. Now if you'll excuse me I've got a Lear Jet to catch. You'd be amazed at the way the Japanese treat a prospective buyer when you tell them you'll be needing five and a half million portable DVD players. Lock the front door when you leave, will you? On second thoughts, don't bother. Nobody is going to break in here. There's nothing worth stealing."

Santa left the Committee Room in a haze of blue smoke and expensive cologne. He paused outside the room and called back: "I almost forgot. Merry Christmas to all, and to all a Good Night. Ho! Ho! Ho!"

*** * ***

The optimum size for a committee is often one person. For a committee which is required to make decisions, the optimum size is <u>always</u> one person.

* * *

THE BEANCOUNTER AND THE KING

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Once upon a time, not that long ago really, there lived a King. He was a good king, kindly and wise, and he ruled his kingdom well. When he rode about the kingdom in his Royal Carriage the people cheered and threw roses.

When he became tired of smiling and waving the King would sometimes stop by the stables and saddle up his favourite charger. To avoid the company of the ever vigilant Royal Guard, he would usually do this early in the morning, when not even the palace footmen were awake. So it was that on a sparkling spring morning the King set out at a canter along the river bank which meandered past the Royal Palace through open meadows alive with wild flowers and birdsong. The sky was the colour of a robin's egg, but so bright that it hurt the eye to look directly at it, and even though the sun had barely cleared the horizon the King could already feel the heat of it on his cheek. He knew the trail well, for he had been riding these fields since he had been a young boy, many years ago. After a few miles he turned the horse from the trodden path towards distant woods, where he hunted from time to time, and set the animal to a gallop.

A trail of sorts, not much more than a rabbit run, led towards the woods which were separated from the meadow by a high briar hedge. A prudent man would have dismounted at the hedge and opened the wide five-barred gate through which the local farmer moved his sheep to and from the meadow, but it is difficult to be prudent on a bright May morning, especially if you are a king, and if you are mounted on your favourite charger. Spurred on by his rider the huge animal galloped towards the gate, but the area by the opening was worn to bare earth by the feet of countless sheep, and muddied by the rains of the previous day, and so the beast lost his footing. By long training and lightning fast reaction the animal was able to bring itself to a halt inches from the gate. While the horse therefore failed to take the jump the King cleared the gate by a good two feet and came to rest face down in a mud puddle, where he lay unmoving.

All of this had been witnessed by a local shepherd who was returning home after a long night tending to a sick ewe, and who now stood, puffing his pipe, watching the unconscious body in the muddy puddle. Having seen his King but once and at a distance he remembered only that His Highness, unlike this poor fellow, had been exquisitely dressed. But without really thinking about it any further the shepherd pulled the hapless rider out of the

puddle, ensured that he continued to breathe, and carried the still unmoving body back to his croft, where the King was cleaned up, tucked in and generally very well cared for.

In due course the Royal Guard tracked the hoofprints to the gate, tracked the footprints to the croft and returned the unconscious King to the Palace, where he received the professional but less effective ministrations of the Surgeon General and his staff. So it was that the King did not learn of his rescuer until several days later, but within hours of learning the truth the elderly shepherd was brought before the king, where he knelt, cap in hand, still not sure how his act of kindness had anything to do with the regal presence before whom he now trembled.

"Rise, sir," the King said. "It is I who should be on my knees, for without your action I would surely have drowned in that shallow puddle. My debt to you is great, and although I know that you acted without thought of reward, you shall have one. Name it, good sir, and if it is within my power to grant, I swear you shall have it."

The shepherd thought for only a few seconds before replying. "A job sire, if you please. Not for me, for my son. He does not take well to farm life, and has spoken often of life at the palace and how good it must be for those fortunate enough to work here. Would you give him a job here, and we will call your debt repaid?"

No amount of pleading could persuade the shepherd to take more, not so much as a few silver pennies, and so the old man left to break the good news to his son while the king called for the High Chancellor.

