

Secret Sidewalk

By Tom Lichtenberg

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One

When Marcus was eleven, and his little brother Ben was only six, they lived on a boat in the harbor with their mother, a hard-working grocery store clerk named Kristen Holmes.

Sometimes Ben had trouble sleeping at night, and he would climb to the upper bunk and jab his brother in the ribs until he woke him up. Marcus would open one eye, and then the other, and eventually say,

"What?"

"I can't sleep," Ben would reply, and Marcus knew what that meant. He would sigh and say "OK," and then they'd both climb down, slip on their shoes, sneak up deck very quietly so as not to wake their mother, leap onto the dock and head out to the secret sidewalk which was right across the street behind the parking lot.

Usually it was a hot summer night when this happened, and no one else was around, just Marcus and Ben, some crickets and skunks, and sometimes a bulldog named Sparky who was supposed to be guarding the fleet, but most of the time did not.

The sidewalk was hidden between a wall and a hedge, and it basically went nowhere at all. It was lined with the backs of old buildings, which housed a variety of tenants; a body shop, a nightclub, a diner, a tattoo parlor, a newsstand, a mysterious dark office and a beauty salon. It started on Riverside Drive and extended one block, then it came to an end at Battery. The hedge kept it hidden from view from the lot.

Nobody ever walked on this sidewalk. No one except for the boys. Only they knew why it was secret and at night, and especially at midnight, and especially at midnight on a hot summer night when Ben couldn't sleep and their mom didn't know, something remarkable occurred on this sidewalk, something completely and totally weird.

This sidewalk turned into a city.

One Hundred Thirty Seven

They reached the corner at Riverside and stood, face to face, on the very first square of the sidewalk. The night should have been dark, but the reflected light of the downtown sky kept the stars at bay and the moon soft and pale.

"I'm thinking of a number," Marcus began, "between one and one hundred thirty seven," and Ben began to squint and squirm.

"Twenty!" he shouted and Marcus had to remind him to be quiet with a shake of his head and a finger to his lips.

"Sorry," Ben whispered. "Thirty two?"

Marcus smiled and said "How did you know?" as Ben shrugged and laughed without making any noise.

"Thirty two" Ben repeated, and began to walk off the steps. He knew from various experiments that there were exactly one hundred and thirty seven Marcus-steps from one end of the sidewalk to the other. With Ben trotting along beside him, Marcus marked off thirty two steps, and stopped at an oil spot rainbow on the path. Marcus nodded for a moment, and then began.

"The Dark Rider came through here not long ago," he said. "You can tell by the blackness of this spot." He knelt down and put his nose to the ground, waving at Ben to do the same. After they'd both sniffed around the area, Marcus asked Ben what he smelled.

"Gas," said Ben.

"What else?" Marcus prompted.

"I don't know," said Ben. "I only smell gas."

"There's cinnamon in there too," Marcus replied. "There's also a scent of root beer, root beer candy ..."

"I love root beer candy," Ben interjected.

"... and sawdust. and also licorice," Marcus continued, "that's how I could tell about The Rider. He was in a hurry, too."

"Why?" asked Ben.

"Oh," said Marcus, "The Rider is always in a hurry. Ever since that day," and Marcus paused again. Ben stood up and stretched his legs. Marcus also stood and turned to face the building wall behind them.

"What day?" Ben pleaded. "What happened that day?"

"The day he became The Dark Rider, of course. Before that he was just a kid named Phil."

Mister Pete

"Yeah, Phil was just a regular kid who used to love to hang around Manny the Mechanic's all hours of the day and night. Manny didn't like the kid, and was always telling him to 'scram' and 'get lost'. Some of the Brazilians, especially Junior Bus and Levantin, used to stick up for the little guy, but Manny would shout them down.

"Ain't I got enough going on around here without some pipsqueak getting in the way? What's the matter with you guys?"

"But he ain't doing no thing," Junior Bus would say, "he like to learn, we show him, ok?"

"You show him at your own place you don't like it doing what I say," Manny yelled, "this is my shop now the old man's gone and kicked it."

Sure enough, it hadn't been the same since old man Sam fell off the roof of one of those Land Rover things and busted open his head and died. Manny was not his son but acted like it all the time, and managed to get the bank to let him carry on as long as he could make the payments. Customers didn't like Manny so much as they used to like Sam, and one by one they were going somewhere else. The Brazilians who had been around awhile would try and get him to see where he was going wrong, but Manny was the best mechanic this side of town and damn well knew it too. Problem was, that wasn't enough.

"Scram, I said," he yelled at poor Phil, just a scrawny little guy whose father had a problem with reality. Phil loved to work on cars. Didn't he tear apart the old man's Honda? Now he really needed to figure out how to put it back together.

"Come on, I'll help," Levantin said, and called to Manny he'd be back some time or other. Phil didn't live but just a couple of blocks from here, over that way, just across the Front Street Bridge. Levantin was a big old shaggy guy who always wore his soccer shirt and harbored a deep, deep hatred for European football.

"They play like animals," he'd declare, "that never came out of the jungle. Why they gotta play like that? Holland! huh!," and he'd spit clear across the street, especially when mentioning Holland. Must've been about six foot four or five and two eighty or three hundred pounds and strong as anything. Roland used to say Levantin didn't need no jack, he'd just pick the car up by himself and hold it while they changed the oil.

When he saw what Phil had done he sighed and asked, "Oh boy, are you in trouble now?"

Phil shrugged. All the pieces of the Honda were still there. He was pretty sure of that.

"It's like Lego's," Phil replied, "I just gotta figure out which way is what."

"You got a lot of junk right here," Levantin told him, examining some of the bent metal and stripped bolts. "I tell you what. You run back, get Junior Bus and Roland. Tell 'em we need a case of any old bad beer and that little radio we keep up on the shelf. It's gonna be a night."

"OK," Phil shrugged, and hurried back to Manny's. That was just around the time Phil's dad woke up, looked out the door, and saw a giant wielding what seemed to be a club amidst the wreckage of his Honda in the driveway.

Mrs. Sweet

Mister Pete, which is what everyone had always called Phil's dad ever since he was a little boy for some reason which no one ever bothered to explain, or even knew, had a bit of trouble back awhile ago concerning some police activity. What it was is hard to say for sure. According to official reports, there was some kind of a disturbance, and that involved the neighbors, and something about a rooster, but like I said, it's hard to know. All I know is that the people around that street gave him a lot of room whenever he appeared, and Levantin was no different. He took off like anything down the street, leaving Mister Pete alone to examine the wreckage of his vehicle.

Another person would have called the cops but like I said, Mister Pete had had a bit of trouble back a while ago, so he didn't want to do that. He stood there on the stoop for just a bit, scratching his balls every now and then, trying to think of what to do. Someone looking from the side of him might have thought he wasn't even seeing the pile of scraps that formerly had been his ride. It was more like he was watching where the big mechanic headed off. Mister Pete was known to have opinions about some people.

This is when the telephone rang and Mister Pete went back inside to answer it. It was the call he had been waiting for. The lady on the other end was from the State and she was doing her job denying him his long-term disability. He had thought that he would get about a thousand dollars a month because he really couldn't function anymore, and even had a doctor tell him so.

"I got a note," he said into the phone, but the lady wasn't interested.

"I'm afraid it isn't my department?" Lila Sachs intoned, "I'm just delivering the message?"

"Is there someone I can talk to?" Mister Pete inquired.

"Certainly," Lila told him, and she gave him several numbers, each of which would lead eventually to the person who'd already reviewed and denied his claim four times. That would be Jalissa Sweet, who lives right over there, remember her?

"That the lady with the candy cane lights at Christmas?" Ben asked Marcus.

"That's the one," his brother told him.

"She works for the city?"

"No, the State. It's different. She also did the accident that time along the waterfront. Remember when Elliot on his skateboard was flying up the launch ramp and got whacked by that Jeep Cherokee with the sailboat coming down? That was Mrs. Sweet."

"What about Phil?" Ben wanted to know.

"Phil who?" Marcus replied.

"The Dark Rider," Ben insisted, "you were telling me how he got to be that way."

"Oh yeah," his brother said, "Well, it was later when he got back home with Junior Bus and all the other guys. His dad was not around by then. Levantin came up last because he was, well, he was not afraid. He never was."

"He was really big," said Ben.

"Yeah," Marcus said, "really, really big, but he wasn't stupid either and he didn't like the way that Mister Pete was staring.

So they got back to the house and it was dark already. Roland had the radio, and Junior Bus was carrying the beer. They were all joking in the driveway when Phil said he would go inside and check. That was when he found his father sitting in the kitchen on the floor, with the telephone still in one hand, and a bottle in the other. He wasn't moving and Phil thought maybe he was dead. He wasn't though. He was just sitting there."

Marcus stopped talking, and in the dark and humid night Ben waited for his brother to continue. He could hear a cricket or two, and once a car passed by which made him think it might be Mrs. Sweet going after yet another skater kid. But he didn't hear any skidding sounds, so he stopped listening to that and asked his brother what he meant.

"Just sitting there?"

"Yeah. Just sitting there. The guys outside came in and took a look.

"Sweet Jesus," Roland said. Levantin waved his hand in front of Mister Pete's blank eyes, but they never even blinked. He never flinched.

"Someone's got to call someone," said Junior Bus, but no one wanted to take the phone out of the sitting man's hand. They stood around and stared for a while. Finally Roland turned off the little radio that had been blaring salsa tunes for all that time.

"Come on, man," Levantin said to no one in particular. "Let's get back to Manny's. Maybe he'll know what to do."

Sugar

"You know how Manny sometimes keeps the shop open late at night. Right now it's closed but he was here till just a little while ago. Some people say it's because he needs the money to pay the bank and doesn't want to pay out any overtime, but I don't think he's doing work because I know what kind of sounds that makes and I'm not hearing them at night when all the other guys are gone. I'm hearing sounds like talking and sometimes I hear laughing too. That's what everybody heard when they came back with Phil that night, and there was Manny and Mrs. Sweet all getting cozy in the office.

"Mrs. Sweet? But what about Mr. Sweet?" Ben wanted to know, and Marcus shook his head.

"There ain't no Mr. Sweet. Didn't I tell you about that? Mr. Sweet went by the name of Sugar 'cause his last name, Sweet, you get it?"

"I get it," Ben giggled.

"So Sugar was a guy who used to be familiar all around this place. Anybody wanted something done they talked to Sugar first. Funny guy was Sugar. Normal sized and kind of thin but totally and completely bald. They say his hair fell out when he was only ten years old, just all of it at once one night. Sugar was playing by the tracks back there. They used to run the trains. When Sugar was a kid you know. Not now. They haven't run those trains since way before both you and I were born. Used to bring all sorts of stuff out to the harbor, when they shipped it out of here. They don't ship nothing now."

"What kind of stuff?"

"All kinds," Marcus said. "Like everything. But I don't know exactly."

"So what about Sugar?"

"Sugar? Oh, when all his hair fell out? I don't know. Something about the trains I guess. Anyway, that Sugar disappeared one night and no one ever heard from him again. That was not so long ago, in fact, and when I say disappeared, that is exactly what I mean. Larry and Drake will tell you they were standing there in front of him, talking about cars, the way they always did. Sugar was a big one on the cars, knew all the makes and models, everything about them. Drake and Larry, this was on a Sunday so you know. They'd just come from buying some lottery tickets at the liquor store when they ran into Sugar. Larry owed him twenty dollars, so Sugar came up next to him and asked about the money, so Larry changed the subject.

