

## The Wages Of Sin

The day was a bright and sunny October. There was no work down at the office, there had not been any now for the past four or five days. The puffing bursts of wind even held more the feel of gentle springtime than the cool compelling coax of fall. Some have said that mass layoffs in our business enterprise were soon to be upon *us*, but I continued to hope for the best from the future that lay ahead.

I must admit, however, that these periods of layoff without salary, were strangely becoming more frequent. There was even talk of us losing *all* of our remaining benefits that had been gradually chipping away now for quite some time. To think about it though, only gave me another situation to despair over, when in reality, there was simply nothing that could be done to neutralize these situations, even if they did occur. What I was really in need of was some rest and rejuvenation, far away from the surrounding situation.

I arose from the bed and commenced to prepare an aromatic, healthful breakfast of freshly buttered grits, cheese, eggs, sausage, and pumpernickel toast, smeared with homemade peach preserves, all served up with rounds of thick, jet black coffee. The luscious aroma soon awoke my dear wife.

“John!,” she called in a voice that sounded half asleep. “Are you up already, at this time in the morning?”

“Yes, I certainly am, my darling. I have a nice dandy right here for you, all ready fixed up just right!”

I soon heard the sounds of movement from the bed room as her feet hit the freshly waxed hardwood floor. I could hear her as she haphazardly placed her slippers upon her bare feet.

“I’ll be there in just a moment, dear,” she replied.

I perceived a sleep induced shuffle of her feet as she stumbled down the hallway toward me.

“Mm, mm, boy,” she said, as she paused in her night gown, with her hair all rolled up onto huge, light blue rollers. “I could just taste it as I moved down the hallway, before I even walked up!”

“Well now, you had better come on ova here and get it. Grits are not very good when they cool, even if they are warmed over,” I replied with in my raspy, asthmatic, morning voice.

“So whats on for today?,” she inquired as she took her seat at the oval oaken eating table.

“I thought that we would ride out and take a three day trip. Maybe it will help me forget about my employment situation, these waves of bills, and all of this other garbage piling up that I cannot seem to get a handle on,” I replied in a sighing gasp.

She suddenly glanced up at me as she took her seat.

“I understand, honey. I have told you over and over to just stop worrying about all of it. We will just take it as it comes. If we lose our home, then we could move in with my auntie over in Dallas county. She has already informed me that we have the go ahead. She has a hundred acres of land, farming tools, and the like; we’ll never go hungry, John. She needs help on her place anyway. We would still be earning our keep, if feeling like we are not doing so would bother you any.”

“Oh, I know,” I replied in a release of pent up breath, “but I just cannot seem to get this mess and the fact of my inability to control our decline, out of my mind. It just keeps popping back up about the time that I have put it all down.”

I spoke to her as I took my seat at the right hand end of the table; *the King's throne*, everyone all sarcastically referred to it as. She warmly glanced toward me again.

“I understand your feelings in this matter, and I am with you all the way. Where was it that you had in your mind to vacate toward?”

I glanced down at my steaming plate before me, then cautiously glanced up again before reaching down to scoop a spoon full of the semi-thick cheese grits.

“My old hometown,” I replied.

“You mean the place that you were raised in? With all of those frustrated cranks and weird Os?,” she snapped with a snarl on her face.

“Yep, that's the one,” I replied as I placed the heaping, steamy spoon into my mouth, and began eating. “That's the place that you have so aptly described.”

She cut her narrowing eyes at me sharply, then suddenly laughed in a way that appeared as if she were attempting to withhold it from my notice.

“I just cannot believe it, John. There are better places to visit than that old depressing, boarded up relic of a mill town. Only ghosts from a now dead past still inhabit the place., and the few people remaining all have employment far away. Most, way off in the Dakota oilfields, I have heard. All that remain inside that dilapidated time worn town are a bunch of locked up, antiquated homes, and the old folks just waiting to die. Why not the beach or the mountains, for Pete's sake here, dear John?”

I smiled as I completed working my mouth full of fresh grits, carefully swallowing before I spoke in reply.

“I just feel compelled to make one last trip. You are right, not much remains to be seen there . The mill closed down some twenty years ago, and nothing has ever returned to replace it. The barrel factory and the goat slaughtering plant closed soon there after. There exists nearly a zero employment base in that dying place. Locals call the entire district well-fare row, or Social Security alley, in dark sarcasm of what is amounting to a perpetuating reality.”

When Walmart went up on the other end of the county, all of the time honored mom and pop businesses simply shut down, not being able to compete with the poorly crafted foreign imports that people preferred to purchase in the name of saving minuscule funds, even to their own future detriment. Now their antiquated storefront windows stood not only as just boarded up reminders of a splendor once dearly held, but as timeless monuments to a glory that was now lost for what was beginning to feel like an enduring eternity, with the talk of any new golden restoration being only idle speculation that was reaching farther ahead into a future that never materialized. These relics only loomed on to give a future generation that same feeling of a past enlightenment, glory, and wealth, that the old plantation homes and estates always have generations now passed.

The wife's warmly glinting brown eyes abruptly glanced back up toward mine. A sudden comforting smile streaked across her face..

“So what compels you to make this trip? I don't understand, John.”

“I do not know if I can find the words to describe my inner feelings about it all, in such a way that anyone else would understand, Maria. I would never expect people to be able to. All that I can say is that I just want to return one more last time, only to see where the great journey of life began for me. I am hoping to find maybe one remaining elder who can speak to me of those blessed days of yore, now forever gone by. Otherwise, strangely as it sounds, I don't know,” I gasped in my bluntly honest reply.

I paused as I gazed blankly out the kitchen window, searching for the words to describe my repressed feelings. Another warm smile streaked across my dear wife's face, then cracked into a slight laugh.

“I understand,” she replied all of a sudden as she glanced down. Her face then shifted back up toward mine. “If that is what you want, then such is what we shall do; starting today, if you would like. I am at perfect ease with it all. I only want you to find that inner peace in your life., that much is all that I intend in my agreeing with this trip, dear John.”

So we sat and continued speaking for a while longer, talking, laughing, reminiscing about the day that we met, the adventurous trips that we have made over the years when we really couldn't afford to do so, how much the kids had all grown up now, and the like. Before we even became aware of the time passage, we had both completed our breakfast, and I had collected our plates, then commenced to wash them in the sink. My wife walked back into our bedroom and began to pack our suitcase, being much more careful than myself to make certain that all of our needed articles were carefully wrapped in plastic, and placed in the most accommodating, efficient position within our antiquated tan, leather bound carrying case.

In what seemed like moments, I soon found myself walking with the suit case in hand, down the steps, and out toward our economical Nisan Ventura. I carefully raised the trunk lid and placed the old

well worn suit case firmly inside, side down, then slammed the lid down tightly. My wife checked the stove to make sure that it was turned off, locked the door of the house, then carefully walked down the stairway toward the car. Before we knew what was going on, we were both on our way out of our quiet little community.

The trip was not all that lengthy of a trip, but certainly a long enough one, as far as I was concerned. Maybe it would last just over four hours or so, I would guess. Soon we were heading out of our community and making our way slowly down the somewhat crowded narrow side street called *the Zebra pass*. As we slowly turned from our neighborhood street onto *Fish-rock road*, beside the corner created by *Beaver road* and *Fish-rock road*, sat the local community school.

When we first moved into the neighborhood just a few years prior, a homeless, dirty, sun browned drunk who lived in the graveyard behind the school building, used to come out just after the dark of evening, terrorizing the kids and the adults who attended the night school sessions. The eyewitnesses claimed that he was clothed in very revealing rags, rising up from the graveyard looming in the forested backdrop, swinging a lantern and proclaiming in a loud, very obnoxious, extremely inebriated voice..

