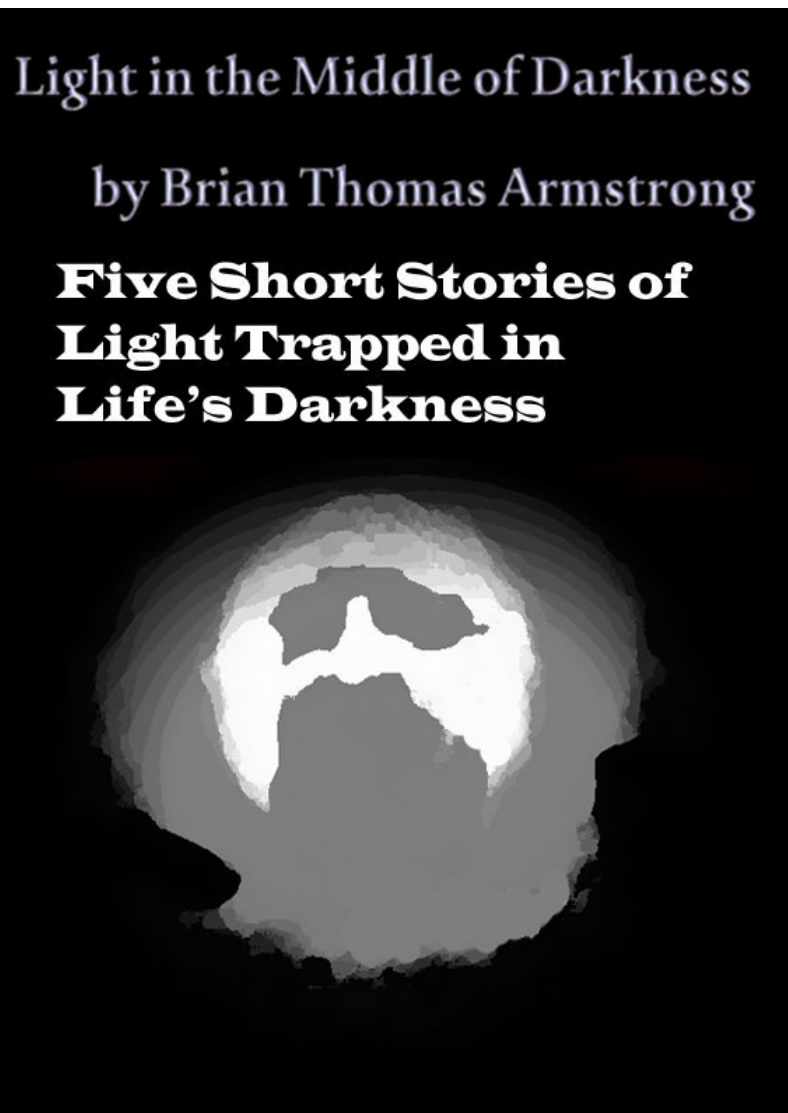


Light in the Middle of Darkness

Five Short Stories: *by Brian Thomas Armstrong*





The Black Tooth

The sound of Detective Levno's fist hitting the hard metal table in the middle of the interrogation room made the petty punk criminal jump in the seat he was cuffed to, and then uncontrollably slide the metal chair backwards away from his tormentor with his feet. The hard angry shouting voice that bellowed from the seasoned detective's mouth cut through the half mobbed up street thief like a hot knife plucked straight from a dungeon masters' fire pit. The cop's cold hard glare made the crook unable to look the detective in the eyes. Wheeler was not a squealer, at least not yet, but he was just about willing to say anything to make his misery stop; at least the misery that Detective Jack Levno was inflicting on his latest victim / perp., Jesse "Fat Man" Wheeler. Fat Man Wheeler was the running street joke in the neighborhood because Jesse was actually thin, broke, a loser, and very gaunt and unhealthy looking, plus a petty criminal.

"Enough of this crap you god damned shitwheeler!" The detective bellowed at Wheeler, Jesse sobbed and pleaded with the detective - I told you over and over again that it wasn't me who did those things!

Detective Levno was intentionally a tough man to read. He worked his way up through the department ranks the hard way. Levno paid his dues as a street cop for five years before finally nailing the detectives' exam, sending his career into the next level of police work. The only trouble was that the next level of police work so far had led to nowhere for him, at least nowhere he hadn't already been. The only thing that seemed to have changed with Jack's big

promotion five years ago was a few bucks more and a fancier job tittle at work, that's all. Detective Jack Levno was a seasoned veteran cop, but also had become damaged goods at the precinct long ago.

"I haven't been a detective for years now without having to deal with crazy, lying, lunatic bags of shit like you! Just like you they always expect me to believe their new form of horseshit just like the crap you're trying to shovel out right now onto my favorite shoes Wheeler! Well I aint buyin it, not now, not then, not ever, so give it up shitbag or your troubles are going to get much worse than they are now; I guarantee that personally!" Levno threatened Wheeler with a sadistic smile as he talked. He then hit the table again with a loud bang focusing Jesse Wheeler's limited brain span into absolute attention to what the detective was insinuating, and how the facts didn't line up every time Jesse Wheeler opened his stupid mouth to try to answer the detectives allegations.

Jesse was looking very distraught and you could tell he was wearing down and so could the detective. The old school cop could smell the confession he was notorious for getting in a pinch. Levno jumped back into Wheelers face again and turned up the heat by shouting and pounding his fist on the table again. Wheeler was sniveling at this point and whined to the Detective – "I will tell you how it all started if I can just have some water man, and a just a few minutes to clear my head. I'm so tired I can't think anymore. You don't have a clue what I've been through detective!" Jesse looked down at the cold worn steel table as if trying to find some answers to his predicament from a piece of interrogation room furniture, he then proceeded to emotionally crumble and sob uncontrollably.

Levno calmed down his demeanor towards the cuffed Wheeler and gave him a slight warming smile. Whatever you need pall, he said, just tell us the truth and we can work with you on this. Just tell us how this all started then, OK. The detective switched to the good cop routine sensing the prisoner was on the verge of breaking and giving up everything. With no lawyer asked for yet by the newly arrested Wheeler, Levno was certain he could close this case early with Wheeler's confession and then hit his favorite cop bar for some coolant before going home to his empty cramped rundown apartment in the bad part of downtown.

The detective called over to his partner Sargent Roland who had been standing by the interrogation room door leaning against the wall watching the detective do his thing on Wheeler.

Hey Roland, do you think you can get our friend here some water? Roland nodded his head and still remained silent as he opened the door, stepped out into the hall and closed the solid wood door behind him with a loud slam and heavy click of the lock.