"Did you see the new Mercury line?" he asked. Sugar shook his head.

"They got some sporty models coming out I hear," Drake added.

"Oh I don't know," said Sugar, "those Mercuries are always just a Ford dressed up a bit"

That's exactly what he said before he started vanishing. It was just a little bit at first, around the edges Larry says, but pretty soon his hands and feet were turning into air. Drake and Larry stood there pretty shocked of course and couldn't say much. Sugar even saw it happening, they say. He looked down and saw his hands were gone and tried to move his arms but they were stuck. He looked down and saw that he was floating since his feet were gone, and soon the bottoms of his legs were also missing too. Sugar looked back up at Drake

and then at Larry, and then the very last thing he said was "I wouldn't spend good money on one of those Mercuries, boys. Might as well just get a Ford and save a few," and then he, pop, just vaporized."

"That really happens to people?" Ben was anxious to know.

"Naw, just to Sugar," Marcus reassured him, "that kind of thing don't happen every day."

Sharad

"Wish we had some lemonade," Ben said, "or maybe a Popsicle. A Popsicle would be perfect!"

"Ready to go back home?" Marcus asked. He deliberately didn't bring stuff with them so that sooner or later Ben would be ready to go.

"No," Ben declared. "I want to know about Manny and Mrs Sweet."

"Oh, they had a lot in common, those two. For one thing, they hated kids. They were always talking about ways to get rid of them, and how many points you'd get for different things"

"What kind of things?"

"Well, like when she hits a skater kid with her Jeep, she gets a thousand bonus points. Like that. She even gets a hundred when she just scares them off their boards. Manny's secret dream is round up all the kids and dump 'em in the sea."

"No way," Ben did not believe it.

"I heard him say it myself," Marcus insisted. "One time I was over there with Karly when she was planning to get a tattoo even though she's only twelve and they won't do it over there, but she was asking anyways, and that's when we heard Manny talk about his plan. Now whenever I hear about a missing kid I think they ought to check his boat for clues."

"What kind of tattoo?"

"Oh, Karly is going to get butterfly dragon things, you know, all pretty wings and a killer head. She has got it all drawn out. It's really beautiful, I think. You know Otto, the tattoo guy? He asked if he could borrow the design but she said only if he'd do hers first but he said no he can't because she's only twelve and that's the law. Otto is the one who had the idea that Mister Pete was going to be OK because he'd seen that kind of thing before. So he told everyone "just leave him alone" and that is what they did. Phil wanted to know if he could get his tat done too, and that's when he became The Dark Rider. It's his tat.

Karly was pissed because Phil's sixteen and that's still less than the law I think, but Otto was feeling sorry for the kid because his dad was in a state and there was nowhere he could go, so he did Phil's right then that night. It was after two a.m. when Phil went home eventually, and found his dad still staring on the kitchen floor. He started to tiptoe up the stairs when suddenly his dad jumped up and started running around the house screaming as loud as he could about ninjas, grease, and engine oil. Phil was so freaked out he jumped out the bathroom window and took off running down the street.

Mister Pete got on the roof somehow and that was where the fire department found him when they came. Nobody could talk him down until they brought in this guy they called Sharad. He was some kind of guru-looking guy, old and bald, long beard and everything. He showed up in some kind of sweet sky blue Mercedes convertible, hopped out, and scrambled up the ladder to the rooftop. He sat up there like a Buddha, you know, and Mister Pete sat down beside him, and discussed about whether a man could really fly. Finally they both came down, and the fire chief let Sharad take Phil's dad back to his compound at the Buena Vista Trailer Park.

Emma Biggs

"What's a compound?" Ben wanted to know, and Marcus told him it was like your own little country where everybody did what you told them to as long as you were the one in charge. Like at the trailer park, he explained. There's about two dozen trailers all lined up in two neat rows, twelve on the left and twelve on the right, and they are all numbered like even and odd so that one is on the left and two is on the right, like that. Sharad lives in lucky number seven, exactly in the middle, and he's got families and couples and people in the other trailers just the way he wants them.

Sometimes he likes to mix them up. He'll take a husband from trailer three and stick him with the family in trailer seventeen, so now there's a wife and two husbands there with all the kids, while back in number three it's just the mom. This way he can re-arrange the families and by now it's everyone has been with everybody else so it's all like one big family. Antonia's from there, remember her? She came over that one time to see the boat?

"She's got lots of moms and dads?" Ben asked. He was catching on pretty quick.

"Yeah, like every woman there is like her mom, and every man her dad. And all the other kids are like her brothers and her sisters. She says it's pretty cool, because if one of her moms says no, she can't have ice cream, she's got like fifty other moms that she can go to, down the list. She always gets some ice cream somewhere!"

"Awesome," Ben put in. He liked the idea of always getting ice cream.

"But they have to give him all their money," Marcus said.

"Give who?"

"Sharad," he said. "He takes in all the money they all make, and then he hands it out again however he wants. And everything has got to go through him. He makes all the decisions. He decided that Mister Pete was not allowed to bring his family, so Phil still lived at home all by himself, at just sixteen. Pretty soon Roland and Junior Bus moved in, just to look after the kid, you know, they liked to say, but they were having parties every night. It wasn't actually their fault. Roland's just a happy guy and everybody likes him, so one guy started coming over, then another guy, and pretty soon you know the house is full of people. Lady next door, not happy. That was Emma Biggs."

"I know her," Ben said, "the lady with the shopping carts"

"Yeah, that's the one. She collects those things, makes weird sculptures out of them or something. Did you know she made the TV news one time? She had those shopping carts all twisted up and melted, painted, stuck together every sort of way. She said it made a statement, but I don't know about what, and then the K-Po people came and wanted to get their carts back"

"Mom went over there?"

"Not mom, just people from the grocery store she works at. I think they were security or something. They were pissed at Mrs. Biggs for screwing up their carts like that, so they were going to sue her for a lot of money but the TV crew came by and she was famous for a while.

Still thinks she is, you know. She goes around wearing a button on her coat that says 'Action News at 10'.

So she was going to call the cops on Phil because of all the parties but instead she settled on a hunger strike. Sat right down there on the sidewalk right in front of Mister Pete's old house and wouldn't eat a thing. She was hoping for another shot on TV at the evening news and sure enough she got it. They asked her if she'd asked the neighbors if maybe they could turn their music down, but she said that was not the point. There were global issues here. Something about people suffering and a general lack of empathy.

Good thing she's so fat, you know. I doubt she even lost a pound those couple of days she wouldn't eat.

Sawdust Nation

"I'm hungry," Ben said, and Marcus said if they went home he'd sneak a hot dog from the fridge, but Ben didn't want to go just yet.

"You said there was sawdust"

"What?"

"Back when you were telling about how Phil became the Dark Rider, you said there was sawdust. I don't see any sawdust."

"I didn't say I saw it," Marcus said, "I only said I smelled it. Can't you smell it too?"

"I don't smell anything," Ben said. He always had bad sinuses.

"Licorice and root beer candy too," said Marcus, remembering from before. "That means there was a meeting of the Sawdust Nation here not long ago. They always have these rituals they do."

"What's the Sawdust Nation?"

"Do I have to tell you everything? Sheesh. I thought everyone knew that," and even in the dark Ben saw his brother's smile.

"Originally they were way up north, but came down here because their leader - his name was Johan something - anyway, he got sick and tired of being cold. It's funny because he was the one who took them up there in the first place because he said he liked the cold. Then he had too much of it, I guess. I never get cold, do you?"

"Not me. Never," Ben replied.

"These Sawdust people, though, they got really really cold and so they moved down here where they'd be warmer, duh. There were a bunch of them, maybe ten or eleven, and some of them had kids. Mostly they went around grinding up stumps because they liked to smoke the sawdust in their pipes. That's where they got their name."

"They smoked trees?"

"Yeah, pretty much. I think it made them calm or something. They were always getting in trouble with people whose branches they went around trimming without permission. Some of them were working for the city just so they could get it legal. They had some other weird things they did. One time I remember there was one named Bill, or maybe Bob, but anyway he was really good at jumping over cars from standing still. And every time he did that all the others gathered around and sang a particular song. They also liked to mix the stuff with licorice and root beer candy. Sometimes they'd have bonfires on the beach.

But after Johan went to jail for destroying public property, the rest of them did not know what to do. You could see them wandering around the waterfront carrying their chainsaws and their bus maps. Eventually they kind of went their separate ways I guess, but every now and then, there's some who get together on this spot right here and celebrate the old ways.

Uncle Bill

You would usually find Roger Bancroft hanging around Original Johnny's on a weeknight roundabout seven o'clock. This is when Maddy the waitress would come outside to check on him.

"Mr. Bancroft, are you OK?" she'd ask in that sugary sweet voice she had. Maddy was what they call a looker. You seen her so you know what I'm talking about.

"You're talking about her boobs," Ben guessed, and Marcus laughed.

"Not just her boobs. The whole thing. Anyway, what are you talking about boobs? You're only six years old"

"So? You're only eleven, and anyway, I'm going to be seven someday, and even eight and nine"

"OK, ok, some day you'll be a hundred if you're lucky and then it will be the same to you as now as whether she's a looker or she's not, but to Roger Bancroft, it was everything in the world.

"I'm good now, dear Madeleine," he always said, "now that I've seen you I know the sun will shine again," and then he'd wander off back toward the waterfront. Mr. Bancroft was the manager of that shipping office over there that closed when all the shipping went away. Back in his day he was pretty important. He wrote down everything about every ship that came to port, what their name was, where they came from, what they carried, what they took off with them. Wrote it all down in one big book. Every day he came to work and I mean every single day for forty years. Never missed a one. So he still came down even after there was no more work to do, when there were no more ships come in. Always had his suit and tie, and that fedora hat was on his head, and he was all bent over all six foot six of him. Hard to walk there towards the end. Shuffling back to where he lived, wherever that was at the time. Last time anybody saw him he was shuffling off like that.

Maddy'd go right back inside and Lucky joked about her man. Lucky was always lounging at the counter. He was another one of those old guys leftover from a different world. Place is full of them down here. Spend most their time out feeding pigeons and gulls. Remember Lucky? He used to give us bubblegum.

"Uh-uh," Ben did not remember.

"Oh that's right," Marcus said, "it was me and Kansas. Never see Kansas anymore."

"I remember Kansas," Ben replied. "He was always good to me." Marcus agreed and lost himself in thought for quite awhile. Ben thought maybe he had gone to sleep. Both of them were standing on the sidewalk still. Ben realized that if Marcus fell asleep he would have fallen over, so he just sat down by himself and waited for his brother to recover from his fit of memory.

Kansas was Marcus' best friend when they were nine. He came from Sawdust people. Once his father and his mother disappeared for several days and Marcus made him come back home with them. Their mother was fine with that. Kansas had good manners, didn't eat too much, and was happy to sleep on deck. Marcus hoped that maybe Kansas' mom and dad

would never come back and he could stay with them forever. It was a bitter loss that day the Sawdust man came by and took him away. Sawdust man just showed up on the dock one morning during breakfast, hollering for Kansas. All the boys went up to see what all the shouting was about.