"A job, Chancellor. Find this boy a job. A good job, a responsible job, and one with very good pay. Do it today."

That afternoon the Chancellor reported back to the king. He had spoken with the "boy" who was, in fact, in his middle thirties, and had come to a conclusion which he now shared with his Sovereign.

"The man is simple-minded and uneducated, Sire. He has but basic skill with numbers and little more with letters. He is not physically capable of work in the stables or fields. He cannot fight, and has no skill with wood nor iron nor stone. He is in short unemployable. There is no function within the palace walls or grounds which this man is capable of filling."

"He can count, you say?"

"He can count, sire."

"Then he shall start tomorrow morning in the Palace kitchens. There he shall serve as my Royal Beancounter."

"And what exactly will be his duties, Your Highness?"

The King explained.

Fresh fruit and vegetables were delivered daily to the palace from nearby farms. These deliveries included large quantities of Green Beans, a favorite of the Queen, which were delivered in sacks. The sacks were stacked in a small room adjacent to the kitchen where they were inspected by the Royal Beancounter before being released for culinary processing.

The Beancounter opened the sacks, counted the beans, refilled the sacks, marked the sacks with 'C' (for 'Counted') and sent them on to the kitchen. The number of beans in each sack was recorded in a little notebook and at the end of each day the Beancounter added up the total number of sacks and the number of beans in each. These statistics were written down on a sheet of paper headed 'Daily Bean Record' and signed with the Bean-counter's mark. The sheets were hand delivered by a palace flunky to the High Chancellor himself The Chancellor filed the reports in a special bucket-shaped filing cabinet which he kept under his desk and which was emptied each night by the palace janitor. In winter they were put to a more practical use in the Chancellor's fireplace.

The Beancounter received one gold coin per month for this work ---- by the standards of palace paypackets this was very decent money. He was proud of his work and took it seriously. He shaved daily, bathed weekly and wore clean clothes. He was happy. The Chancellor was happy. The Queen never knew that there had been any change in the kitchen routine and her point of view in this matter is therefore of little consequence.

Within six months the Shepherd's son was promoted to Royal Beancounter, First Grade, which gave him great pleasure, though no increase in his take-home pay. Altogether a very satisfactory outcome. Pity it couldn't have ended there, so that the story could finish with 'and they all lived happily ever after', which would have been a very appropriate ending for a tale which began with 'Once upon a time'.

The following summer the King and his retinue embarked on a tour of the Kingdom, an event which occurred every third year or so. While the retinue examined tax rolls, settled minor legal quibbles and took stock of Royal Holdings the King was primarily involved with drinking, dining, socialising, drinking, listening to music, dining, attending the theatre, drinking and chasing chambermaids along castle corridors. In truth the King was feeling his age and had decided than on this tour he would cut back

considerably on the chasing. At the first stop, having congratulated the local Earl on a fine feast, the King allowed himself to be drawn out to the balcony for a private chat with his host.

"It's my son," the Earl said.

"What about him?"

"He's useless. Can't joust; won't hunt; not interested in sports of any kind; can't be persuaded to join the army nor the church. Can't even expect him to marry well, since his skill with the ladies is on a par with his other talents. He's useless."

"And so?" said the King, seeing nothing out of the ordinary in this. Ninety percent of his nobility's sons would have been a good fit for such a description.

"Well, I thought you might find him a job at the palace, where his lack of ability wouldn't be any sort of hindrance to his career."

"What sort of job?" asked the King, feeling vaguely insulted. Actually he was experiencing a strong sense of déjà vu around this whole conversation.

"Oh, you know," said the Earl "Something with good pay, good perks, lots of opportunity to meet the right kind of people and — most importantly -- no responsibility whatsoever."

"Do we have anything like that?" asked the King, turning to the High Chancellor who, as usual, was lurking in the shadows.

"As is happens, Sire," said the Chancellor, "We do have an opening for a Supreme High Director General in charge of Royal Beancounting."