Sargent Darnel Roland was Detective Levno's yin to the older detective's yang. The sergeant was a young black man with good taste in clothes, Levno was an older caucasianish man - no one could really tell if Detective Levno had a touch of Polynesian, Black, or Hispanic in him, in fact it was a running bet/joke on just what form of latte fell into Levno's caucasianism. Levno also wore cheap suits and never minded wrinkles, whereas Sargent Roland was meticulously clean and pressed as a rule. The odd couple seemed to work well together and Roland usually

stepped back letting the old man do his thing on crime in the interrogation room; out in the streets it was a totally different story.

As Sargent Roland walked down the hall towards the break room to use the water cooler, he heard a commotion in the booking area downstairs. Hassles in booking were a daily occurrence so Roland forgot about Wheelers water and instead ran down the stairs to help give a hand again, probably controlling another unruly drunk driver or another town tough guy.

The sound of the heavy interrogation room door slamming behind Sargent Roland was enough to make Wheeler cringe in his chair, unwilling to turn his head and look the detective in his eyes as Levno stared down at the greasy criminal and then started back in on him. Wheeler was sniffing and holding back tears as Detective Levno barked at him authoritatively, "I did my part and sent for your water, now it's time for you to do your part and tell me how this trouble you've gotten yourself into started. Do that and I will get you some food; just remember you can't clean this mess up yourself. It's time to help you by helping me make sense of this thing. What the hell happened to those people Wheeler?" The detective then raised his voice with a threatening snarl as he almost shouted at the shackled suspect – "You better have a damn good alibi on where you were yesterday with some "real" witnesses and do it quick you piece of shit! What the hell happened?"

Wheeler looked exhausted and ready to crack at any moment, Levno pulled back a little as wheeler started to say something, ready to employ a softer touch if the suspect made a mistake and started giving him something he could use to nail him on these crimes. Wheeler started to describe how he was at the local park with his two grade school kids a day ago sitting on a bench watching his children play when he suddenly lost time, not lost consciousness exactly, but just the memory of what had happened recently. He checked his watch and 30 minutes had gone by in which he had no recollection of, and that his head started pounding in agony and then a trickle of blood ran down his lip from his nose. Wheelers children played on the grass oblivious to his pain as the kids bantered back and forth playing with their worn toys and totally ignoring their father. When wheeler finally got his head on straight and the pain stopped he said he took the kids for ice cream and then picked his wife up from work. The rest of the night wheeler claimed he spent at home sitting in his living room with a splitting headache while the kids watched TV and his wife fluttered from project to house hold project on meth as usual, while sipping wine as a reward to herself for being so productive all night.

The detective was only interested in the first part of Wheelers story, that was the same park where the first murdered teenage girl was found, lying in a gruesome pose on her back along a park trail, her body twisted in a horrible unnatural way with a look of shock, terror, and slow suffering still frozen on her face, fists clenched in a death grip, clearly from having the life strangled out of her according to the visible black bruise marks across the young girls throat. Wheeler had given the detective his first break in the case but the specifics he needed like motive, and DNA placing Wheeler with the girl still eluded the seasoned cop.

So why'd you kill the girl Wheeler? Levno asked in a low calm voice. Wheeler looked up pleadingly into the detective's eyes and said in a whiney cracking voice, "I told you, I didn't kill

nobody; it was the something else that killed them not me!" The detective countered Wheelers pleading with an irritated sounding reproach," Now we're back to the beginning where you tell me gibberish and I tell you to get fucked. Wheeler pleaded again with the Detective," No it's true. Look at my record, where do you see violence, I was just a street punk doing petty jobs for chump change. The big guys never gave me the time of day let alone trusted me with anything else. Never murder!" Well maybe you decided to finally join the big boys Wheeler, the detective told the crook sarcastically, I don't fucking have a clue what makes guys like you tick. Frankly I don't want to know!" Levno added disgustedly.

Wheeler started whining again to Detective Levno and looking confused and even more of a total mess. "I was there, I mean before or after, I've been having these headaches, I mean agonizing terrible headaches, they get really bad and I black out or something memory wise. I don't know what, but I know I could never have done those things to those people. Why would I." Levno told Wheeler he just wasn't feeling it, "You got to come up with some shit better than that," the detective told him. Wheeler started going ape shit in his chair at this point, thrashing around in it even though he was chained to it, shouting at the Detective, "I'm not like that man! That's not me man!" Wheeler then stopped thrashing and started sobbing and mumbling over and over again - "that's not me man, that can't be me!" In a low soothing sympathetic voice the detective used the soft touch now that wheeler was broken and exhausted," What about your family Wheeler? What about your wife Joan and your two kids Jack and Sarah?" Levno told him. Wheeler kept repeating pathetically," That's not me man, that can't be me!" The detective just shook his head again in disgust, "What kind of man hurts the ones that love him? Huh! What about that Wheeler, what kind of man does that?" The detective focused Wheelers eyes on his in a hardened stare,"

Don't try and tell me you're not like that Wheeler! What did you do with them Wheeler? Their eyes were locked and the detective looked dead serious at Jesse and asked him coldly - Are they alive or dead? Wheeler looking genuinely concerned asked detective Levno in a haggard worried tired voice," what do you mean? Are they OK?" The detective didn't let on to Wheeler that they found his family this morning beaten and strangled in his apartment, It was the sight of the little ones contorted in death that ripped through the detectives guts giving him more resolve to nail this creep and send him away for good, then letting the cruel fate of prison take care of the rest.

Where's my family, I want to see my family wheeler pleaded to the detective. Levno just gave Wheeler a cynical look in return and said," We would like to see them too Wheeler, but no one else seems to have seen them either. What did you do to them?" The detective was still reading Wheelers responses about the whereabouts of his family, hoping Wheeler would slip up and admit to killing them or give a false alibi he could nail the creep on. One murder often leads to two and sometimes more, Levno had sadly learned this fact after over a decade on the force, the detective had no reason to think otherwise when it came to scum like Wheeler and what people like him were capable of. The detective had seen mostly the worst of humanity over the years and that's how he categorized most the scum he'd put away, or helped to put away over his long career.

Wheeler started getting hysterical again and struggling once again in the chair he was chained to. He shouted at the detective in a high pitched scratchy voice that sounded on the edge of sanity, "That fucking bum! That fucking bum gave it to me somehow! That's what he meant, can't you see? I see it now! I see, I see through him now! He's the black tooth in my head! He's the rotten one! He's the rotten one not me! Not Me! Wheeler disintegrated into tears and a barely audible gibberish as the detective stood there looking down at Wheeler perplexed. Levno knew he had to keep pushing Wheeler to get to the truth, but he was also starting to worry about how admissible what he got from him would be, given the unstable delusional mental state Wheeler was in now.