"Got to go now, boy," the Sawdust man said when he saw Kansas. "Your mama's waiting"

"Why don't she come then, Uncle Bill?" he asked, but Bill did not reply. He stood there arms akimbo waiting for Kansas to follow"

"What's akimbo?" Ben asked and after Marcus told him he continued,

"Next thing you know that Uncle Bill was right there on our ship as if he flew. Never saw a man do that before. One minute standing still, the next he's twenty feet closer."

"That the guy who jumped over cars?" Ben wanted to know, but Marcus shook his head.

"I think that guy was Randy or Mike or something. I forget. Anyway, he picks up Kansas by the belt and throws him, I mean throws him clear off the deck. Next thing there's Kansas rolling on the dock and Uncle Bill beside him again. Those Sawdust people, they can fly. I really believe they can"

"Wasn't dad one of them?" Ben asked.

"Uh-uh," Marcus said. "He liked to go with them sometimes but he was from around here basically."

"Do you think he went off with them?" Ben inquired and Marcus shook his head.

"Dad died," he bluntly told him, "You know that. Come on."

Now both the boys were quiet, both sitting on the sidewalk in the middle of the night. Even the crickets now were sleeping. The sky was still not dark. That sky never darkens anymore.

Kansas

"Wake up! Wake up! Marcus! Ben! Come on! Wake up!"

Karly was standing over them, yelling. Marcus was the first to his feet but Ben had already opened his eyes, surprised to find it was almost dawn.

"We must've fallen asleep," Marcus muttered but Karly was stamping her feet now.

"Come on! There's no time. You have to hurry. Come on," and she was pointing down towards Battery at the other end of the block.

"What's going on" Ben asked, and Karly impatiently replied

"It's Kansas. He's back and he needs our help. Sugar reappeared and Kansas needs us now!"

That was all Ben and Marcus needed to hear. They were off and running, all three of them, with only Karly knowing exactly where they were going. They reached the end of the block - Marcus slowing down a couple of times to help his little brother keep up - and followed the long-legged girl up Battery and into Markham's Alley just beyond the bakery. It was darker in the alley, almost night again. Karly slowed to an almost walk as Marcus caught up to her with Ben close behind.

"Where are they?" Marcus asked, and Karly shook her head, a little out of breath.

"Here, behind the dumpster" and sure enough, there was Kansas sitting on a milk crate, and there was Sugar, sprawled out along the curb. Sugar was bald as ever, not a hair on head or arm, and he was dressed in an all-white terrycloth bathrobe, with sandals on his feet. Sugar had never dressed like that before. He was always a double-breasted bow-tie man.

Kansas was if he'd never changed, still nine, if that was possible. He was shorter now than Marcus, where he used to loom above him. Ben looked carefully at the other kids. They were different now, even his own brother. Marcus seemed older, as old as Karly maybe, something in his face was changed.

"I just found him here like this," said Kansas, after nodding a greeting to the others. "So I've been watching over him."

"My daddy opened the bakery and found him out here," said Karly. "Kansas, I mean. He didn't see Sugar."

"So Karly came out and I showed her," Kansas filled in. "That's when she went off to find you guys. We're going to need a team."

"Awesome," Marcus said. "It's like a genuine mystery"

"Who's that?" The voice belonged to Sugar, who suddenly opened his eyes and reached out to grab hold of Kansas. Kansas tried to lurch away but Sugar held on tightly to his sleeve.

"I can feel you," the old man said, surprised.

"Let me go," said Kansas, and Sugar, also known as Mr. Sweet, did let him go. Sugar sat up slowly, propped up against the bakery wall.

"I'm hungry," he said, and without a word Karly ran to and in the back door of her father's bakery, and emerged almost instantaneously with a donut and a cup of coffee. Ben wanted a donut too but he didn't speak out of turn. He was never much for talking, especially when there were people around he didn't really know, so he just watched them quietly.

Sugar took the offerings and carefully arranged them by his side.

"I think I should know what this is," he said to no one in particular. He seemed to be referring to the coffee because apparently he knew enough about the donut to stuff it in his mouth and take a bite.

Kansas and Karly and Marcus formed a semi-circle in front of the reconstituted man. Ben was farther off, a little behind and to the side of Marcus, from where he could watch the expressions on Sugar's face. The man was content to munch on his donut for awhile, seemingly oblivious of the children all around him.

"If you don't mind," Karly said, "but didn't you, like, vanish?"

Sugar looked up at her, confused.

"You mean me?" he asked.

"Yes," she persisted. "Everybody says you disappeared." Sugar didn't answer for awhile. He tasted the coffee and seemed to approve.

"Young lady," he began. "I've no idea what you are talking about. The fact is I have no idea who I am, or where I am, or who you are, or anything at all.

Flood Control

That's when Sugar stood up all at once like he hopped directly from his butt to his feet, and staggered off sort of like a zombie, straight into the bakery from the back door Karly'd come out from. Elrod Higgins, that's Karly's dad, was pretty shocked to see this white-robed ghost-like vision sneaking in and trying to snatch a basket full of chocolate glazed.

"The heck you think you're doing?" Elrod demanded, followed by "Karly, what the heck?" as he grabbed the other end of the basket and pulled. Both men tugged and the basket flipped all twenty-three hot donuts onto the floor

"Well doggone it," Elrod declared, "Look what you done now," but Sugar was already on his knees, stuffing the donuts into the pockets of his bathrobe. Karly rushed over with a broom and tried to shoo him away, while Kansas helped himself to a donut and Marcus and Ben hung back by the door in case they needed to make a clean getaway.

It was all bad timing that Emma Biggs happened to stop in right then. She was fresh off another hunger strike (this time because the escalators ran too fast at the Pay'n'Pay and she couldn't get on), and she was literally starved. She was out there in the front of the store calling and calling and Elrod didn't hear her due to all the commotion in the back, so she came around the counter and was about to help herself when she peeked in and caught a glimpse of Sugar on the floor.

Emma knew exactly who he was, and screamed.

"Beauregard Sweet!" she declared, "what the hell are you doing crawling around on the floor like a cockroach?" but Sugar didn't seem to hear, not Mrs. Biggs or anybody else. He was fending off the broom attack and trying to recover more glazed. Emma came storming back and got around behind him, stuck her arms in his pits and heaved him straight out the door and into the alley, knocking down the brothers who were in the way. All four tumbled onto the pavement, donuts flying everywhere and Sugar trying to snag them in midair. Then something really weird happened. Ben was sprawled and in a daze but he was certain he saw Kansas blast off right in front of him - a puff of smoke from the bottom of his shoes and there was Kansas overhead, flying down the alley kind of slow and uncertain, but going, going, gone.

"Marcus," he called out, and Marcus grabbed his arm and yanked him up.

"Kansas flying" Ben said.

"I saw it," his brother replied. "Come on, let's go," and both boys took off running after Kansas.

"Wait for me," yelled Karly and almost all at once she was in front of them running fast. All three kids were shouting after Kansas, who was just a few feet in the air, and not too far ahead of them, but Kansas wasn't looking back. He was just swimming in the sky.

Franklinia

Even before he reached the end of the alley you could see that Kansas was in trouble, flapping and flailing and kicking his legs, but he couldn't stay aloft and came crashing down on the curb on a heap of worn out shoes and flannel shirts that usually went by the name of Kirk. Didn't seem to bother the codger one bit. He just shrugged the kid off and rolled over. By that time, Karly was by his side checking for wounds, but Kansas was more embarrassed than hurt.

"I ain't never learned it too good," he muttered, and Karly nodded.

"I can tell," she said sympathetically.

"You OK?" Marcus said when he came running up with Ben behind him, lagging. Ben was nervous about Kirk, even though the snoozing bum wasn't even making a sound. Ben was afraid of derelicts in general.

"You must think I'm stupid," Kansas said, looking straight at Marcus.

"Nah, come on," Marcus replied gently, helping his buddy to his feet. "Flying's for the birds," he joked but Kansas didn't laugh.

"Why'd you take off like that?" Karly asked and Kansas jumped up and shouted,

"I've got to tell my dad. He said if this ever happened I should tell him right away"

"If what ever happened?" Marcus asked.

"One of the vanished!," Kansas said. "If one of the vanished ever came back. They're not supposed to come back, you know. Once they're gone they're gone, but if they ever come back, holy hell!"

"Sugar's all right," Karly said, "he looks like he's been in a hospital or something"

"No, no," Kansas told her, "he's one of them, one of the first. Now LeMaster's going to find out from that lady, the fat one, the TV lady, everybody's going to know. I've got to tell my dad. Come on," and Kansas took off running, on his feet this time, and after pausing for a second to exchange completely baffled looks, Karly and Marcus and Ben ran after him.

It seemed to Ben they ran for miles and miles but in hardly any time at all. Brick and metal buildings just whizzed by, the cars were slower than the kids and sometimes they were on a train, and sometimes they were rolling in the grass but mostly they were running, and then he was out of breath, and then they stopped outside a yellow building with no windows and no doors.

"Dad's in here," said Kansas, and he pointed at a sign that spelled out Federal Penitentiary.

"Why's your dad in prison?" Karly asked, and Kansas told her that his dad was innocent.

"He was framed," he said. "He was set up by LeMaster. He never chopped down that tree they said he did, the old Franklinia that used to set up there in front of City Hall. We would never do Franklinia. Not enough dust in one of those things"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," said Karly, who'd never even heard of the Sawdust Nation and only knew Kansas as a friend of Marcus and that was all, but Ben and Marcus

knew exactly what he meant.

"Your dad is Johan Schluck?" Ben asked, surprised, wondering how come Marcus never told him that.

"Yeah, and we've got to bust him out," said Kansas. "Right away."

General Penitentiary

"This is so not going to be easy," Karly said, as she examined the structure behind them, all yellow brick and plaster. She leaned her arm against it and pushed a little. Obviously nothing happened.

"Is there a door or something?" Marcus asked but Kansas shook his head.

"I've been all around it," he said, "there's no way in and no way out. No windows even."

"Maybe there's an underground passage," Ben suggested, but nobody seemed to hear him. The four kids sat down in a circle on the sidewalk and looked down at their feet. Nobody said anything for a while. Some cars passed by on the street but there were no other pedestrians. Ben noticed there weren't any other buildings either. This one big yellow thing seemed to be the only building anywhere, and it stretched up to the sky as far as he could see.

Ben thought he heard some music playing far away, and then it was closer and louder, and then Roland walked up with his radio on his shoulder like a parrot blaring out some tropical tune with trumpets and piano.

"Hey little guys," said Roland, "why the occupation? You claim jumping here?"

Karly stared at Roland as if he were from outer space. The little man with the white beret and the plaid pants wrinkled his nose right back at her.

"You own this sidewalk, missy?" he asked again.

"What do you want?" Karly impatiently replied. "Can't you see we're thinking?"

"Oh. Sorry," Roland apologized, and sat down next to Ben.

"Hi little buddy," he smiled, and Ben shyly returned it.

"Anybody want a Popsicle?" said a big booming voice, followed by the giant Levantin, approaching with huge strides and holding exactly four Popsicles in his big right hand. The kids all got to their feet and each selected one.

"I can see you have a problem," Levantin said, examining the building. "If you want to get inside"

"We've got to spring my dad," Kansas said anxiously. "He's in there somewhere, I think."

"Let me take a look," Levantin declared, and he placed his enormous frame directly in front of the building and pressed up against it. The building seemed to budge. It seemed to sink behind his weight. Levantin grunted and pressed harder, and the building shook and swayed but didn't break. Levantin backed off, breathing hard.