*“Hark there, ye young bastions of dark iniquity.. The day of reckoning is upon you all! Hear me out now...! Your day of reckoning is upon you all! All evil will be certain to fall most solidly upon ye false teachers of thy satanic iniquity, spreading thy fallacious lies, speaking only of evil in all forms as being good, and all forms of good as being evil. You'll all pay for your vain blasphemy, thy fornication, and thy adoration of the great satanic abomination! I know thy evil masquerade that thee so mockingly stage for the crowds laughing pleasure, as ye shove thy center finger into my astonished face! You will all pay for this...! You'll pay for thy iniquity.. You all will pay so dearly, and suffer a certain divine retribution in thy forthcoming destruction...! You are all doomed, I shall say again, doomed to death and certain destruction!”*

He would run about draped in rags, covered with fresh dirt from the surrounding fields and wooded yards, behind which stood the graveyard, as he screamed his words of condemnation while racing wildly toward the teachers, adults, and the horrified children. Many residents were terrified all around, and the talk began to race throughout the neighborhood.

So it seemed, he enjoyed coming out every Wednesday, Friday, and Saturday night. The police and anyone else who made the effort, could never seem to locate his exact place of abode on any given day. About the time that the churches got all into it, and the preachers began making mention of it to their Sunday congregations, the old man strangely disappeared. Even the best trackers among the local police failed to locate any sign of him, as did their concealed trail cameras, airplanes, and such. I never heard what eventually happened to him. As I motored on past the school, I could not help but just chuckle to myself in recollection to this now long since past event..

Truthfully speaking, there was a shockingly blunt honesty in the old mans spoken words. The wife and I made mention of the scenario in delightful recollection, as we motored on passed an obvious middle aged man dressed in a woman's summer dance dress, holding another man's gently clutching right hand. The state owned schools were guilty of contaminating the minds of our impressionable youth by claiming that obvious acts of indecency and sick perversion were positive, and that wholesome lifestyles and Christian accommodations, were evil.

Maybe the true sanctioned authoritarian intention in it all, was to bring about a calculated destruction of our beloved nation, its heritage people, and its culture, both morally and increasingly, economically. Elders had been saying these sorts of things for many years now, since degeneration has been noticed in social culture at large with the youngest of children in schools being ordered to interact with the lowest forms of base humanity on earth, the representative films glorifying what amounted to social degeneration, similar literature, even the so called “modernist” architecture, and virtually every other form of artistic expression. Laws and rules of every sort commanded the public at large to accept this obvious degeneration as “modernist,” and “progressive,” rather than the true source of destruction for cultures, people, and empires all the way into the farthest reaches of human history. The lies in this

command were clearly obvious in the fact of being, but who specifically was pushing it, was the obvious question being asked behind closed doors by a numerical minority in the general population?

The more that I gazed about at the landscape and upon the people, the more that I strongly desired to return back into the days of righteous bliss and wealthy enlightenment, now gone for all eternity, so it was appearing, all bearing a shadow of reluctance on part of those whom analytically observe. Maybe that realization was what I was really in search of here.., a return back into what was not so long ago, and all of the positive opportunistic advantage that have been lost in the last thirty years alone.

“You O.K?,” my wife glanced back and inquired of me, as I sat quietly enveloped in my own deep thought.

“Yeah, sure,” I replied. “What do you think that this world here is all coming to?”

“I don't know,” laughed my wife. “I guess it is all like asking the question of why was that man with another man, rather than a woman? What does that sick looking thing have that a woman doesn't, and a man wants, needs, or even gives a damn about? Something there about the entire bloody equation is just obviously not right. Maybe the doctors are putting something in this so called medicine that they are so quick in prescribing to everyone? Maybe the babies are being injected with this negative element that is promoting this emerging homosexual state of mind, in the name of population control, eh? Something is corrupting the world around us, and the devil damn sure has to be in the mix somewhere, since it is so unnatural.”

She laughed as she spoke the last sentence of her inquiring words.

Both of us chuckled as we continued to motor on down the road, plugging along in our destination. As we rode down main-street, even here it was all apparent that our own present town, called *Prospect Mills*, had dramatically deteriorated in a relatively short passage of time. Most of the storefront businesses had boarded up tightly, radiating the feeling that the last nail driven in was intended to hold for all time forward into immortality. On the right hand side had once stood the dance studio; on the left, a funeral home business that had dominated for over a hundred years; all now boarded up for many months past now.

Out from where it was that our car ran past, on the left hand side, once sat a very small majestic lake, complete with a surrounding lakeside neighborhood, extending wooden piers and boat docks backward into an enveloping lake draped lovingly in the arms of adoring weeping willow trees...; all now standing on dilapidated, completely dry land, that seemed to be enjoying a reclamation by the young towering scrub oaks, bamboo briers, and towering lob-lolly pines. A deteriorating dam that had collapsed in the center seemed to be the source of the problem, but the funds for it's much needed repair seemed to loom in what was becoming so dramatically apparent.., a disheartening mirage in the distance beyond.

“What do you make of it all, my dear?,” I sarcastically inquired of my wife as we both glanced out of the car window.

“All of it comes from taxes, and taxes come from people being gainfully employed in secure jobs that pay realistic living wages. Just take a look at how many factories have all closed down, and been closed now for a number of years, without even as much as an attempt at bringing in any enterprise to replace them. At least I still have my job, John boy, and for that much, I am *very* thankful,” she replied.

“Yeah, I know, and most local business people tell me that the real reason that they are going out of business is because of these extortionist taxes, expensive mandatory permits, and all of these gross mandatory insurance requirements. They say that they are all operating only on thirty cents out of every dollar earned. This negativity is about the same for a workers wages nowadays as well.”

My wife chuckled aloud at my words as we continued to motor on down the road toward our destination.

“And when people try to reduce their overhead so that they can live on those few cents remaining, there is always some sort of a regulatory mandate that tries to prevent them from doing so. You can't rent your rooms out in your own house. You can't use your own crafted lumber to build with. You can't

put an attic room in your own damn home. You can't even build a tool shed on your own damn property. Yet these pathetic, greedy pigs running this town and the state, all do absolutely nothing to create real jobs; the situation at large is simply insane to me! If people want proof that God exists, then examine the fact of an economy holding up as long as this one has, when leaders have violated every law known to economic and moral science.

“What is the real sense in continuing to live in the US anymore, if the entire country is so corrupted and ruined now by the outright incompetent fools who are in control, with the authority that we elect on the pretense of safeguarding our own interests, supporting our extortionist adversaries once they attain office? Hell, we didn't tell them to take out huge loans at the Federal Reserve, so who do they think that they are forcing the installment payments for these loans back down on us, the proletariat? I just don't see the advantages in continuing to live in the US anymore for those that have accumulated assets, to be frank about it,” she said as we rode along.

As we cruised on down the highway, both of us could not help but to take notice of the overgrown farms, dilapidated corn silos in front of entire fields that had been overgrown with scrub and dog fennel, with small maple trees sprouting up here and there throughout the low growing area. All of the fields gave the appearance of being allowed to lie fallow for two or three years, maybe even more. The sight was absolutely shocking. An overwhelming majority of the homes appeared to be overgrowing with vines and grass, long since out of control. Most were boarded up tightly, giving the appearance of have been so for innumerable years. Not even a shivering skeleton of a single dog ran about, as far as I could tell from the passenger seat of our car, as the wife drove along skillfully dodging the ridiculous number of pot holes in the road.

“Wonder where all of the people are?,” I inquired with a sarcastic air in my voice, just trying to make light of all these negative appearances surrounding us.