Wheeler was in a daze as he remembered back to the strange encounter he had with a street hobo two days earlier. The bum was in layers of filthy tattered almost rags and was mumbling gibberish as he sat on an equally filthy sleeping bag in a dirty dark and smelly vacant building doorway. Wheeler was handing the bum a buck when the freak grabbed Jesse's hand with his greasy dirty street fingers. The bum cackled at Wheeler in a dark, disturbing, and deranged manner through his twisted black toothed rotting grin while keeping Jesse's hand still trapped within his own. The vagrant was looking with bloodshot putrid yellow eyes at Wheeler and said, "I have the darkness deep inside me and now so do you! - No one can save you or anyone anymore, especially not God!

Wheeler was staring into space when the detective pounded on the table with his fist again to focus the prisoner on the detective's questions. Wheeler came crashing back into awareness. Tell me how all this killing started Jesse, innocent people are dead son, Levno told him. Wheeler came back into a moment of clarity and started talking to the detective in the calmest voice he'd had all night. "My life was on track, I was doing fine for the first time since I got out of prison, I started rebuilding my family and we were still poor but things were alright anyway. Then I gave this bum a dollar on my way to the car after looking for a gig and some extra cash and everything went to hell. I didn't realize it then but I caught something from him - something terrible! I tried to help the bum and then later I started having these terrible pains through my head that were unbearable. I started blacking out, or not remembering things, I don't know, but I do know now that the bum with the black teeth has something to do with all of this. He knows who's murdering everybody not me! Not Me! You need to ask him man not me." Now wheelers voice was escalating as he accused the bum he'd met of somehow being behind everything that had been happening to him over the past three days. Levno, disgusted, started shaking his head once more back and forth as he stared at the man shackled to the chair in somewhat disbelief at how all over the place this nut job was. "Always right back to gibberish with you Wheeler," the detective told him.

"I guess you just aren't ready to come clean with me yet Wheeler, but your gonna be, you're gonna be real soon!" Levno was back to becoming impatient with this guy and was hoping to wrap this interrogation up sooner rather than later. Jesse responded back angrily, "I haven't even got my water yet!" Levno looked at his watch with somewhat irritation wondering what the hell was keeping the sergeant." Well you're not the only guy in the world with headaches Wheeler, I've been getting an ear ache all week listening to my partner bitch about his headaches; you don't see him going around killing people now do ya! He's probably getting

some aspirin to go with that water. You want a couple aspirin - Then Start Talking,” the detective told Wheeler. Levno snuck another look at his watch a little more anxious and irritated, and then he looked towards the door again.

Exhausted and broken down Wheeler finally totally cracked, sobbing and red faced he confessed to Levno – “Fine, it’s all my fault! Is that what you want to hear! Alright Then! They are all dead because of me OK. All of them because of me!” Wheeler broke down into a totally unintelligible hysterical sobbing with his fists clenched. Spittle and drool was coming from his mouth. Tears were streaming fully down Wheeler’s face to the point that they were wetting his pants as the flow of tears dripped onto his lap. Detective Levno put his hand on the broken man’s shoulder and started to soothingly calm him down. “It’s all over now son. Calm down and I will get you some food and water and that aspirin my partners hoarding. You did real good Jesse; it’s time to get it all out in the open. You’ll feel better afterwards. We’ll write it all down when I get back.”

Levno checked Wheelers hand cuffs, making sure he was secured to the chair. He once again patted Wheeler briefly on the shoulder. He then walked towards the door, stopped halfway, turned back to wheeler as if contemplating something, and then he shrugged as if dismissing his contemplative thought. Detective Levno continued to walk towards the door, opened it and stepped into the hallway, closing the heavy door behind him with a loud metallic clank of the lock.

Am I the only damn cop on the job today? Levno asked himself. He quickly walked to end of the hallway and went down the stairs looking even more irritated. He turned and walked around the corner into the main precinct booking area – The detective stopped cold in his tracks. He looked out in shock onto the carnage that surrounded him. Blood was everywhere and dead police were littered throughout the room. Some were at their stations randomly draped over their desks dead or lying on the floor face up, sideways, face down in large pools of blood. None were shot. Most of them were brutally beaten and bludgeoned, or hacked to pieces by something. A look of horror came over Detective Levno’s face and he started to shout. “Sargent Roland!” Levno was almost screaming - “Sargent Roland! “This time the detective’s voice was an extended panicked shout/scream. “Sargent Roland!”

In a large room of wealthy looking house an unknown man stands over a woman and a grade school child with a horrible deranged look on his face. The woman and child simultaneously scream and hold their arms up in a blocking and defensive motion as the axe in the deranged man’s hands comes striking down upon them.

At another part of town, an unknown large man in an old dusty rundown bar room full of dead patrons, repeatedly beats dead bodies with a baseball bat shouting and ranting unintelligible nonsensical things.

A car smashes into a bridges right side guardrail breaking though it and careening out and into the cold swirling water below it. The car floats for a moment and then the driver opens up the window allowing water to flow inside the car without trying to escape from it, ranting gibberish. Two passengers in the back seat of the vehicle pound frantically on the back window

trying to break the glass out with their feet, but to no avail. Screaming, pleading for help they sink slowly downward as the front of the car submerges first. The car finally sinks totally underwater trapping its passengers inside, two faces are pressed against the glass of the water filled back window wearing a horrified drowning look as air bubbles rise from their open gurgling silently screaming mouths. The horrible faces of the two victims can still be seen under the water for a few murky feet as the car fades away, sinking deeper into the oblivion of the cold watery darkness.



Floating in Darkness I am Senseless

by Brian Thomas Armstrong

Floating in darkness I am senseless

Floating in darkness I am senseless. I “feel” nothing and nothing can be felt around me. I am floating. I am something but I do not know what.

An apparition of light dances before my mind - do I have a mind – I have no eyes. Flaming wings of light flying before my senses – I have senses.

A dark silhouette swoops in and engulfs the winged spirit. The darkness violently wrestles with the glowing apparition of light in a cruel struggle of life, death, rending, tearing - fighting to snuff out its very existence – If it is alive?

I cast them both away from me with my mind. I strike them from me without touching them physically. I push them both away from my senses, away from my very being. Am I truly being? I see nothing. I can touch nothing. I feel nothing I can see. I feel only what is inside of me as I float in eternity. I know not what was before me. I know not of who I was or who I am now. Who can I be? Have I ever really been?

There is a new shadow coming towards my mind – Movement - Mass. What is it? Does it live? Am I alive? Does it truly exist? Does it know that I exist?