"Got to go up," he said, turning to the kids and then, turning back, he leaped up several feet and attached himself by his fingers and feet, and began to climb the wall like Spiderman. He was forty feet above the ground when he turned, looked down, and said,

"Roland! Turn that damned thing off. I'm trying to listen here."

Roland shrugged but silenced his radio. Everybody held their breath as Levantin placed his ear against the wall and remained there, motionless and listening. Slowly he drew his right

arm back and then suddenly slammed his fist into the side of the blank yellow building. His hand went right through the bricks and when he pulled it back out again it held a small, gray-bearded man wearing an orange jumper and no shoes. Levantin leaped and both he and the man flew down to a graceful landing on the sidewalk.

"Daddy!" Kansas cried and jumped into the small man's arms. Johan Schluck grabbed his son and held him tight.

"So it's true," he said, and looked up at his rescuer.

"Yes," Levantin said. "The time has finally come."

Snowman Fish

Marcus seemed to be talking from under water, and it was something to do with a parking lot torn up by giant mechanical beasts the size of dinosaurs, and the invention of sheet metal mountains, and other glorious achievements. Ben glanced over and saw that only Karly and Marcus were with him now. It was still very early in the morning, and they were home on the wharf where the cinder block aquarium was opening for business.

Ginger always let the boys in free so they could watch the giant red octopus eat breakfast inside his pathetic gray tank. In return, Marcus and Ben would help clean out the sea lion tubs. Karly wouldn't go in because she hated to see anything trapped, so she went back to her parents' bakery down the street.

Ginger was smoking as usual outside, a shrouded tangle of yellow hair, black clothes and restlessness. When she talked it was a mix of words and coughing spasms.

"We got some new guys coming in today," she said. "Roughies and cod. Also a tiger shark"

Marcus grabbed the buckets and mops and handed the smaller ones to Ben. While they were working, Marcus was telling him about the Snowman Fish.

This was back before the Hybrid days began, he said, so it was really something. Inside the fish was colder than ice. Somebody thought to hide a diamond there. It would be undetectable. They took the fish through customs in a special tank. No one ever guessed, but when they got to

Russia they found out the diamond was digested and transformed into a block of gold.

The secret of the Snowman Fish was never solved because of course they killed the thing before they realized it was the only one.

Ben was worried about the octopus because it wasn't moving much. Marcus thought he was lonely.

"I'll bet he wishes he could disappear," Ben said, "and come back somewhere else, like Sugar did"

"Manny's not going to be happy about this," Marcus said. "Somebody better tell him quick"

Rocky the Octopus

Ben and Marcus never got the chance to warn Manny, but not because they didn't try. First, they had to finish cleaning up, and that took awhile. Then they visited with the octopus and tried to cheer him up. Ben did a little tap dance even though he wasn't supposed to be tapping on the glass. Marcus tried to tell some jokes but none of them were funny. He was never good at being funny. Then some customers started coming in, tourists from even less impressive cities than their own who probably were expecting something more from an aquarium than a half a dozen cinder block stands with filthy fish tanks on them. Nevertheless, some of them would buy little lighthouse paperweights and a 'Rocky the Octopus' magnet or two on their way out the door.

Marcus and Ben looked both ways before crossing the street and lucky for them Mrs. Sweet was in a rush because she only tried to run them down once. Marcus thought he saw a diamond on her finger as she went swerving by in the Cherokee. She was already in the office on the couch when the boys got to the body shop. Junior Bus was making coffee and offered them each a lollipop. Marcus took a red one. Ben preferred the green.

"I wouldn't go back there if I was you," he warned them, but Marcus insisted they had to see the boss. Ben agreed with Junior Bus and stayed behind. He saw Marcus almost get the door halfway open before he heard Manny yelling,

"What do you want from me? How many times I have to throw you out? Get away from here you stupid kid"

"Yeah, go on, beat it," Mrs. Sweet joined in, and even though Marcus tried to say "but Manny," they kept shouting and threatening to call the cops or tell his mom or worse, like you don't even want to know. Finally Marcus gave up and let the door slam shut. He shrugged as he turned back and Junior Bus laughed and said,

"I told you once, I told you twice."

Marcus nodded grimly, and that's why Manny didn't even know that Sugar had returned until the formerly vanished man himself appeared outside the office door.

Mr. Brooks

"They were doing it," Marcus said.

"Doing what?" asked Ben.

"It," said Marcus, "you know. What grownups do."

"Oh," Ben said. He thought a moment and then inquired, "you mean doing it like mom and Otto, or doing it like mom and Mr. Brooks?"

"Like mom and Otto," Marcus announced, "and Sugar was just standing there, dressed in a yellow three-piece suit with bright green running shoes and a little straw hat, what they used to call a boater, I think. He had his nose pressed up to the glass and in the office there was Mrs. Sweet and Manny on the couch."

"How do you know they were doing it like mom and Otto?" Ben wasn't satisfied.

"I saw that tattoo on her butt. I could only see it if, you know."

"OK," said Ben, placated.

"Sugar didn't so much as flinch and he was watching for a while. Junior Bus was trying to distract him with a cup of coffee but Sugar didn't notice. Then Junior got out of the way when Mister Pete showed up. You should've seen him take off into the lot," Marcus said, smiling, "I never saw Junior Bus move so fast. Mister Pete was looking mean. He was not the same guy anymore. There were stories about what he'd done to cats, and one time to a squirrel he caught right in his fist. Squeezed that sucker flat. And he was bigger too, like he'd been working out, and next to Sugar he looked almost as big as Levantin next to you."

"Woah," Ben declared. "That's like really big"

"He put his hand on Sugar's shoulder and leaned down to whisper in his ear, but I could hear him saying that Sharad LeMaster wanted to see him. Now."

"Well, Sugar, he just turned around and nodded, and he started walking toward the door with Mister Pete behind him. He gave me a look and I swear inside his eyes it was the same as Rocky, just the same. Whatever he was, he wasn't the same old Sugar anymore. Both those guys, I mean. You think you know someone and then they're someone else."

LeMaster

Out in the garage, Levantin was just bringing down a Jeep Rollover after balancing the tires. He was down to his normal six foot six, decked out in his customary yellow and green, with dreadlocks flying as he carefully carried the car over his head and set it down in the parking lot. Roland was tagging along, sporting the blue and black of Inter Milan which greatly annoyed Levantin.

"Why do you like that salsa anyway," he demanded after ordering Roland to turn it off. Roland complied with a shrug.

"I love every music," he said.

"But you always listen to the same thing," Levantin replied. "Why is that?"

"Some kind of music is better," Roland said.

Junior Bus came running out and when he reached his colleagues he mentioned, in rapid succession, the names Sharad, Mister Pete and Sugar. Levantin pressed him for the full details and seemed angry when he heard that Junior had let Sugar go without a fight.

"I ain't messing with Mister Pete," said Junior Bus. "Maybe you can do that but not me. That man is dangerous."

"He's nothing," said Levantin, "just a shell. It's his boss you got to worry about, and now that he has Sugar, this is something to worry about."

Ben didn't know why this was so important.

"I thought you said that Sugar wasn't Sugar anymore," he told his brother, and Marcus agreed but said that Sugar had become something else and this was exactly what Levantin was talking about.

"Sharad is the kind of man that causes all the trouble in the world. He knows he wants to have power, but he doesn't know why. What is power good for? This man, he can rearrange families all he wants. He has the compound going on, just like he read about in that book he read, called "How to Be a Cult Leader." He's been following all the instructions and so far he's been building up. His problem is he doesn't have a purpose. Doesn't have a meaning. He's so jealous of the Sawdust People. That's why he did what he did to Johan."

Roland leaned over, and casually mentioned to Ben that there really are no Sawdust People. Ben was very confused by this and didn't hear the next things that Levantin said. He looked at Marcus and he looked at Roland, who was smiling, always smiling, and thinking about trumpets.

"He's got to have a gimmick, that's the thing," Levantin was saying. "He wanted to take the flying thing away from Johan, but Johan refused to teach him. Bill Cody refused to teach him. The Sawdust People all told him that even if they wanted to, they couldn't show him how. It's because of the Hybrid situation, you know"

"Pssst," Ben was tugging on Marcus' sleeve and trying to get him to listen.

"What's the Hybrid stitch nation?" but Marcus shrugged him off and whispered,

"Later."

"That was when he was just Sharad, only Sharad. Then he heard about Le Car and thought that was a cool idea so he became Le Master. People only laughed at him. Turns out there was a pretty bad shortstop by that name one time. Now you say LeMaster only if he's not around or if you're strong enough to face him down. I wouldn't try it, though. He's got too many guys like Mister Pete who'd love to take a swing at you and some of them have guns and shit."

"That's what I'm saying," agreed Junior Bus. "Listen to me, kids. You want to grow up, you stay away from guys like Mister Pete, and you stay away from Manny, too. He's no good. You keep away from him"

Seven Hundred Channels

"Get back to work, you lazy bums!"

It was Manny, tucking in his shirt and standing in the doorway.

"What I pay you for? Standing around talking to little kids? Didn't I tell you kids to get the hell out of here? How many times I got to tell you?"

"Better scram," Junior Bus said to Marcus and Ben, so they took off, but not before they heard Manny saying to Mrs. Sweet,

"No way. It couldn't be."

"But it was," Marcus told Ben, once they'd gotten clear of the body shop and were staring at the ice cream stand inside the corner market.

"It was Sugar and she knew it. She felt him standing there. She smelled him. Sugar might have changed but he still smelled the same. She was so freaked out she jumped in her Jeep without even putting on her pants, and squealed that thing right out of there.

"Look, there she goes now," and sure enough Ben saw the bright red Cherokee go screaming down the street the other way. Moments later, he heard a siren and a cop car turned the corner and took off after her.

"That's gonna be something," Marcus smiled, and with the dollar bill he got from Ginger he went into the store and came out with an ice cream sandwich torn in half. He gave one half to Ben and chomped the other down in just three bites.

"Hey guys"

It was The Dark Rider, come wheeling up on his skateboard and stopped beside them.

"Hey Phil," said Marcus. "Did you see that Mrs. Sweet?"

"I know it," Phil replied. "I heard that when the cop came up and asked to see her license, she flashed her beaver at him"

"What's a beaver?" Ben asked, but the older boys ignored him.

"And she said, don't you even know who I am? And the cop said yeah, you're the bitch that ran down that kid on the wharf"

"That's a bad word," Ben said, but the older boys ignored him.

"Then he pulled her out of her car and made he walk back to his, but slowly so that everyone could see. He pretended like he was going to pat her down. All the time his partner, who was Amy Biggs, you know, Emma's daughter? She was laughing her ass off and waving her gun around."

"That the same Amy Biggs that used to go with Junior Bus?"

"Same one," Phil said, "but Junior said she was like really stupid."

"Junior's cool," said Marcus.

"Yeah," said Phil.

"Hey, we saw your dad," said Marcus and Phil shook his head.

"I guess he is," he answered. "I don't really know him anymore. He's over at the trailer park, you know. Superintending or something."

"Super Nintendo?" asked Ben, but the older boys ignored him.

"He was taking Sugar over there," said Marcus and The Dark Rider nodded. He already knew.

"They got him in trailer seventeen," he confided. "All by himself for now. No wife. No kids. They say he hardly ever moves, don't even watch TV, and they got more than seven hundred channels of cable over there."

"Woah," said Ben. "Seven hundred channels."