“Couldn't stay here,” replied Maria. “The farming administration crashed, and people simply could not make a living from doing it any more. All of the factories shut down and went overseas, so that they could employ slave labor instead of paying living salaries in America to US citizens. The few corporations that did remain on US soil cried that they couldn't compete with entrepreneurial citizens starting their own businesses, so they paid the politicians to pass regulations raising costs dramatically to discourage self employment. How were the people going to make a living here?”

“Yeah, that just tells you how sorry the pigs are who were elected to run this place, now doesn't it?,” I snarled.

“Well, what is really disturbing is when one considers that the people here all tried to get home based businesses going on their own property. But the regulators, meaning the zoning boards, the local police and so forth, swiftly moved in to shut them down for not paying all of those extortionist taxes, permit fees, insurances with rates that suddenly leaped upward, and all of that. When these authorities imposed their prohibitive mandates with direct armed force, door to door, there was a huge firefight over this ridiculous mess, and the troops moved in, eventually... You mean that you have not heard about this? It was all over the news, the computers, and everywhere.”

“Can't say that I have,” I replied.

“Where have you been living at then, inside a cave? Darn!,” she snapped with a sigh and a smile.

“What happened to all of the people who remained, then?,” I solemnly inquired.

“They were all rounded up, and delivered into the containment facilities. The order was to surrender, give up your weapons, come with us, or die right were you stand.. You did not hear about this, John?,” she snapped.

“So the people slugged it out with them, huh?,” I asked. “Seems like I did hear about it.. I am shocked that the same has not happened to all of us in our town,” I replied.

“Well right now it is just in certain places, not everywhere, and the information about it is being suppressed by the state and locally owned owned media,” my wife replied. “The authorities are telling us that these contests are over discrimination of one demographic by another, one being shot by the

other for no reason, supposedly, or some other such ridiculous claim soaked heavily in appeal to emotion. But our area has suddenly begun to deteriorate, I know that much.. It all makes me wonder..,” replied my dear wife, Maria, as she slowly shook her head from side to side. “It all just makes me wonder and gives me this shifting, sick kind of feeling, deep down inside the pit of my stomach.”

We continued to pass through the surrounding country side. Where once had been wide open spaces planted with long rows of rich leafy green tobacco, green, then yellowing corn, or enrapturing verdant expanses of soybeans; were now replaced by freely growing pines, maples, or water oak that was locally known as scrub oak, consumed by thick enclosures of tall flowering snake root and water hemlock, field grass, and flowering cat-claw briers. Here and there one might see some willow, if indeed flowing or more than likely around in these parts, standing stagnating water was nearby.

Soon we passed a mobile home park that was now deserted, covered with vines, overgrown with fennel brush, and tall standing patches of yellow broom straw. The tops on many of these eroding dilapidated doublewides appeared to have caved in, creating large holes and exposing the interior to the elements. It was all shocking as to just how quickly the poor quality building materials deteriorated when exposed to the outside corrupting elements.

We soon paused where the pothole covered highway came to a T, the stop sign having been removed in what appeared to be a long passed time span. If one did not know better, we were entering the realm of some ancient ruin, or an alien apocalyptic landscape of some sort; which indeed, some were now, shockingly enough, saying was the case.

We glanced both ways, no one was approaching, so we then made our right hand turn. As we moved forward we slowly passed through more collapsing houses, some standing obvious as burned out hulks riddled with bullet holes, and gutted by some sort of incendiary flame. As we continued forward, on our right hand side we passed an area that I could clearly recall once being a beautiful cleared and landscaped cemetery dating back into colonial times, now being so overgrown by saplings, broom straw and briers, that I could never even tell it had *ever* been a cemetery in the past. I strained my watering eyes to pick out a standing stone here and there from within the dense brush. As we passed through, my wife glanced my way, gently smiling as she spoke.

“According to what my dear friend, Glenda, told me at work a few days ago, many of the locals in their struggles with the repressive troops, who so rudely marched in to subjugate the people and herd them all into the labor camps; were compelled by the prevailing circumstances to dig up their own dead, being careful to place their arms and ammunition into the caskets with the corpse, which in most cases, was only dry bones and powdery dust. It was observed that the invading troops were very careful to always avoid graveyards, for some unknown reason. Maybe it was all due to some sort of superstitions that the individual troops held to; since a majority of them were from way out of state, if not from overseas, rather than from our part of the USA here.”

I continued to only gaze through the passenger window, consumed by a glaring stare made in drop jawed disbelief.

“Where was I?,” I muttered as I continued on in my consumed, hypnotized gaze across the surrounding astonishing landscape. I felt as if I had been placed into a rocket ship, then shot onto some distant alien planet, rather than remaining in my own lifetime familiar environment.

My wife snapped her head around, a streak of sudden anger placed her into it's grip...

“I tried to speak with you concerning these matters, John, but you only just tuned me out, telling me that I was being negative, and wallowing in it. When I tried to speak of the information that my friends were giving me, you would only reply that I needed to stop hanging around such negative, apparently very influential people. You would always continue on by telling me that both of us still had our jobs, and that we could not feel a thing as these people were giving us all of this so called “negative” information; informing me continually of these awful horrors all around us.., even though we could never see them! You even made the statement yourself, laughing that everything just continued on as it always had, and requesting in jesting sarcasm, where these events were that was being spoken of; like

these people were ridiculous fools who were giving us this information. I, and a number more, tried to warn you and everyone else, John, but no one would listen to me or any of the others..”

“But we were both doing just fine, Maria...We were doing so well back then!,” I quickly snapped. “I honestly did not see a thing that had changed, just as had all of my associations back then, not so long ago...”

“Yes.., that much is so true, dear John,” replied my wife. “It was all so true.., until the retirement account confiscations that I had warned everyone about, suddenly came knocking on everyone's front door. Then came the bank account confiscations.., then finally you and all of your friends lost your jobs and everything else, all at the same time. Now you are all perfectly prepared to admit that something was, *and is*, very mucked up here; but it is way too late for all of you now, John, way too late.....”

“What do you mean, that it is all way too late for me, Maria?,” I inquired in a new level of puzzled astonishment.

“I cashed in my personal savings and retirement accounts some time ago, when I first noticed that everything was heading for the rocks. I purchased pure golden bullion and diamonds, as did all my “*negative*” associates. I stashed all of it inside of an inch and a half diameter sized PVC pipe, capped on both ends, and buried down in the river swamp by the old Dowlais Plantation landing point. You know, near where the three hundred year old mile stone stands, right there by the river. I was careful not to bury my stash directly by it, since it is so bloody obvious, but at the foot of the second huge live oak tree directly out from it; then again, directly out 13 feet due west, from the dogwood tree closest to the next largest live oak tree. No one will ever find it there, John.”

“Damn, Maria, you mean our camping trip down there, with our group of friends, was for that purpose; you to stash your valuables?,” I asked in great surprise.

“That's right, you would not listen, and neither would any of the others. So all of us, who were aware of the facts building and the looming negative future suggested by them, simply took action all on our own. But now it is way too late for you and all of the others. Not only have your financial accounts been confiscated, but it is now illegal for anyone to acquire, or to even own gold or diamonds, or any sort of elements that allow appreciating wealth, even small caliber arms and reloading equipment, or ammunition; even loose cured pipe tobacco or coffee by the pound to narrow my claims down more., much less any form of liquor or dope! Naturally growing Yuopon tea is now illegal to possess. Simply doing so is a felony offense, bearing a thirty year prison sentence and a sickening, melancholy future to mercilessly labor on this decaying infrastructure. I am so very sorry, John, but all of you and your immediate family, and personal associates..., are simply screwed in the worst sort of way, with a great big screw callously wretched into a teeny tiny hole, and all that any of you can do is to simply grin and bear the pain of it.”