The scientists gathered around “the Tanks” for the swing shift and all of them silently collected their data in one ongoing endless routine. George calculated the digital readouts from his assigned tank that he checked daily, and then he started to analyze the data he had recorded. George meticulously entered the information as usual on his official **LabCore IPad** that he turned into data analysis every day at the end of his shift. If George didn't turn it in on time the GPS tracking system automatically kicked in, and Corporate Security Services would give him a ration of shit, or in the worst case scenario, give him another dreaded corporate write up again for being five minutes late turning it in. Today though, George was more concerned about the data subject rather than the data or shit from C.S.S.

George in an intentionally inconspicuous way stopped his shift supervisor Nate, and without causing any unwanted attention voiced his concerns. How long has he been in there? - Asked George, - A little over thirty days, said Nate. Is that authorized or even legal asked George? “This guy signed away all his rights as a human being to get out of being executed for murder, what is legal these days anyway George; he’s alive isn't he?” – Nate said. But is this ethical Nate? George asked.

Nate gave George a look like he was about to relieve him of duty and George dropped the subject after Nate said in a low voice meant only for George’s ears, “Do we need to take this in front of a clearance review board George.” - No sir! George replied, George then continued to monitor the man in the metal isolation tank sheepishly without looking his boss in the eye.

Little did George know, he had already been turned into Nate by his fellow co-workers for acting suspiciously around the other scientists. His commitment to the corporations’ ideals had been in question for some time and Nate felt like he had no other choice but to call Corporate Security Services and have George brought up on formal charges under the Direct Corporate Governmental Threat Act of 2024, outlawing all forms of governmental or corporate whistleblowing. Nate always liked George and he felt somewhat guilty for betraying him, but he also felt no need to jeopardize his position at work, let alone endanger himself or his family. George should have been a better patriot; he should have learned to keep his mouth shut, Nate thought to himself - As the hidden audio equipped infra-red tracking security cameras followed Nate out of the room, and then focused itself back on George.



In the Middle of Midnight

By Brian Thomas ArmStrong

The American "Cold War" with Russia was at its peak in the 1980 s. Our misunderstandings of each other compounded by our totally different ideologies and perceptions of democracy, life and liberty were of common worldly knowledge. What was not commonly known by the public now or then was how many times those differences almost threatened to destroy · not only ourselves, but the entire World!



In the Middle of Midnight – A Cold War Story

At 2:27 pm *Eastern Time*, March 30th, 1981, President Reagan strolled through the "President's Walk" of the Washington Hilton Hotel after giving a speech to The American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations. The President of the United States Secret Service staff did not realize that a deranged John Hinckley Jr. was lying in wait to prove his delusional obsessive love to actress Jodie Foster by assassinating President Regan that day. Hinckley was lucky and had slipped in unnoticed with Reagan fans so he had actually managed to get within fifteen feet of the president when he pulled out a .22 caliber revolver, and then proceeded to unload his weapon at Reagan six times as the president went to enter his limousine. The first bullet hit Press Secretary James Brady in the head, the second shot hit police Officer Thomas Delahanty in the back of the neck as he tried to shield the president. The

third bullet overshot Reagan and the fourth hit Secret Service Agent Timothy McCarthy in the abdomen as he tried to protect the president by shielding him with his body. The fifth and sixth bullets hit the armored limousine, but the sixth ricocheted off and struck the president under his left arm lodging the bullet in Reagan's lung. Luckily the bullet stopped within an inch of the president's heart. Neither the President of the United States, nor his security team were wearing bullet proof vests due to the walk only being 30 feet or so from the hotel to the president's limo. An Ohio labor official who was standing by the assassin hit Hinckley in the head and took down the maniac while agents, police, and citizen bystanders all pounced on him - violently subduing Hinckley. The President was rushed to George Washington Memorial Hospital and arrived there within four minutes; the arrival time was so short that there was no time to arrange a waiting emergency team. The president then insisted on walking into the hospital on his own power and immediately collapsed upon entry at the reception desk.

After only 69 days in office the president of the most powerful nation on earth had been shot and was in surgery. The Vice President of the United States, George H. W. Bush was away from Washington and returning as fast as he could, while fourth in line to the succession of the presidency in case of the president's death, Secretary of State Alexander Haig, controversially stated he was in charge of the country until the vice president returned. He also stated that there would be no elevation of the nation's threat level. In another controversial move behind Haig's back, Defense Secretary Casper Weinberger raised the threat level aimed at Russia, thus setting into motion one of the many little known "Cold War" World Wide brushes with global nuclear destruction.

I dragged my ass up the front stairs of the old 1940's style German Nazi barracks by the hand railing, moaning and groaning to myself as I somehow made it to the second floor. I then found my way to my room and more importantly my bunk. These Mondays were tough and getting tougher every time I ended up partying too late on Sunday nights in Bad Kreuznach's illicit brothel night clubs downtown. The booze and the hash, along with the young pretty cheap women that went along with the party made that five mile run in the morning cruel punishment for last night's crazy off base partying.

The rest of the day after the morning's run went just as bad with a hangover from hell following me around all day. It was also being complicated by Sergeant Gator's constant critiques of my abilities, not to mention derogatory personal remarks that were obviously not meant to be

constructive on his part; all I wanted to do now was to get into my bunk and desperately try not to think about tomorrow as I tried to fall asleep.

I started to unlace my boots when the outside base alert siren went off. The other soldiers who shared the room with me started waking up asking me what was happening. I shrugged and couldn't think of anything to say but "beats me!" The inside barracks shrill ear piercing alarm went off as I jumped a bit out of my bunk in surprise, "what the fuck!" I looked around at everyone else with a puzzled expression on my face. Some of the guys were half out of bed by now also in their underwear, scratching their heads, looking around irritated and blurry eyed as well.

Staff Sergeant Leroy Gator burst into the room and started shouting at everyone to "git yer gear on," threatening to dump anyone he saw still in their bunks on their ears. The sergeant's specialist grade four followed him around like he was on a leash and was handing out live M-16 magazines. I took the ammo in somewhat disbelief, they never trusted us "shit birds" as they liked to call us with live ammunition; they must be really serious about something. I called out to the staff sergeant, "hey serge, what the hell is going on." Sergeant Gator flew across the distance between us and knuckle punched me in my chest, knocking me back, almost making me drop my magazines of live ammo. "That's what's going on, and yer gonna get more like it if you don't shut da fuck up an git your damn combat gear on Private Armstrong!!!" I managed to catch my breath and squeeze out a "Yes Sergeant" without wheezing too much, showing too much fear, or turning too blue in front of him, I knew he already didn't like me and thought I was a pansy. The sergeant took another irritated look at me, then shrugged his head and walked off muttering, "Fucking Armstrong."