"Sharad is pissed," said Phil. "He wants to get the secret out of him, but Sugar doesn't know it."

"What secret?" Ben asked and both the older boys looked at him and said,

"Invisibility"

"Duh"

"And coming back," Phil added. "Going invisible ain't so hard. It's coming back that is"

Trailer Seventeen

Bill Cody and Johan met behind a mountain of sawdust seven feet high and twelve across. They'd been holed out in a lumberyard since Levantin went and pulled Schluck out of jail. The lumber folk were decent sorts, a Viking named Mathilda and her son, a cross-eyed boy named Luke. Luke had gone to high school with some of the so-called Sawdust people, so he knew what was what.

"They all don't fly," he'd tell his mom, "there's a just a few of them that can, and they don't hardly do it much."

"How come they can?" she wanted to know, and he explained it was a Hybrid thing.

"Sometimes you get a mix of things together in the blood," explained her son, "depending on the father's father and if the mother had a sister and the sister had a son. On top of that you need some secret ingredients, special amino acids that you had to come across depending on the place you live and the time of the month conceived. It was nature's way of sticking in some variables," he said.

"But that's not all the Hybrid stuff," said Marcus. He and Ben were crossing the street, looking out for red Jeep Cherokees. Marcus wanted to find Karly again but he pretended to be doing something else, collecting bottle tops or counting orange markings on the pavement. Ben was not confused by any of that. Marcus was in love with Karly as long as Ben could ever recall, and Karly, she was still a girl who didn't really know she was a girl. Give it another year and maybe then she'd know. Marcus planned to be around whenever it was she turned. In the meantime, their wanderings took them back and forth around and across and behind the bakery. Each time they passed, the long brown-braided, flour-faced girl would wave and smile as if she hadn't seen them in years.

"They're not like freaks," he said. "They're just the same as you and me except for getting off the ground. It's got to do with gravity"

"How come Kansas can't do it?" Ben wanted to know, and Marcus shook his head.

"He's learning. It just takes time. Sharad was really mad when he found out you either got it or you don't. He thought it was something you could steal or buy. He tried to get it out of Johan Schluck and didn't believe him at first. Then he got really mad and locked him up in trailer seventeen. That's why it's so weird that he put Sugar there."

"Maybe that's his prison," Ben advised.

"I don't want to ever find out for myself," said Marcus. "Phil snuck in there one time. Middle of the night. He knew from his dad that no one else was in there so he did his Dark Rider thing and got inside. Said it was just like any other place. TV, kitchenette, bedroom you can't stand up in. Awful hot. There were books on a shelf by the door, all sorts of self-help things. How To Be A Cult Leader. What To Worry About and How. What To Do About Your Soul Mate. How To Maximize Your Potential. How To Leave Your Dreams Alone. Alchemy For Dummies. All sorts of books like that. Phil said his favorite was What To Name Your Cult. It was kind of like a baby-naming book except for gurus. He still hasn't come up with a good name for his cult. Buena Vista Trailer Park's the only name it's got. Doesn't inspire much."

"Phil thought it was Sharad's own trailer he was in, and maybe it was. Maybe that's the thing. He was trying to breathe their souls into his own just by proximity. Sharad has the look and feel down pretty good, but he hasn't got the content. Levantin says Sharad's still looking for the hook."

"Karly likes you," Ben declared, as they passed her smile again.

"You think so?" Marcus asked, but then he stuffed his hands back in his pockets and continued to shuffle along as if he didn't really care.

Buffalo Bill

The problem as Bill Cody saw it was simple and humanitarian. How to stop LeMaster from sacrificing Sugar. To Kansas' uncle, this was déjà vu. Once before he'd rescued someone from the clutches of the Buena Vista gang - that was his own leader, his own older brother, Johan. This time it was different. Sugar wasn't one of them. As a Sawdust person, Bill knew that he could let it go. He hadn't sworn an allegiance oath to the entire human race.

"I ain't the Lone Ranger," Cody said, but in his heart he knew he was just fooling himself. Actually, he had always wanted to be the Lone Ranger, exactly. Either that or Robin Hood. Bill Cody pictured himself on a white horse, tall in the saddle, but he wouldn't admit it to anyone. Growing up teased like that about Buffalo Bill and so on, he had a deep-seated hatred for anything associated with cowboys and the wild west. He had never wanted to come down here from the north. He would rather freeze his ass off.

He was loyal, though, and a trooper. He was also the best flyer ever produced by the Sawdust Nation, and was also the city's leading manufacturer of licorice and root beer candy. So he was a man to be reckoned with, a businessman and a hero all in one.

"I'm going to need some help," he said to Johan. "I can't do this by myself. LeMaster knows me and then there's Mister Pete. Last time I saw Mister Pete was hopefully the last I ever will. That guy is nasty with the chainsaw."

"What do you need?" asked Johan, who knew he couldn't do much himself. He had to stay hidden until somehow he could get a pardon from the governor, and he didn't know even where to begin with something like that. It's not like he could call and say, "um, hello? I just broke out of jail so could you like commute my sentence or something?"

"We need information," Uncle Bill said, "and we need spies. And we'll probably need a distraction, too."

"What about the Brazilians?" Johan volunteered. "They know their way around and they're not afraid of anything."

"Not bad," said Uncle Bill. "I was also thinking about setting up a conference."

"A conference?"

"Yeah, a cult leader convention, that kind of thing. You'd have to show up, though"

"I don't know," said Johan, "I think I ought to keep out of sight."

"It's the only way to get LeMaster in the open," Bill replied.

"We're gonna need some kind of bait," said Uncle Bill. Johan shrugged. If Bill Cody saw himself as Jesus Christ then what was he? The worm?

Rick and Rod

Manny had a bad feeling about it when Mister Pete returned, later that night. Manny was alone in the office. Mrs. Sweet was sorting things out downtown and he'd kicked his crew out promptly at six o'clock. He'd settled down with his salisbury steak and peas, and was deciding whether or not to eat the applesauce first, when Pete came pounding on the door.

"Closed!" shouted Manny with a mouthful of lukewarm peas.

"Open!" demanded Pete, and he pounded even louder on the door. Manny thought he was hearing the frame begin to splinter so he hopped up and hurried over.

"All right, all right," he said, and he opened the door. Pete barged in, nearly knocking Manny over. He lifted him up by the collar and shoved him back against the wall.

"Boss wanna see you," he spat.

"Why you got to be so friendly?" Manny managed to rasp. Pete let go and Manny fell flat on his ass.

"God damn," he said, struggling up again. Pete was closer than bad breath, closer than sweat on a hot day.

"You're coming, now," he said and pulled him by the arm out the door. Manny realized they were leaving the body shop open but decided against complaining. Out front by the curb a white Jeep limo waited, door open. Pete threw Manny in the back and pushed in after him. He closed the door and the Jeep sped off.

"I don't even got my seat belt on," Manny thought as the speeding utility vehicle lurched him from Pete's lap to Sharad's. Fortunately, the trailer park was just a couple of blocks away. They screeched to a halt outside trailer number four, and Pete pulled him out onto the pavement. Manny was pretty rumbled by then, but Sharad was cold as ice.

"I appreciate your taking the time out of your busy schedule," he said, stepping over Manny and beckoning for him to follow.

"Do I know you?" Manny asked. Sharad glanced back, surprised. God damn it, he thought, what's the point of being a goddamn leader if people don't even fucking know?

"In here," he said, gesturing toward the trailer. Like every other one in the Buena Vista Trailer Park, trailer number four was painted a pleasing beige with forest green trim. The retractable awnings - quite an expense at that - were color coordinated to match. Each trailer was fronted by a heavy metal door, the better to retain the heat inside. Two steps up and there you were.

The trailers were set a little closer than in most such parks, only six-foot gaps kept them apart, and the road between the rows was one lane only. Sharad preferred closeness on principle. It fostered more cooperation, he believed. Trailer four was currently home to one woman (Kate) and two husbands (Rick and Rod). The pair of children assigned to them were ages six and four and named Rubinea and Charlotte.

"Out," Sharad announced, and the five residents hurried to obey. Manny followed Sharad inside, and Mister Pete followed Manny. Outside the family gathered around the picnic table and discussed whose turn it was to wash the dishes. Rick was hoping it was his because

whoever did the dishes often got a blow job afterwards, from one spouse or another. One of those unwritten rules, you know.

"What's a blow job?" Ben inquired.

"Like mom and Otto," Marcus said.

"Oh, ok," said Ben.

"So," LeMaster said, after placing himself in the good seat. Manny and Pete had to share the cramped little couch.

"I hear your boinking Mrs. Sweet"

"What's boinking?" Ben asked.

"The other thing," said Marcus, "now just listen, all right? Or do you want to go home already? I thought so."

"Anyway," he continued, "Manny did not deny it. And what's the harm? he asked. Mr. Sweet had disappeared so it wasn't like he was hurting anyone."

"It's not hurting me," said Sharad, "and I don't even care. I just want some information."

"Why didn't you say so?" Manny asked. "I'm always good for that."

"Just want to make sure you understand who you're dealing with," Sharad went on. "Now listen. I want to talk with Mrs. Sweet and I want her here tonight. So where is she?"

"Beats me," Manny said. "She was going home the last I heard"

"Well, she didn't make it home," said Sharad. "We were waiting and she never showed. You've got till dawn to bring her here, you got it?"

"Um, okay?" Manny was uncertain. "But what if I can't? She don't answer to me"

"If you don't," said Sharad. "Well, if you don't..."

God damn it, thought Sharad, what's the use of having power if you can't really threaten anyone? Fuck!

"I'll break his legs?" offered Pete.

"Ok, yeah," said Sharad, "If you don't bring her, Pete will break your legs"

Amy Biggs

When he got to Mister Pete's old house, Manny first had to get past Emma Biggs, who was marching back and forth across the lawn carrying a sign declaring her opposition to all things latinly syncopated. She rushed over to block his way to the door and Manny tried to push her aside, but she was too heavy.

"Come on, lady, I got to see my boys," he said, but Emma wouldn't budge.

"Your boys are messing up my neighborhood," she said, "with their bouncy noise and all those cars." She pointed at the open garage, which was stuffed with half-VW's and Renaults.

"They're spilling out against the ordinance," she said.

"Well, take it up with the city," suggested Manny, "just let me knock on the door."

Levatin heard the struggle from the living room and poked his head out the front window.

"Hey lady," he shouted, "You can't block the walk like that. Remember that court order we got?"

"What are you going to do about it?" Emma shot back, "that's not even your house!"

"It's mine," yelled Phil from the upstairs bathroom.

"Do we got to call your daughter again?" threatened Junior Bus, emerging from the front door.

"Already here," announced the officer. Amy Biggs had pulled up in her patrol car just that minute and stuck her head out the driver side window.

"Come on, ma," she ordered, "get on home with you."

"I ain't going nowhere," Emma replied. "I got my civil rights."

"You got the right to get your ass back home," said Amy, "or I will give you another citation and don't you think I won't"

Emma snorted and seemed about to come up with some other challenge, but decided against it and stepped aside, letting Manny pass.

"You don't know the trouble I got," said Manny to Junior Bus. "I got to find Mrs. Sweet right away"

"What's that?" yelled Amy from her car. "Did you say Mrs. Sweet?"

"Yeah," said Manny turning back, "I got to find her right away and take her to the trailer park or Mister Pete is gonna break my legs."