“But that is just not right!,” I screamed in a snap of my own sudden rage. “We all have constitutional laws against this sort of tyranny and oppression!”

My wife only shook her head with a slight smile as she drove along.

“...Don't worry there, dear John, You and your kind are not by your self. Most people have not heeded the call made by the mounting facts, choosing instead to simply ignore them and the terrible suggestions they put forth. Everything was so humorous to you all when it was only others around you who were suffering.. It was so easy for all of you to simply make some sort of moral condemnation by declaring aloud that this person brought it all on themselves because he drank way too much, or that person brought on the misfortune because he lived with someone outside of marriage, or was just a slothful insolent fornicator in general..., or that person way over there had been divorced.

“It was really easy to declare aloud that the suffering person did not major in the right field and did not apply themselves enough in school, with your obvious conclusions being how they consequently deserved the misfortune piling up. Until the monster of an ape came home knocking on your front doors..., then it is always a different story, dear John...The skunk always smells worse when he is sitting in your own lap. Just like the shitty end of the stick always smells worse when it is shoved into your

own face, rather than the face of someone else ! It is only funny when it happens to someone else, isn't it, dear John boy, there?"

"Just wait a minute there, dear Maria, no sense in going there with this!," I snapped.

Soon our car was entering into what was the city limits of Old Bridger's Town, respectively. The term *city limits* being only a pathetic euphemism for an extortionist tax realm, signifying the border where one enters into upon crossing. The majority of the people therein, being so ignorant as to except this base euphemism, and the minority who were not, too weak too protest about it; preferring instead to prostrate themselves in sickening homage to these incompetent authorities, and to simply just "*suck up*," hoping indefinitely for some sort of granted favor that is promised, but never materializes; instead of standing tall to make what would otherwise be their very valid demands, publicly known.

Only the black folks bore the fortitude to make any sort of public demand, but unfortunately, the majority lacking the intellectual insight to know that they were only being manipulated; when the elites informed them that the reason for their own unemployment situation and general sufferings were because of discrimination by the opposing races surrounding them, rather than regulatory neglect and governmental incompetence at managing both the state and local economy. They all seemed to simply just give totally into the well presented lies and turn on their fellow innocent, suffering neighbors, now consumed by an inexplicable heated rage, without any sort of preceding justification. In most cases when asked, they themselves did not even know why it was that they behaved in such a raging, viscous manner; but so today's reality goes, until it sadly ended like this..

Old Bridger's Town had always been somewhat of a relic, standing almost as a living museum piece to the World War One era and the era leading into World War Two. Change had seemed to skip that old town right on by. Even so, there was far more activity going on in this place than there were people to enjoy it, once upon a time in the not-so-distant past.

On the right hand side stood the old Western Auto store that also once pared as a very profitable dime store general; then a local farm supply store that sold some of nearly everything imaginable. On down through the town midsection, on both the right hand side and left, once were clothing shops displaying and selling the most elegant of hand stitched dresses and the most durable articles of clothing, especially the thickly crafted denim coveralls and jeans. There once stood the old *Popes Dime Store General*, just up ahead a bit from where our car eased along right now. The Macon family's dry cleaner store stood right beside where our car had eased up beside presently. Ahead of that, stood their old jewelry store that even doubled as place to obtain credit, if one possessed the collateral in valuable jewelry.

Just up ahead, to the left hand side, stood the old Bridger's family bank, the building of which I always felt, appeared just as those on the now time honored Gun Smoke westerns. On the right hand corner up ahead once stood my favorite drug store, since here it was that I could always saunter inside, and sit down in one of the handcrafted wooden benches to order a real freshly made malt shake or a true fountain soda. I could also order a fat, luscious pickle, onion and tomato decked hamburger, complete with a large order of freshly cut and cooked fries, if I chose to.

I had taken many a date into that welcoming store back in those days, since all of this I could purchase for a crisp three dollars total in cash, depending on how well it was that the cook enjoyed ones presence in the store. With check or some sort of credit, it might have been five or six dollars, but I am not sure because I never was one to make use of check or credit. I always made use of hard cash. COB, we called it back then..., *cash on the baboon head*, we always stated in playful annotation.

Back in those days, we could all just walk into any one of these stores and ask if they needed work, and someone somewhere always did. We only needed to tell them our name and they would then ask us how we desired to be paid, check or cash? Our tart reply was always, COB please, followed by a laugh from both of us, and a rather curt reply that they somehow knew we wanted it that way....

I shook my head from side to side in despair as we slowly made our way past, remembering all of the bustling activity that was now replaced by tightly boarded up store fronts and the crumbling brick



hulks of burned out, and in some cases, apparently bombed out buildings. Even the old Bridger's family bank building was now just a roofless, crumbling, molding brick hulk, that still loomed forward but prominently on the despairing landscape. In some spots, English ivy vines and cud-zoo had nearly completely overtaken the entire crumbling building structure itself. The sidewalks were all covered in deep, potentially damaging potholes, that loomed eerily before us with wide opened mouths, as we eased forward along.

Up ahead to the far left, right beside the collapsed shack that was once the local police station, loomed the old Bridger's Town High School building that had been dismantled due to a lacking of funds to maintain it, and the central section of the building transformed into first a town museum; now barely standing as an ancient crumbling hulk, just like all of the few remaining buildings around here, the others obviously having been reduced into vine enshrouded, scorched rubble brick mounds.

Once there had been a cotton mill in the center of town, and a barrel factory on farther still, down the narrow street. A number of welding shops once stood to happily offer employment, but all of the industry had vanished first; then the people of working age had left the area to find employment. The next astonishing exit was that of the once thriving tax base... Then came the retirement account confiscations and that of their savings accounts. Immediately following were the mass protests and the terrible violence that went with it. Finally the troops had moved in to quell the raging situation, intending to reestablish order.

The only folks who remained anywhere inside this now, intimidatingly empty environment, were the elderly and the infirm, of whom had been granted a meager living allowance from the State government trying to maintain the appearance of really caring for the large, ever increasing numbers of destitute people. These fortunate recipients were only a small select few of the needy, and not a large overwhelming number, by any means. These recipients were predetermined by their continuing loyalty to the ruling elites and the prevailing authoritarian establishment; and according to rumor, their willingness to sign over their hard earned property ownership rights to the ever imposing, authoritarian elites. On a mere whim the funds could cease, and the once fortunate few abruptly rendered into quivering, starving destitution. All of this information I was informed of by my dear wife, as we slowly made our way ahead down main street here in the heart of Old Bridger's Town.

"I just cannot believe it, my dear Maria, I can't believe it! Punch me and tell me that it is all just a bad dream, and then tell me to simply go back to sleep!" I whined to her in my searing astonishment.

She only replied with a slight laugh, a deep sigh, and another half smile.

"Well it is real, and you and every damn body else around had best just accept it. We may not be suffering where we live at now, like these people here have, but it is coming to us. The facts that build just don't lie, with their forward suggestion of the forthcoming horror, John."

As we crossed the railroad bed, the rusting tracks seemed to be the only remnant that held to any sort of original luster, but I say all of that in great hesitation. Upon gazing down the limitless extent of the railroad bed, on both the left and the right hand sides, I observed what appeared as sections of the track that had been removed; probably by the few remaining locals for use in their own, absolutely necessary, building projects. According to my wife, being caught by any authority in possession of railroad iron meant being charged with attempted murder and committing acts of terrorism; all transporting a life time prison sentence which would inevitably lead to a crushing death of the unfortunate inmate, since conditions were so horrible in those dreadful hell holes euphemistically labeled as *production centers*, or *craft shops*, bearing the promise of employment by the more creative in the art of dark sarcasm.