"Good," said the King. "He starts next week."

"Sounds perfect" said the Earl. "He leaves for the Palace tomorrow."

Given the size of the kingdom, and the fact that dining, drinking and regal carousing are things which can't be rushed, the King returned home six months later, just as the first snows of winter were beginning to fly. The regal procession stopped at the palace gates, which for some reason were standing open and unguarded. There were no palace guards anywhere to be seen, and few courtiers. The High Chancellor's assistant, looking decidedly harried, made a brief appearance in the courtyard, but scurried away before either the King or the Chancellor could question him.

The Counting House was empty, as were the barracks. The armory was deserted and devoid of arms. The Queen was alone in her chambers. When asked what-the-hell-was-going-on-here she gave the King a look which would have floored a lesser man and hissed through gritted teeth “Ask your God-damned Beancounters!”

The King strode through the corridors, from which the few remaining servants scurried at his approach, and crashed through the doors to the kitchen. The Head Chef was noticeably absent and the three remaining scullery maids stirred assorted pots without remarking His Royal Highness’s presence in any way.

In short, the Palace was virtually deserted, and essentially non-functional. It had all of the earmarks of a machine which has run out of fuel and puttered to a stop at the side of the road.

But the Beancounting Department was thriving.

The Department employed a total of over four hundred, including a technical staff of sixty seven and an analytical division of eighty. There were one hundred and seventy counters in grades one through eight, and a research division which included seventeen PhDs. The Department used the most modern computerized processing systems. Bean-counts were fed into the computers which calculated mean and deviations, while automated equipment measured beans by size and compared the results against standards set by the Department’s Industrial Engineering Group. Any sack which failed to measure up was returned along with the entire shipment to the farmer who had supplied it. Receiving back their beans, now several weeks old and unfit for human consumption, did not go down well with the farmers, most of whom now refused to supply produce of any kind to the palace. This lack of shipments did not seem to have deterred the Bean-counting Department nor put any kind of dampener on its rate of growth. Thanks to the imaginative work of the Department’s Research Division, the Counters were now shifting their attention to carrots and potatoes, while the PhDs had embarked on an ambitious project designed to apply their procedures to Cabbages and Brussels Sprouts.

The Shepherd’s son had been fired six weeks previously for failure to meet the new counting standards.

Since Beancounting activities now absorbed over eighty percent of the palace budget it was inevitable that expenditures elsewhere had suffered. The impact of these cutbacks was readily apparent. Many of the courtiers had left the palace shortly after regular meals ceased to appear in the dining room, and most of the Palace Guard had deserted when the same thing

happened to their paycheques.

The King drew his sword and went looking for the Supreme High Director General in charge of Royal Beancounting, but he was too late. The S.H.D.G. had left his lavish office in something of a hurry and was now on his horse, heading south at a gallop.

The King sat on the floor and put his head in his hands. “What am I going to do?” he asked -- but the deserted corridors gave back only an echo.

It was too late anyway. The Barbarians of the Northern Reaches had been watching the Kingdom’s deterioration with great interest, and when their invading army arrived it walked into the Palace virtually unopposed.

The King should have known better. Someone should have explained it to him.

A small-minded man with small vision and small ambition is rarely a danger, and can be very valuable in a position where the work is simple and repetitive, requiring little or no initiative. He will be happy there and he will do the work well. But a smallminded man with ambition, given power and authority and left to his own devices, is a ticking time-bomb. Left unsupervised for any considerable period of time, such a man can topple a kingdom.

* * *

THE CARPENTER'S HAMMER

A Fable for the Third Millennium

John Lockwood liked to say that his name had predisposed him to his trade, but this was not true. As with his father and grandfather before him, carpentry ran in John's blood. For the Lockwoods, no rose could smell as sweet as the scent of cedar shavings and pine sawdust from the shop floor, and the finest painting in the grandest gallery could not compare to the grain of a newly polished pine table or sideboard. And like his father and grandfather, John excelled at the trade and was known far and wide as a consummate craftsman.