My curiosity was put aside after that encounter with the staff sergeant and I frantically put the rest of my combat gear on while hearing more shouting, whistles, and sirens blowing around us, as upper ranking sergeants and officers started to pile through the echoing halls, all of them shouting orders at the same time and telling us to line up immediately in formation outside the barracks.

The night air was a normal cold crisp German winter's breathe that hit me in the face as I stepped out of the barracks I had just dragged myself into for some shut eye. I assembled with the rest of the platoon waiting for the other sergeants to arrive that were off duty or off base.

My chest still stung from Gators knuckle ball and I started thinking back to my first miserable encounter with the staff sergeant when I arrived here six months earlier.

It was just after the last formation of the day and I was getting a little apprehensive because of the way everyone was asking me if I'd met Staff Sergeant Gator yet, then they would smile in a sinister way when I said that I hadn't. I was in my newly assigned barracks room, getting my footlocker in order after being warned by my compatriots of incessant and meaningless surprise inspections, and how they got your locker dumped and ransacked if it wasn't up to perfect predefined military specifications. Suddenly a tall thin weathered faced wiry old goat of a staff sergeant staggers through the door with a case of German beer. He proceeded to plop himself down on my newly perfectly made bed, simultaneously pulling out and opening a bottle of beer, he then shouts drunkenly to no one in particular, "who the fuck iz zis kid." - I told him my name was Armstrong. The sergeant shrugged off my polite introduction and said in a slurred southern drawl, "youz better not be another fuck up kid, in "Nam" we learned us how to take care of fuck upz real quick; you fucks up wiz me son and I'll killz ya." He then relentlessly tried to make me bet him twenty bucks he couldn't drink the whole case of beer in one hour, not wanting to see what he was like after drinking a whole case of beer by himself in an hour in my room, let alone be near him while he was doing it, I feigned poverty. I had dealt with a lot of nut ball Vietnam, combat, still fresh in their minds, drill sergeants in basic, but the thought of this guy being in charge of me, along with the not even veiled first greeting death threats; man is this going to suck was all that was going through my mind. There was no doubt by the look in his eyes, the dead look of people who have seen too much in this world to ever take back, especially and most likely in some snake infested nightmare of a jungle. I re-assured him that I did not have any money and also that I did not plan on screwing up. He shrugged his shoulders and gave a sigh like he was bored of me now. He then tried to get up out of my now crumpled messed up bed but his legs buckled, he had to grab the bunk side bars and pull himself up. He turned as if to say something but then stopped, shrugged his shoulders again, grabbed his beer and left stumbling back down the hall in search of another room of underlings to harass.

Armstrong! Yo Armstrong. My mind came back to the formation and Sergeant Donny Loven was standing in front of me asking me - Where were you boy? What, I asked him? - Where were you boy cause you sure ain't here at the moment! Oh yea, I'm just tired I said. Donny and I had gotten to be fairly close friends in the past few months after he got to know me and vice verse.

He was a carefree buck sergeant who brought his wife over to Germany and lived off base, I was one of the lucky few soldiers in our platoon who got to go to his house and meet / party with his family; no military bullshit at his house, that all went back to normal on base where he was my platoon sergeant and superior, but not there at his personal home. Donny started confiding with me: "You got yourself in the shit now Armstrong, heck were all in the shit. You got your gear right; keep those live rounds secure, you know how they are about that shit." What are we doing, I asked Donny? "Some big shit cause they ain't even telling me," he said, "I tried to ask top the same question and all I got was an irritated look and a, when you need to know shit you'll know shit speech." - Just then they called all the platoon sergeants to the front and Donny had to run over and face the big wigs, after a brief period Sergeant Loven came running back to us red faced, and then he took his place alongside the platoon and shouted attention! – We all instantly snapped together like rigid boards – Right Face - Forward March!

They marched the whole company to the motor pool, and then marched us to our assigned vehicle sections and we halted. Sergeant Loven shouted "fire em up and wait for the order to move out." We pulled in our truck and attached the generator trailer to the back. Everything was already in place and the trucks were kept full of gas for entirely just this reason. Donny ran up and tapped on our truck as we were pulling up into position to move out. He jumped inside and said "move out they gave the order." Where we going serge? Said our teammate and driver Specialist Rodriguez, she was the cool one of the bunch in smarts and proficiency, she was a woman but let you know she was off limits and all business. If you wanted to talk with the boys and not want the Army brass to hear what you were saying, you shut your mouth around her and did what she told you. Other than that she was alright. Donny told her to steer towards Baumholder. "Baumholder! " Me and Rodriguez both said at once - "That's where they keep the nukes," I blurted out. Sergeant Donny Loven looked at me with a serious expression we seldom shared together, he then simply said "that's where were going," and didn't say another word. We all stared straight ahead at the endless line of military vehicles, all assorted according to their specialized operators and all converging on the exit of the military compound at once.

When we arrived at Baumholder we didn't go in the base which confused me, I guess we aren't staying, I said perplexed. That's when the long semi-trucks with huge missiles on the back of them pulled out of the front gate of the base. Sergeant Loven said "that's our escort!" "Now where" Rodriguez said. "Just follow them Rodriguez, and don't fall behind" Donny told her.

Specialist Rodriguez complied and there was uncomfortable silence between us once again. Suspicion and fear started to form in my stomach and my heart, then it began to explode in my mind - What the hell are we doing escorting nukes?

The ride to the as yet still secret location was a strange and surreal trip of following an endless convoy of trucks into the German dark night, the destination a mystery. The situation upgraded itself to scary and not just weird when the Autobahn signs on the freeway started saying were headed towards the East / West German border, otherwise known as the "Iron Curtain." Crazy stuff was going through my mind - like the only reason to take nukes that close to the border is to use them. Desperate fantasies of hijacking a freighter and surviving nuclear destruction out in the middle of the ocean also ran through my mind and sounded better and better every time I looked at the machine gun and stacks of clips they gave us. Coming to my senses I looked behind us at the endless trail of trucks following us and rationality returned to clarity / reality with the almost comic idea of our captain letting us just turn around and go our own way in the middle of a mission - this made me chuckle to myself - I've heard they shoot people for that sort of thing in war time - Is this War - In my M.O.S. (Military Occupation Specialty), the estimated time of survival in a war with Russia was five minutes on the battlefield before their equipment tuned itself in on my equipment, and then sent rockets over to my exact address destroying the surrounding area, equipment, and unfortunately myself, right where I just set up camp. That was a depressing statistic; it always made me wonder why the Army felt the need to be so mentally cruel as to give a poor smuck like me those kinds of numbers. Obviously all they cared about was motivation and obedience to bullshit in there soldiers. The mental and emotional moral of the troops barely crossed their minds, at least not until it was usually too late and the damage was already done.