My wife claimed that people died there by the thousands on any given day; I, on the other hand, just simply refused to believe it. As a matter of fact, I did not even believe that such places existed, not here in the good old US of A! Yes, I can see that everything has gone to hell in a hand basket all around, but not to that damn extent of decrepitude. I would never say such a thing to her. I just allowed her to jabber on while I only pretended to listen, never speaking a disparaging word.

As the wife continued to speak of these horror tales, I could not help but recall with a slight chuckle to myself as I slumped backward into the passenger seat of our car, the time old man, Preacher Lacivus, decided to hold his own curbside tail gate commodities sale near here. He had fruit, farm squeezed fruit juice, hand rolled cigarettes and cigars made from local air cured tobacco, homemade peach and apple cider, and lots of used factory made complimented with brand new home forge crafted hand tools. I was mainly interested in the hand tools, but to be quite honest about it, the home made peach plug chewing tobacco did interest me just a bit at the time, though somewhat to a much lesser degree.

Soon a ratchet and socket kit caught my inspecting eye. I asked the preacher how much it was that he wanted for it, and he indicated that he wanted only twenty dollars cash. I did not have it, so he asked me how much it was that I did have on me at the time. I think that I had ten bucks, if I am not mistaken in that recollection. He quickly replied that I could hand the amount to him, and he would be there next Friday evening, same time, same place, as always. So I handed him the ten dollars cash, casually forgetting about it until the next Friday.

Next Friday came, but no Preacher Lacivus. Since it was raining lightly that day, I simply forgot about it. Next Friday was bright and sunny, but no Preacher Lacivus, and for the next several Fridays I could never find the old Preacher-man. Up ahead stood an aged somewhat dilapidated street side shack that doubled nicely as a small time fish market. I decided to drop on inside and ask psycho, Jeremiah Tucker, if he knew anything about the good Preacher.

“You mean Preacher Lacy?,” he inquired on breath that bore the hint of bourbon.

“Yeah, I guess that is the one.”

He burst out laughing..

“Another one has been had again. That man is a master con artist, to-be-sure, but nobody says anything since he is using the money for the churches benefit.! Honestly, he really is, man. I can say that much for him. He really does care for that church and it's congregation.”

“You reckon I could pay him a visit?,” I asked inquiringly.

“Hell yeah, man, his door is always open to anyone,” the tattoo covered, age speckled gent replied. “I hear he puts on a hopping good service. All of the ladies love to hear him when he speaks, and he is not at all shy about meeting any person to consult with them on various matters at hand.”

He smiled slyly as he spoke those words of gleeful information.

“How do I get to this church from here?,” I inquired.

“Well, just follow the street here, and go straight forward across the main street there, right on toward the cotton mill, and on passed. Keep going straight, fellow, until you come to the first large brick Baptist church on the right, and that will be his.”

“Yeah, Jerry, I appreciate the information there. I'll see you around. I think that I am going to go to church this coming Wednesday evening.”

“Oh yeah?,” replied Jerry with a laugh and a smile. “Well who knows, maybe I will see you there. No problem with the information.”

The following Wednesday night came, and according to Jeremiah, the fish man, I would be certain to find Preacher Lacy standing up proud and tall, with a full house congregation around 1800 hours sharp. I will never forget the feeling when the moment arrived that I crossed that door threshold. Jeremiah was right, there the old man was, with a full house all seated right there before him, just a preaching away! He seemed to enjoy telling his congregation about the virtues of honesty, integrity, and keeping to ones promised word. I wanted to be certain that I absorbed all of it, so I was sure to take my own personal position right there on the front pew before him, standing at the front of his congregation...

I never could seem to figure out exactly why it was that he appeared as though he would jump clean out of his skin at the moment his eyes fell on little ole me, then he bore the appearance of consuming reluctance as he turned to make a second glance. He continued on with the sermon, but choked all up before the next nine minutes had passed. Soon he commenced to cough and sputter, promptly excusing himself and making his way into the study room immediately behind the wall, right there behind the

pulpit from where it was that he then stood. His assistant walked up to present himself before the congregation, giving completion to the nights' service, being very careful to excuse the preacher for “*becoming overtaken by the prevailing ailments*. Just another testament to the evils of mankind seeking to destroy the saints remaining on earth here in these last days,” he continued to announce.

The wife and I continued to motor on down main street, passing the railroad tracks and leaving the track mound behind. Here ancient live oaks arched their limbs over the roadway, appearing to grab down upon us with monstrous hands from above as we passed on by their thick trunks and underneath their massive overhead limbs. The effect was that of passing through a natural tunnel, and even more so now than ever before since the streets had not been kept up in so many months, or maybe even a couple of years. The same consuming cud-zoo vines and English Ivy had wound themselves up the trees and over the arching limbs, even to the point of completely blocking out most of the sun light as we passed through. Long strings of cud-zoo vines slapped our windshield while rolls of English ivy scrapped the roof of our car as we made our way down the pavement toward the light at the opposite end of the tunnel.

“Thank the good Lord a monster didn’t leap down on top of our car from the tree limbs above,” the wife announced with an equal combination of seriousness and sarcasm in her speech.

The beautiful colonial style mansion homes that once lined both street sides had given way into utter deterioration and ruin. Many had been gutted by fire, or bore the obvious appearance of being bombed out with their scorched, caved in roof tops and their standing rubble walls of red and gray, time honored but very charred clay baked brick.

As we coasted along, I was straining my eyes to pick out the home of my best childhood friend, Fish. The place had changed so much from a past gleaming luster, into a depressing view of scorched rubble grays, whites, and reds., all delightfully combined with the forest greens of the ever consuming cud-zoo and English Ivy that had ran wild at large, with the people being absent to hold the vegetation in check. I was still in utter shock, since I could vividly recall the outstanding representation of opulence, accomplishment, and glory that this town once manifested unto all whom entered into it's wake.

From the road side I noticed an expanse consumed by the wild vines growing unchecked, but here and there in between the scrub, I could barely make notice of the azalea bushes and red tipped hedges attempting to peek out from underneath a heavy leafy vine screen. Then I saw it, I thought., the old dirt driveway of my targeted residence.

Off in the distance up ahead, I could barely make out the form of his parents home that appeared to remain standing and in good health, but delightfully concealed behind a convenient natural screen. Everything else was completely consumed by freely growing saplings and brier tangled vegetation. I have no idea what happened to his Grandfather's home on the other end of what was once a thriving hay field, but now only a brush chocked and free growing sapling expanse to the far right. The wife and I paused our car in what felt like the entrance way of what was once a drive. I could barely make out the form of a house more to the left fore of this awful weed and vine choked portrait standing before me.

I got out of the car, opened our trunk to retrieve a handy military machete that I always kept with me. I began to chop my way through the chocking brush and vines, slowly exposing what was once an immaculate drive, yard, and farm home estate.

As I made my way down the drive, from the figure of the home, the once tightly closed door opened and out walked a gaunt, apparently despairing, aging figure that I strained my eyes to recognize. As his shriveled form moved ever closer, I at once shockingly recognized him to be my old friend from childhood, Fish. As this form neared ever closer, I could observe that he carried several bandoleers slung across his shoulders and an FN assault rifle positioned in both hands so that it could be handy for any sort of potential action.

“Hellooo! Hellooo,” I stood and called toward him.