John's father died at the bench he so loved-- and not in the manager's office where he rightly belonged. The men would joke good heartedly that an invisible manager ran the place, since the flesh and blood manager was more often to be found admiring a new piece of white oak, or sketching a design for a dining room table. John's grandfather had started the shop with two apprentices to help him, but by the time his father moved into the small corner office there were eight skilled carpenters on staff as well as three apprentices, a clerk and a storeman. At the time of his father's passing the payroll of the little company had grown to thirty five and the original premises were straining at the seams. John knew that he could no longer afford the luxury of spending time at the workbench with his beloved wood, and so he packed his toolbox for the last time and moved into the corner office.

The office was a mess. Papers were strewn everywhere. Mrs. Jacobson, the company clerk, had, in her own words, "nagged the old man like a fishwife" on the subject of keeping orderly records, but admitted that this had been as effective as "yelling at the wind to stop blowing." Skimpy records did not show whether bills had been paid or debts had been collected. Production records gave no hint of who worked well, who worked fast or who worked at all. An ominous scrap of paper stated "Spoilage costs for March" and gave a figure which made John's hair stand on end.

He looked over his personnel records — names of longtime friends and workmates. Old Samuel, for instance, had worked at the shop since John's grandfather's day, and had taught John many of the basic skills of the craft. Samuel was now into his sixties, and so crippled by arthritis that he worked very slowly. His work was still of the very highest quality, worthy of exhibition in the finest gallery, and it commanded the highest prices; but he took so long to finish each piece that the return barely covered the old craftsman's wages, with not a penny over for shop profit. Arthur turned out

his pieces rapidly, but it was rough work and it did not sell well. Mick, the foreman, was a competent craftsman but he preferred to work at the bench rather than focus on what the men were doing, and discipline in the shop had become very lax. Neither was he good with apprentice training,—being impatient and critical without showing the youngsters what they had done wrong, and how to avoid such errors in the future.

From his study of the ledgers one immediate problem jumped out at him. The amount of overtime paid out in recent months was staggering, and John was well aware of the men's complaints in this area, and of the occasional angry phone calls from their wives. He needed more hands to keep up with the workload, and hired five more journeymen and two apprentices. Because of the state of the shop's finances John relaxed the usual standards and hired men who would work for less than the going rate. He also replaced some worn shop tools, but not from the usual supply house, where the cost would have been more than he could afford.

The extra staff did not help. Although daily production was slightly improved, three of the new men proved to be short-tempered bar-room brawlers, well beyond Mick's ability to control. For the first time ever a fight broke out on the shop floor (over an allegedly stolen tool) and John had to run out of his office to restore order.

Despite his efforts to turn the company around, things went rapidly from bad to worse. Within a few months the prospects for the company had become so bleak that John saw no way out, and expected that the shop would face bankruptcy in the new year, if not before. He braced himself to tell the men, but before he could rise from his desk Samuel entered the office. The old carpenter closed the door behind him and placed a sack on John's desk.

"The Master, your father, told me to give you this if it looked like you were in trouble, but not before you'd been on your own for half a year or so. I'm thinking that it might be the time. There's this letter that goes along with it." John opened the sack and took out a large wooden case. He recognised it at once; it was the toolbox his father had used since before John was born, and which he had carried to the end of his days. His father's name was carved in bold letters at the centre of the lid, and underneath, in a shaky hand, was John's. He had carved that on his seventh birthday, his fathers large strong hands guiding his son's movements with the chisel. John opened the box. The tools within were immaculate, their blades oiled and shining, their edges as sharp as razors; the handles seemed to shine with an inner glow, the grain standing out from the wood from decades of use. To his surprise, John saw that each tool had a numbered tag tied to its handle. He opened the letter.