"He what?" asked Amy. "Break your legs? What is this, some fucking cartoon? I'll bust his ass wide open like I busted Mrs. Sweet just a couple hours ago."

"You what?" Manny came running to the curb, with Junior Bus and Levatin close behind.

"She was speeding half naked down the wharf," expounded Amy Biggs. "Had to take her in."

"Where is she now?" Manny demanded.

"County, as far as I know," replied the officer. "You know a good lawyer, maybe you can get

her out"

"Holy shit," said Manny. "Now I got to pay a lawyer? Why is everybody fucking with me?"

"Maybe it's because you're such a nice guy," Junior Bus suggested, and burst out laughing.

"You watch your mouth you want your job," said Manny, as the cop car pulled away. "What am I gonna do?"

Levatin was thinking oh no, not me, I ain't busting anybody out again today. I hit my limit already.

"You got that lawyer already," said Junior Bus. "The one that got your battery charge knocked down to misdemeanor"

"That sleaze ball?" Manny said. "Oh man, I guess I got no choice"

Sparky

Ben realized he had a lot to think about, and wished the flies would stop buzzing around the fire pit where he sat alone while Marcus looked around for more of that sawdust to burn. They'd found this spot of beach beneath the shadow of the wharf and often came to experiment with different materials. Marcus always liked the smells of roasted chemical combinations. One time he told his brother there were people who knew how to reduce the human body to its essential amino acids and store it in a bottle or a can. Now as he saw some empty soda cans crushed and tossed into the fire he wondered who they'd held in some previous existence.

"This is your captain speaking," Marcus said, "your flight crew have been temporarily reduced and are stowed in the flotation devices beneath your seats. We hope you enjoy your stay in the harbor district and please notify the authorities of any and all suspicious activities"

Ben was listing his favorite colors in alphabetical order. He was counting the bottle tops he'd collected while lagging behind his brother all day. He was singing a surprise song with happy endings. He was remembering the days of the week and the numbers he had assigned to them. He was deciding which one of his friends would be the first one he would hug when he returned to school in the fall. He was wondering if the summer would really end, or maybe it wouldn't this time around. There has to be a first for everything.

Sparky the bulldog was lying next to Ben and breathing his raucous breath. He was the snortiest dog Ben knew, and the smelliest. But Sparky was a loyal friend who could sniff out cat poo anywhere. Ben was wishing he had something that belonged to Sugar so that Sparky could find and rescue him. Ben had big ideas about heroic action figures and exactly how he'd storm the trailer park and free the people from their current family arrangements. It would be a mess trying to sort them out. Marcus told him that the people there had trouble remembering exactly whose kid was really whose. Sharad LeMaster had confused their brains with contradictory stories, and mixed things up so no one knew reality anymore.

Marcus returned with a plastic grocery bag full of sawdust.

"This is really primo stuff," he said, "it's juniper and douglas fir. Man, it smells so good," and he buried his nose in the bag and took another big whiff.

"I almost hate to burn it," he declared, plopping down next to Ben. "Here, you smell." Ben stuck his nose in the bag and sniffed but it didn't do much for him. Marcus was the one with the sense of smell. Ben thought basically it looked like all the other sawdust Marcus ever brought around.

"How come Levantin can fly?" Ben asked. That was bugging him all night. Levantin flying even though he wasn't one of the Sawdust people, and wasn't even from the Hybrid age.

"It's something he picked up when he became invisible," said Marcus. Ben was shocked.

"I thought Sugar was the only one." he said.

"Oh no," said Marcus. "Didn't I tell you about that? It was back when Sam was still alive, right around the time that Mr. Brooks went in the bottle. Gravity slipped up one day and Levantin was right there when it happened. He knew it had to, sooner or later, so he'd been watching

and waiting. Laws of nature can be sneaky, Levantin said, but everybody's got to take a break sometime."

Doc

"Yes, well it's true," admitted Levantin, arriving with a basket full of fresh fish ripe for roasting over the fire on sticks, "I guess I am pretty handy when it comes to bending the space-time continuum."

"Woah," said Marcus, digging into the basket to pull out some smaller trout.

"How?" asked Ben.

"I had a lot of time on my hands," Levantin said. "When I was a kid I didn't have a lot to do, especially in the summertime. I used to hang out at the beach and listen to the older guys tell stories about all sorts of crazy things. There was this one kid, we used to call him Doc because he had glasses, and he knew a thing or two about science. Used to teach us stuff. Most of it was wrong but, hey. He was just a kid, too."

Levantin skewered several of the larger trout and bass and placed them carefully across the driftwood tripods he'd constructed while he talked. Roland came around with a pitcher of juice and a string bag of tomatoes. Naturally he had his radio on but this time it was popular songs, something about a love affair, and flying to the moon.

"Doc was only nine or ten," said Roland, laughing. "We were five or six. Remember when he taught us how to talk with bugs?"

"Crazy," Levantin laughed. "He used to make the termites march all up and down the beach. Damned if they didn't do what he said, though"

Roland pulled some plastic cups from underneath his white beret and passed some juice around. Ben was glad to find out it was lemonade, his favorite.

"Watching the waves," Levantin said, "It gave me some ideas. I could see the breathing of the planet. I had a feeling that I got to know the Earth, and the Earth, it got to know me too. Sometimes it would tell me things. Secrets that it never told to anybody else."

"Seriously," said Roland. "You got to pay attention."

"So you know what they say," continued Levantin. "Practice, practice, practice"

"And the rest is history," Roland added. "Now let's eat. I'm starved."

Ben was stuffing his mouth with cherry tomatoes and guzzling lemonade. The juices combined to paint his chin, orange and sticky and sweet. It made him feel like rolling in the sand and so he did, until he was completely covered in it. Ben was laughing more than he remembered ever laughing before. The night was warm. The fire was hot. The fish was burning, and Marcus was in heaven's scent.

"I can feel everything," he said, with the biggest smile across his face.

"There's many ways to see the world," Levantin said. "You, my friend, can see it with your nose."

Larry and Drake

"I always wanted to be a cult leader," Sharad was lecturing Sugar one night in trailer seventeen. Sugar was half stretched out on the tiny couch while Sharad paced the seven possible paces back and forth across the room.

"Even when I was a kid, I knew. There was this guy. They called him the 14 year old perfect master. Then the next year he was the 15 year old perfect master. How cool is that? He was always getting upgrades. Tons of people showed up at the Astrodome to see this kid and he was from India, for Christ's sake. I was from India too! The other kids used to call me all sorts of names, dot-head, stupid things like that, but I was going to be a perfect master just like what's his name. God damn it! I forgot his fucking name! Shit. Tons of people. Here they got this crazy woman on TV because she doesn't like her neighbors, but me, I got all these people under my total control and does anybody even know? What's a guru got to do in this town?"

Sharad paused in front of Sugar and glared down at the unmoving blob of skin and superman pajamas.

"So are you going to help me or what?" Sharad demanded. Sugar had no idea what the man wanted from him.

"What can I do for you?" he asked, and not for the first time.

"You know what I want," Sharad said, "I want to know the secret. Just imagine. Sharad LeMaster and his Invisible Hoard! Did you know I've never come up with a good name for my little group here? Oh, I've tried, all right. It's like a rock band. You got to have the right name. It has to convey the energy, the spirit, the power, The Invisible Hoard! What do you think? Is it catchy?"

"It's catchy," Sugar agreed. He would basically agree to anything Sharad suggested.

"I don't know," said Sharad. "It's not quite right. I never seem to get it quite right. But anyway, it's even beside the point, because you. You. You haven't told me the secret yet, have you?"

"I don't know it," Sugar said. "People tell me I went invisible. People tell me I came back. I don't remember any of it. I don't even remember who I am. People call me Sugar. They call me Beauregard Sweet. Ok. If that's what they want to call me."

"You were gone for SEVEN YEARS!!!" Sharad shouted. "Seven fucking years!! Where the hell were you all that time? Were Larry and Drake just full of shit when they saw you disappear before their eyes? Were they just the drunken losers then that they are today? Is that all it is? You were in some fucking loony bin all that time? God damn it. I knew it."

Sharad slammed his fist against the wall, causing yet another dent in the side of trailer seventeen.

"We'll see what your wife has to say about that," he sneered when he recovered from his fit.

"My wife?" asked Sugar, sounding curious.

"Yes, your god damn wife," said LeMaster, "Jalissa. Ring a bell? That woman who was fucking the mechanic when Pete caught up with you the other day? Yeah, that's right, that

woman was your wife. Well, she's coming here tonight, and then we'll see how well your little story holds up. Ooh, I don't remember. Right."

"If you say so," Sugar sighed, and closed his eyes. He figured he would just ignore the guy if possible. Sharad was too disgusted to continue, anyway, and he slammed the door behind him as he left.

City Hall

Bill Cody came strolling up calm as anything to where Levantin and Roland and the boys were enjoying their picnic on the beach. He didn't seem to remember the boys or even acknowledge their presence. He walked straight up to Levantin and murmured something soft the boys couldn't hear. Levantin sighed and nodded and the two of them went off to under the pier where they could talk without being disturbed. Ben watched them wave their arms around and thought they looked like dinosaur pelicans doing a dance.

"He wants us to help with Sugar," Roland said, as if their conversation was as loud as his radio.

"How do you know that?" Marcus asked.

"I know whatever Levantin knows," said Roland. "We're kind of like connected. It's pretty funny that old Sawdust fellow thinks he can keep anything from me."

"How would he know?" asked Marcus and Roland just laughed.

"That's why it's funny," he said. "Here," he continued, handing some pieces of burnt fishtail to the boys, "this'll strengthen your spleens."

"What's a spleen?" Ben asked.

"Oh, that's nothing a kid needs to know," said Marcus, acting as if he did. Roland just smiled and said,

"Go on, it's good for you," and laughed even harder when the kids tried to bite into the rock-like bits of coal and spit them out again.

"Oh, that's something," Roland said, cocking his ear towards Levantin and Uncle Bill.

"Ooh, that's big," he said to the boys. "Damn big"

A few minutes, after Bill had left, Levantin and Roland discussed the matter further. Seems the Sawdust people felt responsible for something that happened to Sugar one time. Something about some second-hand smoke gone bad. Had to do with some especially vile wood, that City Hall Franklina, which is why Johan's arrest was so obviously a setup. After what happened that one time, no Sawdust man or woman would ever touch that tree again.

"That's got nothing to do with us" said Roland. "I say we stay out of it."

"Too late now," Levantin said. "It's going on tonight"

Hosers

Fog was settling over the secret sidewalk as Marcus told a groggy Ben about the gathering of the clans.

"It only happens once in a lifetime," Marcus said. "And only when the masters of the clans feel the need. They broadcast over secret channels and reach the networks through devious routes. From the north come the sawdust people, flying directly to the settled site. From the south, the Scrap Metal Mountaineers. From the east come the earthly recombinators, sometimes known as Compost Nation, and from the west, the loose federation of the weed people, also called the Hosers."

"Hosers?" Ben was mumbling, struggling hard to keep awake. He felt as if he's been drifting in and out of dreams for days. He had lost all sense of where his body was. His mind was sometimes here, and sometimes there, but always, almost always anyway, the sound of Marcus' voice, and the proximity of water.

"You can see them at construction sites, hosing down the concrete and the dust while great machines scrape layer after layer after layer. But that's not all they do. Some you see in parking lots and driveways with their weed whackers or their blowers and their rakes, or driving great big broom machines, keeping streets and pavements neat and clean."