“Well hey there, you ole bar slayer you..” he replied! He lowered the rifle, then slung it too across his shoulders. “Where in the shifting sand have you been all of these years? I thought that you had just up and forgotten all about me way down here in the bayou!”

I walked over and quickly grabbed his extended hand, shaking it merrily like I never wanted to release it.

“I came back from overseas, not too long ago. I had been living in Taiwan for three years. I was hired to teach at the local community college the day following my return, and was doing well., until I was abruptly laid off, with no forewarning at all,” I informed him.

“Well., I am just happy to be surviving and alive right now,” he said as he gazed all around, glancing with narrowed eyes all across the expanse as though he were being vigilant. “It was all out hell around here for quite some time, fellow, words can never properly describe the terrors. I can tell you that much for a fact, John.”

“I can see well that something has sure went afoul around here, Fish man. What on earth happened?,” I inquired.

“Well, as you know, the economy went sour all over the state years ago, except for just an exclusive area or four. Everybody under thirty five claimed that it was all a temporary state of being, some thirty years ago now; but temporary never ended., it just became progressively worse until it dragged on indefinitely. All of the old timers back then warned us, John, but nobody listened.. It was horrible, just dreadful.. I will never forget it, even though I would just love too and simply move on with life, and simply cast aside this dreadful horror!”

Fierce anger peculated through his voice as he spoke to me. He hung his head, appearing to be consumed with grief and near the point of weeping.

“What happened around here, fellow? I don't understand, but I can clearly see the results, and they don't look good at all,” I continued to gently inquire.

“Well John, as you may recall, the factories all went out first. We were doing alright, since my wife and I worked with the state, and we farmed our plantation estate here on the side. Then the funds for our county began to dry up, and the state commenced to replace all the workers they could with robots and computers. Soon, like hundreds of others, we found ourselves out of work, but we still had our farm, however, and our retirement funds. We heard rumors that the state was going to confiscate all of peoples savings and pension funds, but neither us nor anyone else believed it. It all happened so suddenly., literally instantaneously, dear John there !

“We went to the board to collect, and there were no funds, John. The county management only stood there like rigid programmed robots themselves, and told us that no funds existed., just like that! When we inquired with an understandable firmness in our voice as to what the problem was, three husky armed guards walked up, demanding that we make our immediate exit from the premises. Can you believe that, John? Like we didn't have any right to ask in regard to our own money reserves, that we had worked out!”

“Like that?,” I asked. They did not offer you any explanation as to what happened to your money, but demanded that you exit, just like that?”

“It all happened just like that, John, just like that, I tell you. Some people would not take the word, no, for an answer. They still stood about continually, demanding answers in raging screams, in spite of being dragged away by the imposing guards. Then it happened...”

“What happened?,” I interrupted.

“A few inquiring citizens shoved the guards, demanding for them to remove their filthy repressive hands. The guards simply drew their side arms all of a sudden, and fired, point blank into them, killing most of them right then and there. I am telling you, that they shot them all down in cold blood like they were stray dogs, and all that the citizens ever wanted was their own money! How could these people do such a thing, John? The few citizens who remained standing and unharmed were swiftly cuffed and taken away to some unknown location, presumably jail.”

“Did the situation resolve at that point, Fish?” I asked in earnest.

“I wish, oh how I do,” he commenced to sob. “The situation here continued to spiral downward, the authorities losing control more and more, with the people at large giving into decrepitude.”

“Who was most at fault here in this story, Fish, the people or the authorities?”

“It was the authorities, John, make no bones about it. I mean, you consider, first they do away with the production base, the very back bone of the job base. Then they lie about it, telling the people that the reason that they cannot find employment was because they lack an advanced education. And this so call education is not given away for free. The institutions and the banks want you to spend all of your hard earned money for it, thinking that having it will really do one some positive good when it came to jobs; but sadly, it didn't, never did, nor will it ever. In the end, everything was a viscous cold calculated scam of the banks, the corporations, and the government, directed toward the citizen base. The authorities continue at this very moment to publish these ruthless calculated lies just to protect the university system and the banks by ensuring that they endure to steal their fortunes, at our displaced expense.

“Then the tax base contracts, since the well paying jobs have now all vanished. This means that just to keep services continuing, income and property taxes must be increased continually, putting great pressure on the general population, even to the point that we are denied our basic freedom and right to conduct individual business enterprise, out of them attempting to guarantee a healthy seventy percent take at our eternal expense.

“Then the job base supported by our broad tax base begins to shrink, and people begin to find themselves laid off and out of work in areas where no one *ever* figured that they would be., like the education field and medical fields. The openings left untouched were filled by computers, robots, or low paid foreign specialists, causing even highly skilled folks to find themselves suddenly unemployed. Soon an eighty percentile of the population found itself standing in the unemployment lines. Even a nurse or a teacher cannot find work any more, John, let alone an assembly line welder, for Pete's sake here!”

“You're right, man, so right indeed. I left these parts way back then for those reasons., and I found work, but the signs around me now are not looking very well where it is that I am right now, either..”

“Yeah, well let this be a lesson to you. Just take a look around you here, John, all of this is what you have to look forward to,” Fish spoke sarcastically, attempting to break the ice as he held his arms open, gazing all around.

“Tell me what happened then, man,” I asked of him.

“Well, then the mass protests commenced. Mainly it was the Mexicans and the blacks, since us white folks don't seem to have the fortitude to stand up for our rights against the oppressive authoritarians. All of us should have stood out there on the firing lines together, but we didn't, dear John, we didn't!,” he spoke in tones sounding as if he were on the edge of crying. “We just stood idly around in wide eyed astonishment, while the Fascist authoritarian pukes continued to lie to all of us, steal everything from us, and abuse us all in every way imaginable. There were loud protests all in the streets everywhere that soon turned bloody violent, with the store front windows being smashed, looting, shooting by the roving surging mobs, and continual death everywhere.

“But as horrible as it all seems John, the heated fury did not reach it's peak until the authorities confiscated our savings accounts, 401K accounts, and our retirement pensions. The protesters were right to get really mad about it and raise hell like they did, and every single one of us should have been right there to participate in the angry melee with them, but we didn't. We did nothing, but still suffered horribly just the same! So what was the benefit in remaining quiet to endure such humiliating abuse?”

“How did the authorities respond to this situation, Fish?,” I asked quietly and gently.

“Well the police completely lost control. You know, there never were that many police around here anyway. Then the swat teams and the troops came in from the state capitol, and the mass shooting began. I hid inside the thick woods and watched as an ATV s moved right down main street there,

taking devastating shell shots at any home from which they imagined a sniper shot to come from, or perceived any imagined potential danger. Don't even try to second guess the question, quite a few authoritarians were shooting simply for the hell of it. I saw bodies by the hundreds laying all out in the streets, appearing as if they had been dropped down from the open sky above.

"When the resistance finally ceased, the troops forced the prisoners held in their captivity to pile the corpses up and set them on fire, right there in the middle of main street, at the intersection by the railroad tracks there! The dead were not even given a proper burial after they had been mowed down so callously like dogs. Matter of fact, I have seen dogs treated with much more respect and dignity, than either the living or the dead around here were, John."

"What was the worst part about all of this tragedy around here, Fish man?"

"What was worse about this entire experience was what happened *after* the mass slaughter in the streets, John.."

"I do not understand, Fish. What could be worse than what you have just described here?," I asked as I swallowed hard at the potential answer to my own question.

"What could be worse, you should ask? Try considering what the troops did to the prisoners and the local survivors when the resistance had ended."

"What did they do?," I asked in astonished hesitation.