I felt alone in the cab of the truck. Both Donny and Specialist Rodriguez had stopped communicating also as realization overwhelmed all of us. It was like we were separated in our own minds, but stranded together in the gravity and hopelessness of our situation. Helpless to help each other cope, coping individually the best way we could. The glowing lights of the Iron Curtain were starting to become visible ahead in the darkness. A massive snaking terrible vision of lights traversing across the German landscape, bathed in both a dark and light nightmare that festered somewhere in the middle of the midnight of our minds, preventing us from doing anything to turn away from it; hypnotized by its tragic horrible beauty. The radio crackled our

code sign and Sergeant Loven listened intently to the encoded message writing it down on his small notepad, he quickly had me give him the code book, DE-coded the message, and then he sharply said into the microphone "Yes Sir" followed by a confirmation sign and an over and out. Donny looked over to Rodriguez and said, "Turn it around specialist; we've been called back to base." Rodriguez coolly said a "Yes Sergeant" back at Donny, trying not to break into too much of a smile, keeping her usual stiff composure. "What the fuck are you serious," I shouted - Then I proceeded to grab Donny and shook him around a little bit until I realized what I was doing. That was too much for the specialist and she broke out in laughter and swerved a little on the road as the sergeant grabbed the dash board and ordered me let go of him. He laughed and said "I know who I can trust now to keep their head." He then nudged me and quietly said to me so Rodriguez couldn't hear, "one way or another were slipping away and getting a beer."

The trip back was a lively one that passed by like time was in hyper-drive. Our minds also reverted back to all the happy hopes and dreams that make and defined our existences, purposely dismissing the fact that we almost helped wipe those same human concepts from the planet by enforcing our government's insanity. We dropped our nuclear friends off back at the base entrance to Baumholder where we picked them up at. When we reached our own base in Bad Kreuznach we were starving and exhausted after our mutual adrenaline rushes had long since worn off. We endured the long line back into the base and finally parked our rig in the motor pool after unhooking our generators; then we were off towards the barracks and hopefully food. I shouted at a soldier what the fuck was all that about! - He shouted back "President was shot" - "what your joking" I said. Donny said Oh Shit! Patted me on the back and said "sorry Armstrong I think I better get back to my wife!" Later serge I said. Rodriguez lived off base as well and said her quick formal goodbyes to me and left for home I assumed to meet her boy / girlfriend, I could never tell.

As I entered the barracks I followed the hooting and hollering into the game room and found a melee of happy soldiers. The room was full of tables, piles of steaks in warmers with all the fixings, and a couple of kegs of beer. I also found out after guzzling more than a few beers in a row that we were pulled back a little after President Reagan came out of surgery. Given how close we were to the "Iron Curtain," I could only imagine what could have happened if he died right as we arrived with all our weapons of mass destruction. I looked at my plate of steak and my glass of beer, and then looked at the taped Super Bowl on the television screen and thought

to myself -This is our reward for giving into human nature and almost destroying it all. I felt a tingle up the back of my neck and turned around in my seat to find Sergeant Leroy Gator standing behind me. His arm swung and I braced myself once more for an impending blow - the staff sergeant patted me on the back and said "Good Work Soldier," then bee lined for the kegs of beer. The ironic nature of the whole nights experience made one thing clear in my mind, a sort of new goal that I was intent on fulfilling as soon as I could - Get the Hell Out of the Army!



Beware the Dark Things

by Brian Thomas Armstrong

Beware the Dark Things

#1

The city that was bustling with its usual procession of busy “Nine to Fivers” yesterday was in total chaos today. Half the town was running around in a panic indiscriminately tearing up whatever they could find to burn, and then throwing the debris into gigantic piles in the middle of the streets in order to dot the roads with large wild bonfires. The other half of the city’s population defended their life, their property, and their houses - and more importantly their stash of precious personal supplies with lethal force.

As it started to get dusk outside social hysteria and desperation escalated to a level of every man for himself, leaving no room left in society for compassion towards the rest of humanity.

No one knew where the creatures came from. No one really cared at this point. That was inconsequential when weighed with the fact that they were here, and that they were growing in numbers and boldness of attacks with every miserable hour that passed by. It was obvious they weren't humanoid by any known earthly comparison. The creatures seemed not even of this universe. Although they were appearing in material form, they looked to be created out of our own human nightmares rather than an image of god or nature in any spiritual comparison; in fact they seemed to be material emanations sent straight from the imagination of hell, with the sole purpose in mind of dragging us all back into damnation with them.

The supernatural emanations first started appearing in the dark shadowy recesses of our world: Basements, closets, attics, and much to the horror of children and adults alike, even from under our beds. It didn't take long for Seattle to figure out that once it was dark, the whole population of the cities lives would depend on the power company in a time of turmoil, calamity, and public crisis – No one was willing to trust Seattle City Light with their own or their families lives, and the city quickly fell into total chaotic anarchy.

More black portals began to open up everywhere in the shadows around the city, the monsters within them attacked the towns inhabitants and violently, and in most cases quite bloodily and brutally dragged their kicking and screaming victims back into their floating black orbs, DE-materializing with their prey before help was ever thought of or possible. This indiscriminant horror sent part of the population outdoors and into the streets, cutting them off from the precious technology accustomed and afforded them in the modern age; which sent society back in human evolution in an instant, back into a pack of dangerous mentally wounded animals that acted according to their new/old human natures.

Somewhere in the pandemonium of the panicked city – deep in a rural suburban neighborhood on the outskirts of Seattle, Washington - A little boy named Jack waited in his living room listening to the overwhelming crescendo of public panic and mayhem going on outside his house. He was also wondering when his father would come home from the midst of it, and then wondered where his mom was as he turned to look for her.

Jack could hear screaming and yelling coming from the outside of his small house. His mom had caught and chastised him several times already that day for sneaking peaks out the window. The heart attack she looked like she was having every time she caught him made him feel guilty and he was too ashamed to sneak another peek after several warnings not to. The sounds outside the safety of his house scared and simultaneously intrigued his boyish curiosity. When Jack looked around for his mother to ask when his father was coming back, Jack saw the open door to the basement instead. Jack walked slowly over to the door and peered down the dusty stairway that led to the dark shadowy creepy basement below; he had always been

secretly afraid to go down there, especially when he was alone. Jack went down a few stairs mustering up his courage and saw his mother cautiously approaching a shadowy dark corner in the cluttered back of their musty basement. He called to his mother – “hey mom, what are you doing?”