The Compost people are the last to arrive. They are notoriously slow. By then the other clans have put their shelters up and already had some meetings. There has to be a good reason for the gathering, some kind of crisis usually. It could be that a member of a clan has gotten lost in the world of ordinary people, and there are barriers to retrieving him."

"When Johan was thrown in jail, Bill Cody had to call for a gathering. He didn't know Levantin was going to intercede the way he did, and there was no way to call it off. The tribes were already arriving at the parking lot behind the grocery store."

Visar Lim

"They all have special powers," Marcus went on. "The Compost people, for example, can turn anything into dirt, and not just ordinary dirt, but super rich soil, the best. They distribute this soil all over the earth, wherever people need it. They don't make a big noise about it. No one really knows. That's just the way it is. They are masters of the art of blending in"

"The Hosers have the power of tidiness. This is more useful than you might think. They are able to organize anything in the most efficient way possible. One side effect of this was that many years ago they learned how to compress themselves into very tiny packages. They don't become invisible or anything like that, but reduce their bodies to a size that can fit into soda cans or other small containers."

"Then there are the mountaineers, who have the power of magnetism to such an extreme that they can really make anyone do anything. They are the most powerful of the clan. The original scrap metal master was a man named Visar Lim. By gathering and collecting a variety of discarded metals, he was able to discern the secrets of metallic recombination. He founded the dual principles of attraction and repulsion and determined how they underlie all social interactions. From this he was able to lay down the laws of political gravitation. He invented the two-party system as the visible manifestation of these laws."

"Visar Lim lived long ago, but his descendants scattered through the nation and the world. Some of them remain in telepathic contact in a sort of controlling authority. It was they, collectively known as "the ones above," who approve or deny the call to gathering. The case of Johan's imprisonment was ruled sufficient cause, but it seems they also already knew about Sugar. Dekkar and Minot Lim, cousins who were nominally in charge of the council of the ones above, were the first to arrive on the lot."

"It seems we've got a lot of stuff going on around here," said Dekkar.

"Yeah, like, where do we even begin?" Minot complained.

"Well, Johan's in hiding, but who is this Levantin? Is he a good guy or a bad guy? What about the man who calls himself Sharad?"

"And Sugar," Minot said. "I thought we already dealt with him"

"Somebody fucked up," said Dekkar. "Obviously"

"Well, it wasn't me," bickered Minot. "I had him placed with the Concrete Bunkers."

"Who always fall sleep on the job? Good thinking there"

"Hey. No one else wanted him. What was I supposed to do? And anyway, it wasn't me who let him out."

"Who gave him the bus map, then?"

"Okay, it's true, I gave him the map, but only as something to remind him of his home. I thought it was perfectly harmless"

"A bus map is never harmless," Dekkar scolded. "It can always lead to trouble."

"Well, now we have the Compost and the Weedies coming in. Who's going to deal with that?"

"I'll take care of it," Dekkar said.

"Fancy talk," said Minot. "What if they forget their tools."

"I said I'll deal with it"

"Fine"

The two leaders huffed and turned away from each other. Dekkar, at six feet tall and ninety pounds, was no physical match for Minot, five two two hundred, but he always won every argument between them. There was a reason these gatherings hardly ever occurred. They were a complete and total pain in the ass for everyone involved.

Ulrich

Jill Saginaw, leader of the dirt tribe, was the next to arrive. Seeing Dekkar and Minot defiantly not talking to each other, she quickly sized up the situation.

"Poz and Neg!" she cried out, using the nicknames they despised. "That's the trouble with you two-party people. Never can agree on anything. Compost People don't have that problem."

"Ashes to ashes," Dekkar replied.

"Dust to dust," mocked Minot.

"Getting things done," asserted Jill. "So what's all this I hear? Johan fucking up again? When are the ones above going to do something about that guy?"

"Clans pick their leaders," Dekkar said. "Ones above have got no say."

"No, but who has to take out the trash every time?" Jill huffed. She did not like being called away from her normal routine. Her practices required infinite patience, dedication, and remaining rooted to the spot. Each day away from home was a day the soil suffered.

"I don't know what they expect from us this time," she went on. "Haven't we promised to live by the normals' laws?"

"Johan's not the problem anymore," Dekkar informed her. "It's the Hybrid. And some other factors. Seems there's been some leakage from the void."

"Leakage?" The final tribal leader had arrived. Ulrich Haas, King of the Weed Whackers, rode up in a stinky white pickup blasting out reams of black exhaust. The back of the truck was filled with various samples of filthy cleanup equipment.

"I got some duct tape somewhere," Ulrich said. "That'll usually fix a leak."

"Not that kind of leakage," Dekkar sighed. "Special powers are getting out"

"What do you mean getting out?" demanded Jill. "That's a breach of security"

"Exactly," Minot replied. "There's been a breach. A guy who calls himself Levantin somehow picked up some of the powers. Seems to have come by it naturally, which is very odd, come to think of it."

"Didn't we all, at one time?" Jill asserted. "Not you and I, perhaps, but the founders of the clans. Maybe he's the original of a new tribe"

"Possible," Dekkar said. "It's possible. There's another matter, though. A certain Sharad LeMaster. Doesn't seem to have any powers yet, but has been trying to acquire them."

"Typical," snorted Ulrich. "You either have 'em or you don't. Nobody ever gets anywhere by 'trying'."

"He's got a hold of Sugar," Dekkar said.

"Oh," said Ulrich.

"Sugar?" asked Jill.

"Sugar," repeated Minot.

Willy

"You see," said Marcus, "that's the problem with super powers. You're really not allowed to use them. It just gets you into trouble. The more you show off, the less impressive you seem. It's like a bodybuilder who really just looks like a freak. It's like the world's biggest army that can't even catch one guy. The harder they come, the harder they fall. You know what I'm talking about?"

There was no answer from Ben. Marcus was pretty sure that Ben had fallen asleep.

"Even if you could fly, you probably couldn't go very far before you got tired and needed to rest. Like birds. They go from here to here to here. Imagine flying people all fighting over the same spot on a telephone wire. Knowing people, they would. If people could lift up cars and toss them around, that'd be the new pillow fight. If people could become invisible they'd be bumping into each other all the time. So it's not going to do a lot of good to have these powers. That's why the clans decided to stay low and never use their powers, except in modest, undetectable ways."

"Unrespectable?" Ben suddenly asked. Hearing the phrase 'super powers' had roused him from his slumber. If there was anything sure to grab his attention, that was it.

"Undetectable," Marcus said, "it means you wouldn't know them if you saw them. Remember that guy Willy who rides the little street sweeper cart around the parking lot at K-Po's?"

"He's got that little dog, Scrappy?"

"Yeah, that guy. He's one of the Hosers, did you know? Except he keeps it a secret. You think he's just out there keeping the parking lot clean but actually he's guarding a treasure."

"What kind of a treasure?" Ben wanted to know.

"The key to the whole thing," Marcus replied. "The key to the lock of the void"

"Whatever," said Ben. He was beginning to get a little confused.

"Okay, never mind," said Marcus, who had a sense of when he was going too far. "Forget that part about the treasure. He's still a Hoser, though, one of Ulrich's men. So when the tribes were going to gather, Ulrich called on Willy to get the lowdown on the people here. Willy knows everyone. You've seen him out there at the coffee shop on breaks, chatting it up with whoever might come by. Everybody loves him. They tell him things. If you want to know a secret, Willy's the man to ask.

"So what I want to know," said Ulrich Haas. "Tell me about LeMaster"

Kitty Lake

"Oh, you don't want to mess with him," said Willy. "That Sharad's a shady character. Oh yes. And he's got him Mister Pete. Nobody messes with Mister Pete. That guy'll break your legs."

"I'm not going to mess with anyone," said Ulrich. "Not unless I have to."

"Well, okay, but I'm just saying," said Willy over his coffee. "Sharad come here some time ago. Started out small time, as just a trailer park manager. Park was owned by Kitty Lake, remember her? She used to be in Hollywood, made some pretty damn bad movies but she had that hairstyle everybody had to copy once upon a time. So Kitty opened up the Buena Vista after her husband absconded with all her funds. Never get married, that's what I say. Why give somebody the key to all your cash? Why do it?"

"And Sharad ... ," prodded Ulrich, a man who liked to get things over with. Talking with Willy was a trial of his endurance.

"So Sharad was Kitty's lover at first. He wouldn't want you to know that. He was in his twenties and she must've been all of sixty-five. It was kind of gross, tell you the truth. People laughed at him but he was only after the park. She gave it to him, just like that. Let him be the manager, then left it to him when she died. Died mysterious too. Drowned in a bucket of water. Who the hell drowns in a bucket of water if they're more than a few months old? Thought it was murder, myself. Cold-blooded, vicious murder. Had to be, come to think of it."

"And Sharad ... ," repeated Ulrich.

"Oh, it wasn't enough for him to be the manager of a trailer park. He wanted something more. Easy prey, those poor folk living there. They wanted a break on the rent, he gave them a break, on condition. The condition was they follow his instructions. Wasn't much at first. A couple of families doubling up, sharing the rent. Next thing you know he got to mixing and matching. Those who didn't like it, they just left. Those who didn't mind, they stayed. At first they were doing it for money, you know, getting cheaper rent, getting free months, bonus channels of TV. He was bribing them to be his devoted followers. After awhile, though, damned if most of them didn't just stay devoted once they got that way. Craziest thing. Letting this man decide who they would sleep with, where they'd live, who would raise their kids and whose kids they would raise. Got to be a kind of cult."

"Magnetism!," hissed Ulrich. "Talk about leakage. Damned Lim brothers don't even know."

"Hell, LeMaster, he don't even know," laughed Willy. "He's out trying to steal somebody else's powers, and don't even know about the power he already has."

"Normals!," Ulrich spat, "you got to spell it out for them."

"Easy as a, b, c," agreed Willy. "But he's gone a little crazy lately."

"Naturally," said Ulrich, "it's the waxy buildup! It's what happens when you don't properly use your powers. Somebody's got to clean up the mess. And you know who that usually is"

"It's who we are," said Willy.

"It's what we do," said Ulrich.

Jesus

Manny had to make a difficult decision, so he locked himself in his office and sulked about it for a while. Junior Bus came by every once in awhile to check, but when he saw the boss huddled over his desk with his face buried in his hands, he turned and quietly walked away. You never wanted to interrupt Manny when he was trying to talk himself out of a jam. The problem was, would she ever find out that he knew where she was and he didn't do anything about it?

Posting her bond was out of the question. Manny didn't have that kind of money. Hell, he didn't have any kind of money. Didn't he basically spend it all on booze and crappy jewelry? Greasing the wheels, you know. Jalissa had specific tastes and it was worth it to keep her happy. Happy, okay, but bail? No way. I ain't paying for nobody's sins, Manny said to himself, pleased at the joke because he said it while staring right at a picture of Jesus. Christ was holding his bloody heart out with a golden halo around it. Pawn the halo, then maybe, he thought.

But how was she going to find out? The Brazilians might tell. Was he going to have to bribe them somehow? Maybe they'd keep their mouths shut out of loyalty? No. Forget about that. He'd give them some rum and a day or two off. Roland and Junior didn't worry him. It was that Levantin fellow that gave him the shakes. Never did trust that guy, even though he was a master mechanic. Half the shit Levantin did, Manny never even understood how, and he'd been in the business all his life. Nobody breathes away rust. Nobody does body work bare handed. Nobody lifts a fucking car right off the ground, I mean, what the fuck is with that?