"I followed them from a safe distance behind," said Fish in trembling, teeth clenching anger. "I saw them do it with my very own eyes. They first took the prisoners deep into the woods on the other side of the town. They forced them to dig a long trench that was maybe some six feet wide and three feet deep, at best. Then they told them all to place their hands behind their heads and kneel by the trench bank. They mercilessly shot all of them in the back of the neck, right where the skull meets the spine and guaranteed to kill quickest with deadly efficiency. They left two alive and forced them to bury the others, instructing them to exit out and tell the citizens resistance remaining what had just happened.

"Then the troops headed back into town here, going door to door seeking out the survivors and killing them all; men, women, and even children, some only small babies! They were very careful to slay the men first, forcing the women and children to watch; then they raped all of the women while forcing the children to watch. The young girls were next, after they had murdered the adult women, while all of the others were forced to watch. Not even the little boys were spared by these brutes, who were all members of our own national forces, mind you. The part that ripped my heart out the most, however, was what I witnessed them do to the small children, and even the tiny babes..."

"What was that, I shudder to ask?," I hesitatingly inquired.

"I saw them round up the small children and the crying babies ripped away from their wailing, dead or dying mothers. Then right before the tearing wailing eyes of their few relatives who remained alive, the troops made laughing sport as they tossed them up high; playing ice cold games among themselves as they raced about, catching the writhing, crying bodies of the kids and babes on the tips of their bayonets. Some even went farther by constructing fires and thrusting the wailing twisting youngsters face first into the hungry searing heat of the flames themselves., continuing to make laughing sport of it as they did so. It was all so horrible, John, so terrible to behold or even think about afterward."

Fish hung his head and began to weep, then upon getting a grip on his emotions, lifted his face and wiping his eyes to continue forth with this so very true tale of dread and woe in America, beyond all imagination..

"The order that was given, I heard it over their radios as I remained in good cover, was to neutralize the population down to zero here in this specific town. The residents were all labeled non-productive, consuming inbreeds, who did not deserve to live anyway. The idea for the future was to completely remove the entire town here from the face of the earth, to allow nature to regain what was lost in the ever consuming genetic squalor here, as they put it using their own words. I heard their commander as he made the announcement over their radios, then he continued speaking in a strange, probably coded language, that I was not familiar with nor could ever decipher even if I was."

“Well how did you and your family make it out alive around here, then?” I asked. “I might need to learn your secret.”

Fish took a deep breath, then proceeded to reply..

“Well it was never an easy experience, nor was it particularly fun, but we all tried to make it so.., to the very best of our abilities. Papa saw this thing coming on years and years ago. As you may recall, he was one of those elders who so bravely sounded the alarm at the very onset of this horrible conclusion. He built a nice bunker back down on the creek behind our house there. You remember, down behind where the old Butler reunion place is there by the creek bank, and then on up creek a bit until the vegetation begins to thicken up well with the wild raspberry cat-claw briars and thick undergrowth. If you recall, you will be nearing the hideaway when you pass the inch and a half diameter, galvanized water pipe driven back into the high limestone creek bank. That was our primary source of absolutely pure, crystal clear water as we rode this deadly fire storm out.

“We all simply just hid out there, and the big city search teams were too damn lazy to venture down into these dense briars and bramble. The brutes would have rightfully fallen very nicely into our well concealed man-traps and alarms, even if they had of made the effort to pursue us. The bank overhang gave us ample shelter from above. We had it knocked with our more than adequate food supply and our knowledge of the local surroundings, with all of us possessing the necessary skills to harvest the fruits from our surrounding landscape. We hid out for more than eighteen months, but finally, it seemed safe to venture outside.”

“What did you find when you made your exit out?” I asked in great curiosity.

“Everything around here on the hill had been burned out and looted. All three of our inherited homes had been burned out and reduced into mere ruins. First thing that I did was to go back down into the clay hole by the creek, throw together some wooden frames from the scrap wood all around, with holes the same size as our bricks remaining on the home. I packed in the reddish clay from the creek side combined with the savings from our own clipped hair, and proceeded to fire them right there on the creek bank, just like Grandfather showed me many years ago when I was a kid.

“The old system still works like a champ, John. I made use of clay mud and crushed ancient oyster shells scrounged from the creek-side for mortar; then I simply took the old home made bricks, and half arsed my homes back together until the day comes that I can get hold of some good factory made brick and some real mortar powder. No one has had power for so long anywhere around here, that I have forgotten that I might need it some time in the future; so as of yet, I haven't given the matter any advanced thought.”

“Damn, at least you have made it through O.K.; damn-it man! Are things still hot around here in any sort of way?”

“Yes, but the general rule now is to keep a low profile. We seldom come out after dark, and nothing starts anywhere until after dark. There are a few others who have made it through. I am always thankful for being able to enjoy their company.”

“Did any of the old time elders make it through?” I asked inquisitively.

“Yes, but not many. Hell, a huge majority of the young ones didn't even make it. Matter of fact, one of the few elders in particular that did make it through comes to mind right now, since you have bothered to ask the question. You remember Mr. Hubert Winslow, don't you? He is well over a hundred years old and still just as sly as a hen house fox, talking a mile a minute and forgetting more in five minutes than most people will ever know in a lifetime. He was asking me about you just the other day, John, believe it or not.”

“Oh yeah?.I would love to see him again.”

“Well, you're in luck because church is commencing tonight. I know that you remember the old Beth Township Baptist church. He'll be there tonight.”

“Yeah Fish, I want to go and speak with him there at the old Beth Town Baptist.”

“That is your wife there in the car with you, isn't it?”

“Yes,” I responded.

“Well, why don't both of you ride with me just after dark here in a few minutes.. We can talk more then.. We both have much to speak about after nearly thirty years of being apart.”

He carefully instructed me to cease in my chopping of the runaway vines, grasses and hedges that had choked his drive. The intent here was to remain in obscurity, rather than to advertise the fact that people were actually living here. I assisted him as he moved a few items back into the roadway and scattered them around in a haphazardly fashion. It felt strange doing so, but such was the way that made sense considering the prevailing situation.

In no time at all as we labored, the orange globe of the sun neared the horizon, and Fish announced that we should be heading out toward the old church building. I could not wait to get there myself. It had been well over twenty years since I had set foot on the grounds, but in my mind, all that I could behold was the clear shining white paint of the wood framed building, the brand new brick and shiny white vinyl covered communal building to the left of the grounds, with the lawn and the building itself immaculate in it's upkeep and general maintenance. The smiling faces that I anticipated seeing again also beckoned me to return. It seemed like it took forever just to drive across this small but decrepit town into the small farm community of *All-Verdant*, so called because crops were planted year round, of one sort or another.

“The situation around here was hell, John, but we were not the only ones to suffer from authoritarian crimes committed.”

“What do you mean, Fish?,” I casually inquired, yet with growing hesitation. Did I really want to hear this terrible story?, I asked myself in silence.

“You mean that you have not heard?,” he asked with shock in his quivering voice, nearing the point of anger.

“We were not the only ones to be oppressed. At the same time they were oppressing us, they were going after many others as well. They disabled all of our communication lines, our internet service, our cell phones. They still want to lie about the situation by refusing to admit what occurred, and still *is* going on right this very moment. You mean you have not heard about the other sufferings, John there?,” he asked again.

“I am sorry man, but I haven't. You see, my job only ended a short time ago. My wife was telling me things that she was being told by people at her job, but these stories all sounded so negative that I simply didn't want to listen. My attitude was, at least we had our jobs, everything around me and my wife appeared to be as it always had been, except that I have noticed more of the store fronts being boarded up and businesses in general closing down; yet to an extent everything had always been that way.”

Fish laughed, then turned toward me smiling as he spoke.