Nancy Chancellor looked up at her son with a nervous frightened look and shushed him to be quiet, moving towards the gloomy darkness of the junk strewn back of the basement with an old rake clutched tightly before her.

Jack felt a cold prickly wave of icy chills go from the back of his neck and explode through his body and mind. He stood at the top part of the stairs so frightened that he was frozen to the spot and struggled to call out to his mother again in a wavering high pitched voice – “mom, please come back upstairs I’m scared” - Jack saw the clawed tentacles start to form out of a black portal swirling in the shadow of the basement corner. Jack tried to scream but couldn't, his mom was looking up at him on the stairs and didn't notice until it was too late as a slimy black hook ridden tentacle wrapped around her leg flipping her violently to the cold hard basement floor, then it started to drag her helplessly towards the pitch black portal that was now clearly visible like a large hole ripped into hell behind her. She screamed Jack! - In a terrified wail scratching frantically with her fingers at the floor and grasping wildly for anything at all to hold onto. Jack's mother Nancy managed to grab onto an old chair leg that was poking out from a pile of furniture; then she was instantly locked into a tug of war struggle of life and death against an unknown hideous demon.

Jack's voice found its wind again and blew forth an earsplitting scream as he watched his mother struggle not to be pulled into the dark swirling pitch black portal by the unknown “thing” that protruded from it. Jack heard his mother cry out his name and then in an instant, watched as she lost her grip and was dragged screaming, flailing her arms as she was helplessly pulled by the slime ridden monster into the darkness of who knows what. There was silence. Jack stood there dazed like a zombie. He didn't or couldn't feel the warm stream of urine that fell down his leg like a small waterfall that started to drip, puddle and pool on the lower stairs below. Jack's trance was broken by the sound of a key turning in the front door and he heard his father open it then quickly pile the provisions he had “procured” for his family inside. Feeling pleased with him-self, Nathan said in an upbeat voice “Hey, where are you guys?” then he walked to the open door of the basement and looked down at Jack. His smile faded as he looked into the terrified eyes of his son who stood there in shock. The boy could not muster up a rational thought in his head that wasn't drowned out by the horror of what he had just seen. He was absolutely unable to find the words to explain what just happened to his mother; Jack could only stare back speechless at his horrified father.

#2

Nathan scrambled a plethora of jumbled desperate worried thoughts through his mind trying to think of a way to tell his son what he saw as their only option left, before the inevitable happened. When Jack came back into the room after looking for something to wipe away both

their tears with, Nathan decided to make his move and try to convince Jack why they had to do it, why they had to leave the “safety” of the house. “Jack we have to talk” said Nathan. His son sat down and faced his father. “This isn't working for us here anymore son, we are going to run out of supplies and if the electricity goes out at night we will be helpless” - Nathan paused and then said, “and well, we don't have any other options left son, do you understand?” Jack nodded his head. He was still having a hard time facing his father and was just starting to get his voice back. Jack started to say something to Nathan but then stopped; he just nodded his head once more in understanding. Nathan nodded his head at his son as well with a warm encouraging half grin and then said, “It's settled son, now do me a favor Jack and go fetch whatever luggage we have left, we have to pack light but pack well.”

Jacks father had worked his way up to principle of Dixie Lee Ray Elementary. The schools name sounded too southern for Northwest Washington but Jack remembered his father explaining to him that the school was named after a Washington State Governor in the 1970 s. Jack liked the southern reference better though because of the adventurous visions of Civil War battles and pirates that the name instilled in his mind. Nathan Chancellor had always been dedicated to teaching young kids the skills he felt every child needed to survive in this world. Nathan's dedication had paid off when he was promoted to school principle, but his secret hippie idealist teacher's ethics never seemed to ware out. Jack agreed with his father that it was the only logical safe plan they had, to drive up to the school and see if any of the teacher's and their families had congregated their yet. Strength in numbers seemed like Nathan and Jacks only chance of surviving as the city progressively slipped into lawless panic. Jack felt comfortable at the school because he was afforded certain privileges for being the principal's kid. One of those privileges was that the other kids treated him with kid gloves just because of who his father was. Jack was graduating to middle school next year and was already anxious about starting out at a new school where he had no special privileges. Jacks father had always felt a little guilty about making Jack attend the same school that he was a principal at. Unbeknownst to Jack, Nathan always had fears that the other boys would tease Jack if he went to “his” school, but in reality Nathan was Jacks ultimate protector at school and at home.

The bags were stacked in the corner of the front room waiting to be carried out to the car. Nathan polished Jack's grandfather's old hunting shotgun and dusted off a box of unused shells that were also inherited with the gun. Nathan wondered to himself if the gun still worked but didn't want to find out by firing it. Nathan's father was always an old school NRA card carrying believer in conservatism and Nathan turned out to be just the opposite of his old man. He was sensitive, empathetic, and idealistic, and also had a loathing for guns. Nathan felt it would be much safer with Jack at the school where people they knew and trusted might go for safety. If he had to leave his son alone again while he foraged for more supplies in the madness outside, he might come back to find Jack missing next; that thought was more than Nathan's mind could bear, and he looked at the weapon in his hand with a newfound appreciation.

Jack came out from the back of the house with the pocket knife his father gave him. Jack had cherished and respected it after the long lecture his father grilled him with on knife safety, before actually giving him the knife. Jacks father called him over and looked him up and down

had just seen. He then ran back to the car and Jack. Nathan hurriedly started pouring the first five gallons of gas in the Buick's tank.

Jack was sitting in the car anxiously hoping his father would get back quickly from whatever he was doing, Jack was trying to be strong for his father but in reality was thoroughly terrified during most of his waking hours lately, not to mention tormented in his dreams when he could sleep. Jack took another last solemn look at his soon to be old house and saw his mother Nancy Chancellor standing in the middle of the front hallway of the open door to their house. A twisted grin that seemed to use half her face in more of a grimace than a smile replaced his mother's kind nurturing and reassuring gaze. The look Nancy had on her face now was the glee of an evil spider luring in its prey to its web. She held out her arms to Jack mouthing with those hideous wide jaws the words - "Jack, come to me!" over and over. The sound of Nathan hitting the side of the car as he opened the gas cap and started filling up the tank brought Jack out of the trance of seeing the horrifying twisted apparition of his mother.

Nathan looked into the passenger side of the Buick at his son and saw he was crying. He decided to let his son be. Just let him cry it out he thought to himself; after all the poor kid had just lost his mother.