"Son: From my grave I ask you a final favour. Speak with Howard in the storeroom. He has several pieces of white oak which I have instructed him to keep for you. ('Sure', John thought, 'If he can remember where he put them.' Howard's stores were much like John's small office when it came to tidyness and order.) *I would like you to build a cabinet, fronted with glass, which is to be placed at the front of the shop, where all who enter will see it. In this cabinet I would like you to place my toolbox, so that whenever you look at it you will think of me, and remember the lessons I taught you. I would like you to build this cabinet in a special way. I have numbered the tools in my toolbox, and each is to be used for the purpose outlined in the attachment."*

John did not immediately open the attachment, but sat and wondered at the strangeness of this request. None of the men needed to be reminded of the old craftsman who had been their employer and their friend for so many years, and there was never a day that John did not think of his father with affection and pride; but strangest of all were the numbered tags attached to the handles of each tool. It was many years since John had needed instruction in the selection of the right tool for a given job. He opened the attachment.

"*The tool marked #1 is to be used to cut the oak to the required size,*" it began. Then tool #1 must be a rip or crosscut saw, John thought, but to his amazement he found the #1 tag firmly tied to the handle of his father's hammer. "*Tool number two is for reducing the planks to the needed thickness and smoothing of the grain* 'the instructions continued. It was not the plane but the carpenter's drill which carried the second tag. A chisel was named as the tool to be used "*in setting the pegs to connect the shelves in the cabinet*." The crosscut saw was suggested as appropriate for "a*cquiring a smooth finish to the outer surfaces of the wood.*"

Samuel nodded politely and left. John sat in stunned silence. Perhaps his father's mind had slipped towards the end. Nothing else could explain the odd nature of his final request. John dropped the papers into the toolbox and set them aside. Other urgent tasks demanded his attention. Urgent tasks always seemed to be demanding his attention lately, he thought.

Over the next few days he looked often at the toolbox, wondering what his father had intended. In the end, not knowing how to comply with his father's last request, he sought out old Samuel.

"I was to wait until you came to me for help and then give you this," the old man told him, handing over a second envelope. "I don't know what's

in it and it was not my place to ask, but it's what the Master asked of me, and I hope it will be of help to you."

Alone in his office John opened the letter. As he read the words he could imagine his father in the shop, his stool tilted back and his feet propped on the workbench after a long day.

"*I hope you haven't started work on my cabinet, son."* The letter began. "*That was a fine piece of oak I'd been keeping for years looking for just the right use. If you tried to cut it to size with my hammer then you're not the son I think you are.*

"*Did you get my message? Pretty obvious, huh? There is a purpose to each tool and each tool is made to serve a purpose. Use the wrong tool for the job and you're inviting disaster. You don't cut wood with a hammer nor smooth it with a saw. You wonder why I should need to remind you of this? Well if Samuel saw a need to give you this letter, then what you're doing is worse than using a hammer to cut wood. How can I know this? Because it's what I was doing son. I realised it too late to turn things around, or even to warn you about the dangerous course I'd set you on.*

"*When I moved into the office I lost a good craftsman and gained a poor manager. Feeling so uncomfortable in that office I spent little time there, leaving the shop with no manager at all. Are you doing the same thing? Are you the right tool for the manager's job?*

"*Remember this too: I taught you than money spent on low quality tools is money wasted. Your mother grumbled at the expense when I first filled my toolbox, but those tools gave me a lifetime of service while other men's tools wore away or broke all around me. At best, a poor tool will give you poor work.*

"*I'm sorry, son, that I've left you in this mess. I hope this advice can help you before it's too late."*

John folded the letter and placed it in the box. The shop was dark, the men having left some hours previously. John turned off the lights,and left the office. As he looked over the empty shop floor he wondered if it *was* all too late.

* * *

The first man to be moved was John Lockwood. The new manager was an ex-army officer, still in his forties, living on a disability pension after a piece of shrapnel had ensured that he would not walk again without a cane.