But he had some excellent references. People were probably just glad to get rid of him, now that I think of it, thought Manny. He never did trust anyone. I'll figure out something to do with that guy, he decided. Now as for Jalissa ... oh shit. Maybe I'll sneak out of town.

Candy McCormack

Things started to get out of hand when Emma Biggs decided she had not been on the TV news enough lately. She thought and thought but had no ideas until she heard about the kidnapping of Beauregard Sweet. 'This is just the thing', she told herself, and went about making signs for a new campaign of picketing. She could have gone directly to the cops, but since that meant her daughter, and she was not happy with her daughter, she decided against that plan. Instead, she tested out a variety of placards until she hit upon the one that seemed to be the best. In simple and direct language, it merely proclaimed, 'Free Sugar!' She put on her best Sunday dress and marched on down to the Buena Vista Trailer Park, first thing in the morning. It turned out to be a pretty eventful evening.

Emma showed up and started pacing back and forth in front of the trailer park. At first nobody noticed. Then the TV crew showed up with their van, their cameras, and their lights. It was already getting a bit dark - Emma chose the time because she thought she looked her best at dusk - so the TV lights attracted a bit of attention. Some residents of the trailer park came out to see what was going on, and Candy McCormack was a well-known news babe, so as soon as people heard it was her, word got around, and more showed up. Soon there was quite a crowd collected on the sidewalk.

The interview went well. Emma demanded that Sugar be released from his captivity in trailer seventeen. There was a clamor for the manager. Sharad had yet to be located. Mister Pete fought his way through the crowd and insisted in a very loud voice that there was nothing going on, nothing to see, move along, and acted insulted when Candy inquired as to the occupancy of trailer seventeen.

"That's my own house," Mister Pete said. "And I can tell you certainly there is no one else in there but me."

Candy requested proof. Mister Pete declined. Emma Biggs began to chant, 'Free Sugar, Free Sugar'. Several children who had gathered began to sing along with her, despite Mister Pete's attempts to shut them up by yelling even louder. The camera crew, following Ms. McC, began to move the crowd back through the lot, towards the trailer in question. Mister Pete ran ahead and flung himself in front of the door of number seventeen, and refused to budge.

"What are you hiding?" Candy insisted.

"Nothing," said Pete, "There's nothing to see"

"Then why not just open the door?" she inquired.

"It's my home," he repeated, "Mine."

"Free Sugar. Free Sugar. Free Sugar" the crowd more and more was chanting. Even some of the trailer park residents were joining in. They were well trained to be joiners. Emma pushed her way to the front and began to climb the steps.

"Don't you come any closer," warned Pete.

"Or what?" she demanded.

"I'm warning you," he said.

"Move out of the way" Emma said, and she walked right up to him and tried to push by him. Pete shoved back but Emma, light on her feet despite her great bulk, dodged his maneuver, and he tumbled off the steps and hit the ground hard.

"Ow!" Pete yelled, and he tried to get up, but he couldn't.

"God damn it," he shouted. "I think I've broken my leg!"

Stanley Mole

"What the hell is going on around here?" Sharad LeMaster demanded, pulling into the driveway of his empire in his new powder blue convertible collectible Mercedes. The crowd parted a little but not enough. He had to stop and hop out of his car and literally dash over to trailer seventeen, where Emma Biggs was pounding on the door and threatening to smash it down.

As Sharad reached the trailer, he saw Mister Pete writing in pain on the ground, and no one helping him out. He saw the cameras trained on Emma Biggs and Candy McCormack narrating intensely. He heard the wail of sirens behind him and turned to see patrol cars and an ambulance rushing towards the residence. Sharad was not a happy camper.

"God damn it!" he shouted. "Everybody out of here. You're trespassing, the lot of you! I'll press charges. You see if I don't," but despite his haranguing, nobody really noticed. It wasn't until officer Biggs, accompanied by Inspector Mole, waded through the crowd that people noticed the situation was changing.

"Mom! Mom," yelled Amy Biggs. "What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"I'm freeing the hostage!" her mom yelled back, kicking again at the door.

"Stop it! Just stop it!" Amy yelled.

"Everybody freeze!" shouted a rookie cop, drawing his gun.

"Put that thing away," said Inspector Stanley Mole, and the rookie cop obeyed. Mole climbed the steps of trailer seventeen and placed his large right hand on Emma Biggs shoulder.

"You'll come with me now, ma'am," he softly said, and Emma relaxed, and let herself be led away. As they passed by Sharad she could hear him yelling some serious threats, but as it was all neatly captured on film, she was happy. She was delirious. Emma Biggs was in the spotlight again.

Lynx

During all the confusion, no one noticed the slight and momentary discoloration of the front door of trailer seventeen caused by the entry of the invisible Levantin. He found Sugar lying unperturbed on the small bed behind the kitchen.

"Don't be afraid," Levantin said.

"Of what?" replied Sugar calmly. "You? Or them?"

"Of anything," replied Levantin. "I've come to get you out of here."

"But I like it here," said Sugar. Levantin was confused. The script in his head called for gratitude and eagerness, followed by a brief ceremonial function, and the exit. He had not considered the possibilities.

"You like it?" he replied.

"Yes," said Sugar, barely opening his eyes. "I can lie here all day. I have you wouldn't believe how many channels of cable TV. They feed me decent food, and all I have to do is every now and then listen to a maniac and a thug until they get pissed off and leave."

"They won't be so patient for long," said Levantin. "Your situation is getting some attention. The police will be opening this door any minute."

"Then let them," said Sugar. "I don't care. I'll tell them I live here."

"You can't do that," said Levantin.

"And why not?" asked Mr. Sweet.

"Because," Levantin said, "you've been dead a long time. You might not remember this now, and it might be a shock, but it's true. Your wife had you murdered, you know, by a couple of guys named Larry and Drake. Does that mean anything to you?"

"They were talking about Mercury Lynxes," he said. "Wouldn't waste my money on that. They were the same as an Escort, basically"

"They killed you," he said. "You were supposed to stay dead. The composting people made a mistake. You were shipped to a concrete bunker, supposed to become part of the wharf. Someone fucked up. Here you are."

"I like it," said Sugar.

"No you don't," replied Levantin, "you really don't know how you feel. This is because you can't feel. You are dead."

"That explains a few things," nodded Sugar. "Like how I can watch some of these shows they got on."

"It's time," said Levantin. He could hear the voices outside of the door coming closer. Mole was arguing with Sharad for the key. He was telling him it was a matter of time. Did he want to wait for a court order and face charges of obstructing justice, or did he want to get along. He'd go easy.

"Okay," Sugar said, "whatever you say. I think that I know who you are."

"It'll be over in a jiff," said Levantin, and he leaned over the bed, placed his hand on Sugar's ankle, and pulled. Sugar began to condense. Coalesce. Levantin reached into his jacket and removed a bright red plastic container and poured in the remains of the man. Then he opened the bathroom window, became invisible himself, and departed.

Mrs. Saginaw

Sharad LeMaster's bad day just got worse and worse. After a night of near riots and near arrest, the disappearance of Sugar, the incredibly bad TV publicity, and the loss of his right hand man to a fracture of his right hand man's right leg, he was not at all prepared for the visit he received first thing in the morning. What else could go wrong? Sharad wondered. All night he'd tossed and turned with very bad dreams about very bad things.

A loud banging on the door woke him up. He had taken a break from his various wives, and as luck would have it, was sleeping alone. He had to answer the door by himself, clad in his superman p.j.'s.

"Mr. LeMaster?" the woman inquired.

"Yes, that's me," he replied, "Who are you?"

"I'm Jill Saginaw," she said, extending her hand, then retracting it once he refused it.

"E.P.A.," she added. "Environmental Pro-"

"Yes I know what E.P.A. stands for," he interrupted, "but what do you want from me?"

"I have a letter here, sir," she said, presenting a form. Sharad grabbed it from her and started to read, but it all seemed like nonsense to him.

"What is this?" he asked, waving the paper around.

"This property," she replied, "it is yours?"

"Yes, it's mine," he defended, "all mine. Every inch."

"It's condemned," Mrs. Saginaw said simply. Sharad was too stunned to speak. Jill waited patiently for a response, although none was legally required.

"You have twenty four hours," she continued. "You must vacate the premises by then. Demolition will begin tomorrow promptly at six. Count on it," she added rather spitefully. With that, she turned and departed. LeMaster stared after her, then stared at the paper again. Toxic waste! God damn it! he thought. How the hell is there toxic waste here? What does this mean? Of course he knew that long ago the lot had been part of the shipyard. The United States Navy? Nuclear subs? Are you fucking kidding me?

There was nothing at all he could do. The notice was final. Twenty-four hours. The first thing he needed to do was inform all his tenants. Fuck that, thought Sharad. I've had enough. Let 'em take of themselves for a change.

Ricky

At six the next morning, the Lim Demolition company made its appearance at the site of the soon to be former Buena Vista Trailer Park. They brought dozers and cranes, jackhammers and claws, a crew of twenty-four men, and Ricky, the boy. Ricky the boy had the job of knocking on doors and informing the startled inhabitants that their trailers were due to be scrapped very shortly.

The residents rushed off to find their leader, but Sharad LeMaster was gone. He was last seen heading north across the bridge. Dekkar and Minot were reasonable, and allowed the residents a couple of hours to pack up their belongings as best as they could. Most of them couldn't take everything, but it wouldn't have helped. They had nowhere to go. It was pathetic to watch them shuffling around, trying to think, make decisions. The first thing they had to figure out was, who the hell was who? Should they go with their current family, their original family (if they could remember who that was), or their favorite family along the way? Most of them were still standing around on the sidewalk when destruction began.

It was swift. Giant machines like dinosaurs swooped and smashed the portable homes into scrap metal heaps, then combined them again into piles; one on the left (Dekkar Hill), and one on the right (Minot Mountain). All the while, Ulrich Haas stood by with his hose, watering down the enormous beasts, making sure too much dust wasn't raised. It was all toxic soil, after all.

The work went fairly quickly. By noon there wasn't much left of the homes, and the monsters began tearing up the cement, peeling it back like the skin of an apple, surprising how little there was of it, really. You think the concrete that covers your city is an absolute thing, but it's not. It's a layer, that's all. Underneath is the world.

Ulrich was thinking of this when a large shaggy man walked towards him. He had a feeling he should know who this was, but he didn't. Levantin drew near, and pulled out a can of cola. He handed it to Ulrich, who was thirsty from the very hot work and the hot summer day. He took the can and began to open the tab, when Levantin reached out and stopped him.

"It's not what you think," he said. Ulrich looked down, then looked up.

"Who is it?" he asked, but he already knew. Before Levantin replied, Ulrich nodded and said,

"Of course. I will take him back home."

"Thanks," said Levantin, and he strode off the lot.

Epilogue

Now Marcus was thirsty too. He felt like he'd been talking all night. Beside him his brother was fast asleep. Marcus' only problem was whether he should carry the boy home and put him to bed, or stay where he was, and go to sleep too. It wasn't a difficult choice.

"Good night, little brother," he said.

"G'night," mumbled Ben, as the sun began to rise above the secret sidewalk.

THE END

Thanks for reading! Reviews and comments of all kinds are always welcome and appreciated. For more Pigeon Weather Productions, please visit <http://pigeonweather.wordpress.com>