The car traveled down the main road dodging flaming roadblocks, obstacles, and occasional looters. The pandemonium of the last 48 hours had drastically cleared from the streets. There were eerie stretches of road where no one was even on the streets for blocks upon deserted blocks. Some houses were indiscriminately on fire and a hazy smoky trail of wispy dirty clouds obscured the surroundings of the neighborhoods in a scary dark depressing smoky fog. Nathan wondered what happened to the droves of panicking citizens that ran through the streets the day before. He looked at his son. Jack stared through the window of the car as if in a trance. Jack felt like he was doing something wrong by not telling his father about the horrible vision of his mother before they left the house. Once again Jack could simply not find the words to tell his father what he'd seen.

Nathan was relieved that the trip through the dangerous parts of the city streets had so far gone uneventful. The grade school was on the other side of the North Wedgwood Ave. Tunnel, and the building was only a few blocks from it once they were on the other side. Nathan stopped at the entrance of the tunnel. The street lights were out of service in the tunnel and it was pitch black inside. The entrance looked like a gaping black chasm full of unknowns. Nathan checked Jack's seat belt and revved up the V8 engine.

Nathan said "Be ready son," then he turned on the car lights and peeled out heading straight into the entrance of the tunnel. Instantly they were enveloped in darkness except for the headlights that barely pierced the blackness. Horrible twisted apparitions of people Nathan and Jack knew from the neighborhood, the convenience store, at work, school, all came out of the darkness of the tunnel and stood in front of the speeding car with horrible surrealistic grins / grimaces, while clawing for the car with mutated arms. Their faces were twisted parodies of what they once were. Cruel perversions of the people they were replacing. Some had claws for

arms, mouths full of sharp gaping teeth, hooked black tentacles flowing out of wriggling pants, shirts, and jackets that held horrors not bodies underneath them.

Nathan plowed through them all and they disappeared into wisps of blackness like scattered dark rain drops on a windshield. Portals of black orbs that swirled and appeared from nowhere in the darkest parts of the tunnel sent out hooked ridden tentacles, spines, claws, and slimy webs that were shot out from horrors made from man's deepest fears and imaginary monsters, materializing in reality from every depth of depravity that could be stored in a mind's eye.

Nathan swerved to avoid the monsters from hell as they bounced ,scraped, scratched, and grabbed at the car trying to force it to the side of the tunnel so they could all pounce on Nathan and Jack in the darkness. Jack was still speechless and sat there like a stone unflinching at the calamity unfolding around him. Nathan saw the light appearing at the end of the tunnel and stepped on the gas so hard that it was pressed all the way to the floor as the old Buick Century leapt into action and roared - Propelling them through the end of the tunnel and into the safety of the light of day.

Nathan got about a block past the tunnel exit and stomped on the cars breaks skidding to a stop in the middle of the street. He unbuckled his seat belt and also unbuckled his son Jacks and grabbed him into his arms; both Nathan and Jack's tears flowed like an endless rain down a dark alley, washing away the hidden dirt of its inhabitants, washing away the darkness. It was a beautiful cry but a tragic one even if it was past due. The beautiful part about the tears is that they were also tears of joy that they had made it so far together. They still had each other. A wonderful tragic beauty of kinship, trust, and true understanding that no one else could share between them - In a suddenly cold, hostile, cruel, and unsure world.

The next few blocks to the elementary school where Nathan worked was uneventful. As Nathan pulled into the parking lot of the school the building and grounds looked deserted. Nathan's heart sank and he started to feel like he let Jack down. He saw Jacks happy expression fade as his son started to come to the same realizations – No one is here, there is no help, and we both had hope for absolutely nothing - Now What Are We Going to Do!

Nathan pulled up to the front of the school and could now see that there were lights on in the classrooms and hallways of the old building. He parked, opened up the door of the car and then both he and Jack could hear the generators running in the background. Jacks face brightened immediately and he opened up his door and jumped out. He looked up at the building like an old trusted friend. Jack and Nathan stood there both watching with glee as excited faces started to come to the windows of the school building. Nathan and Jack were overwhelmed by the joyous sight of their classmates / students and their parents. Some of Nathan's co-workers had made it as well at started out to greet them. Then everyone started coming out of the front and sides of the building with pleasant happy smiles on their faces, holding out normal comforting arms to embrace them both with, giving them both a state of human joy and happiness that they hadn't known in days.



The Nut Factory

by Brian Thomas Armstrong

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by Brian Thomas Armstrong

When I first arrived here I would sleep in the back of a truck-bed in my living room. I would wake up in the morning with nothing much to do, wondering, searching in my mind as to what I should partake in during my stay here - and then I found the factory, the old man told his visitor, with an enthused gleam in his eye.

I started out by pulling taffy, and then tediously but joyously stretching it back and forth along the long walls of the factory's warehouse. I then started making furniture so that I would have something to sit in while chewing on the fruits of my laborious creations. Then I started making shoes for the long walks I endured, and then grew to love, along the trail that I take to the market located in the middle of our town square in order to sell all the goods that I make, the old man said, brimming with pride.

My success grew remarkably fast, so I then hired some of the locals that no one else would seem to hire, although they were perfectly fine men and women in my view, and together we built the small industrial empire that you see here today, all based on candy and shoes that took the local business community around here by great surprise, creating many friends, and also a few formidable enemies if you know what I mean, he winked at his visitor looking very satisfied with himself – I am very very busy now as you can see, and I can hardly remember that dark place the state of my mind seemed to be trapped in before, when I was actively drinking that is. “I know how you feel pop, I’ve also been in that same dark place many times before,” the old man’s son told him in a somewhat solemn response. I’m very busy now as you can see, and I really must go, his father repeated once more. His son told him he wanted to come visit him again soon, and also bring some books back for him to read next time. Oh yes please do - said his father - but never mind the books, there is much for you to learn and do here, and I am in desperate need of help with my factory, as you can see I am very busy here. “I would like that allot pop,” replied his son, a sad smile was on his face as a tear started to well up in his eye. There was also a frazzled looking, somewhat confused and distracted smile on his father’s face as well, as father and son faced each other from across the long wooden table. Very fine then, said the old man, it was assuredly nice to see you again, and as I said before, I am very very busy here, and the factory needs me as you can see. “OK pop, it was great to see you too,” he reached over and held/shook his dad’s hand for a brief minute, and then he stood up and left the room, forcing himself not to look back at his father as he walked away.

The son looked back at the tall ominous brick building that housed/incarcerated his father as he often did, while walking slowly away from it towards his automobile in the always half empty dirt parking lot in front of the asylum. He was once again trying desperately to hold back the flood of welling tears that threatened to pour down the front of his youthful face. This was a sad routine he knew very well, and expected every time he left one of his few and fewer in-between visits with his disturbed father. He made another silent vow to himself that he would visit the institution more often – after all, his father certainly needed him now, more than he ever had before.