John's enquiries told him that the man had been well respected by those under his command, and that he had come to officer rank by means of a field commission. He made the man a very generous offer which was accepted immediately. The two of them worked late into the night and changes were made.

One of the new tradesmen and one apprentice had shown willingness to learn and to give a fair day's effort. The others were paid a week's wages and released. Samuel was given his own corner of the shop, where his main job was to instruct the apprentices, thus relieving the other tradesmen of a task they had not wanted and did not do well. Mick was sent back to his bench, where he settled in with a sigh of relief. The new shop foreman was John Lockwood. Howard came out from the warehouse, which he had run badly, and was appointed as the first full time salesman for the little company, a job at which he was to excel. Mrs. Jacobson, less than a month from her sixty-sixth birthday, was given a handsome severance package which included a comfortable pension. A new clerk, college trained, was hired to put the paperwork in order.

The new shop began to tick along and then to hum, and then to roar. Morale reached and surpassed it's old level.

John Lockwood searched the storeroom and found six broad planks of kiln-dried white oak, into which he poured his time, his skill and his love. Over the years many handsome offers were made for the fine display cabinet which sat inside the main entrance, but it was not for sale. The cabinet housed an old toolbox, the lid propped open to display the fine old tools. lIn front of the toolbox sat a carpenter's hammer, and in front of the hammer sat a small engraved steel plaque. The plaque read:

"*This is a hammer. It is used to drive nails.*"

* * *

TIlE STUPID BUMBLEBEE

A Fable for the Third Millennium

Grasshoppers and Bees do not compete with each other for food, territory or matmg rights, and so it was that George the Grasshopper and Bernard Bumblebee became good friends. George went one day to visit the hive, which hung in a large old oak tree, and found Bernard sitting on a branch watching the activity all around him. George noticed that his friend looked troubled, and asked what was wrong.

"It's the numbers," Bernard explained. "I just don't see how we can survive for long the way we're going. We're simply not bringing enough food into the hive. The clover field is half a kilometer away, you see, and, although our worker bees are doing their very best, the trip there and back is simply taking too long. If we don't find a way to speed things up, we won't survive the winter."

Surprised, George looked at the activity all around him; everyone seemed to be very busy indeed. A long line of bees snaked out of the hive, along the branch, down the trunk of the tree and away into the distance. A similar line approached the tree from the meadow, climbed the trunk, along the branch and back into the hive, where they delivered their cargo and immediately joined the outgoing line to repeat the process. "Bernard, why are all the worker bees *walking* back and forth to the meadow?" George asked. "Why do they not fly?"

"Ah, well, it's a matter of aeronautical engineering, George. We're simply not built for it. The Queen hired a team of management consultants to do an efficiency study, and fortunately for us there was an aerodynamics expert on the team. He explained to us that our wing area is simply too small

to support our large bodies. There's also the matter of wind resistance — even if we were to get off the ground, our size would make us prey to every gust of wind, and we'd never be able to fly in a straight line. It's allright for Hornets and Horseflies, with their sleek aerodynamic shapes and smaller bodies, but it's not for us Bumblebees. You see, in order to fly we'd have to flap our wings so fast that we'd shake the damn things off. I mean, just look how flimsy they are." Bernard extended his wings, and George saw that they did indeed look too frail to support his friend's great weight.

Just as he was about to take his leave George was distracted by a buzzing sound, and looked into the distance to see a small spot moving erratically towards the hive. As it came closer George saw that it was a bumblebee, flying very badly but flying nevertheless. The bee landed on the branch, bounced into the air, landed again and walked unsteadily into the hive. Amazed, George turned to Bernard. "Wasn't that a Bumblebee?"

"Yes."
"But he was *flying!"*
"Take no notice of him. That was just Basil showing off."
"But he can fly!"

"Yes, I know. We've tried several times to explain it to him, but in the end we had to admit defeat; Basil is just too stupid to understand aerodynamics."

When you need to do the impossible, make sure that there is at least one person on your team who is too stupid to understand why it can't be done.

* * *