“Yeah, and large numbers of people felt just that way, and that is what is wrong with everything. People even now refuse to see or accept the truth. This experience really has been an interesting, living example of bleak misplacement in prevailing truth, a very curious element that demands thorough examination in human psychology. Now we can see how the Nazis calculated their repression by logically determining that people would refuse to accept their own persecutions as a fact of being, even when it was happening right there before them as they looked on, in their very faces.”

“I fear that you are right,” I replied.

“Do you realize the true extent of this persecution here that we are experiencing, John? Obviously, you don't, so I am going to tell you. Do you realize that a huge number of once prosperous towns have been totally emptied of their residents and completely demolished, “*returned back to nature*” as our oppressing elitist enemies so euphemistically call this action?”

“Like, which ones?,” I hesitatingly inquired.

“I will give you a very limited list to file away as I speak. Just promise me that you will give my list to the first person that seems intelligent enough, and open minded enough, to except it all as fact.”



“You have it, Fish,” I snapped in return.

“Here is a list of the towns that have been completely annihilated for being labeled *non productive, consuming inbred genetic mutants, who only exist by knowingly leaching from the system far more than they will ever be capable of adding back into it*, and consequently, totally wiped off the face of the earth. Not even a single scorched brick remains, just bare, empty, freshly plowed and replanted forested land now.

Get ready, here it is for your own benefit; *Loris, Chesterfield, Lancaster, Fort mill, Dillon, Springfield, Roseboro, Tarboro, Siler City, Manning, Graniteville, Little rock, Breedsvile...* And I am telling you, John, there are many more that remain unknown to me at the moment[ but just trust me, dear John, there *are* many more such tragedy zones all across this once great land of ours, and lots of suffering to go along with it, far more than may ever be counted. My honest bet is that my story here is not the worst to be heard, by far, Hoss.”

“How do they determine who it is that they are going after?,” I asked in earnest. “What is their criterion to initiate this persecution?”

“Well , according to rumor on the street, they use the former welfare lists, because it is from those that were in largest recipient areas on the list, that the most intense rage of the general insurrection lies. As you may recall, the insurrection did not begin in earnest, with the raging intensity so common place until they cut off the welfare benefits, after they confiscated all financial accounts.”

“What about the labor camps that my wife spoke of to me on the way up here?” I asked. “Have you heard of any such a thing?”

“Yeah, well that appears to be their general plan of things, force the persecuted people into productivity, the general authoritarian idea here being to reverse this scenario of consumers using more than they produce back into the system. If the people refuse to labor, or cannot keep up with the rate of production demanded, then they are siphoned back down into a lower realm of the system; that lower realm being totally vulnerable, market displayed, traded household estate slaves of one sort or another. If they don't make good slaves, then their dead bodies can be reduced into salable products.

“Some even claim that the dominating Government endorsed corporations possess established canning facilities where they strip the very flesh from the railed carcasses of the dead, carefully processing and canning it, then send this canned product back into the labor camp system for inmate consumption. In this manner they do not have to spend much money on the feeding of inmates, if they are productive, for the prevailing authoritarian philosophy is that productive are to completely overwhelm and consume the non-productive in this new world order of Satan's creation.

“The cans are plainly labeled on clean white paper labels, so I am told, bearing only the bold letters; **PORK**. The skins are even manufactured into the meager clothing that the *inmates* are issued, only to be shed upon their execution, or death by general attrition, and reissued back out to the new arrivals in absence of any type of sanitation efforts expended. Life inside these types of places has really turned into a living hell, John.”

“Well, don't they have an order in place, declaring that anyone caught outside will be imprisoned ?,” I asked.

“Yes they do, but I am going to take my chances with it from time to time. Life will be lived to it's fullest extent, in spite of the imposing situation all around me. I accept my fate if I am captured, when I observe that there are no remaining choices.”

Soon to the right hand side entered the now completely overgrown driveway of the churchyard. I wasn't sure, so I asked aloud.

“Is that it. Fish, is that it? I sure have the feeling that it is!”

“Yes man, that is it, the one and only....”

“Damn-it, son, I cannot believe it! Look how much everything has overgrown and dilapidated. Is that old crumbling rubble structure there in the enveloping ivy vines that I can barely make out, the once thriving immaculate church building that we all grew up attending?”

“That is it. What your eyes now behold is really it, or at least, what is left of it. That is the church building and this overgrown wooded area is the churchyard....”

“Why doesn't someone clean it up, man?,” I asked before giving my question any thought.

“I have told you before, we are all in hiding from the satanic horrors without. We do not want any utilized structures to appear as being used. We want them all to appear as if they all had been returned back over to the natural elements.”

We eased the car up at the foot of a huge welcoming ancient Hickory nut tree that I could recall my own Grandfather parking at the foot of every Sunday morning, some fifty years ago, or more. I could even recall him telling me that his Grandfather had parked there, and his before him, right there on the old creosote hitching post that still remained, but with a horse and buggy rather than an automobile. All of this I could just barely make out through the cud-zoo and thick bamboo brier screen as I strained my burning, tearing eyes.

Just beyond the tree once lay a well groomed cemetery, but now I could not even make it out, since it too had been consumed by the entangled vines of complete long term neglect. As I swung my astonished eyes to my far right, all of the buildings that once so proudly stood there, now lay in rubble heaps of vine enveloped charred trash mounds. On the mound that I could clearly recall was once the parsonage, the vine that completely covered was a dense consuming, nearly wild, invasive climbing rose vine, appearing to strangely offer a measure of dazzling beauty on this despairing rubble dilapidated landscape. I knew exactly where the old graveyard lay, but my eyes could not discern it through the enveloping vine and brush cover. I stood nearly right beside it..

“Come on, John boy, lets go on toward the church building yonder ways,” spoke fish, with prodding effort in his deepened voice.

“Yeah, but please forgive me, Fish, I am frozen in such staggering shock.”

As we neared the barely discernible seared rubble walls of what was once a thriving church building, nine shriveled, humanoid bodies draped in putrefying rags, eased from within the still standing, dense vine enshrouded rubble walls of the church. One very aged figure broke away from the gloomy sauntering crowd, moving forward toward us from the center of a darkening expanse lying before us. When he reached halfway, he spoke to us in a straining, weary voice..

“Well hello, there, young fellow! Fancy finding you back our way again!”

Instantly, but only by his now diminishing voice, I recognized him as being the dear elder from my lost youth, Mr. Hubert Winslow.

“Well hello there, Mr. Hubert. I am so glad to see you again after all of these years,” I said as I raced up toward him, hugging him and speaking as I did so. I pulled away saying; “I am so glad to see that you are alright after this terrible horror.” Tears of joy fell from my eyes as I greeted him with handshakes and warm shuddering hugs.

“Well son, indeed I am a true born survivor, as are all of the others hereabouts. We tried to warn them all, but none of them would listen. Such is the price when the devil is allowed to prosper at our own expense.”

“What do ya mean?,” I asked as I gazed into his shriveled, unkempt bearded face.

“Well it all began with the churches marrying members of the same sex, which is not really a marriage, but an insulting, perverted masquerade, with the center finger being shoved into the very face of the good Lord in heaven above. We warned the church deacons not to anger him, but they only mocked us and carried on with their gross undertakings, just to retain their continuing tax free status quot. Then came the so very obvious demonic possession of the general population.”

“What do you mean?,” I asked him in a voice of absolute shock.

He glanced around into my face, then the face of Fish, and then into my wife's astonished face....

“Well boys, I noticed a real change around here, when preacher Hallaway got caught molesting the youth in that new age, break away church that was once across town there, way more than thirty years ago now. The church maid caught him in the very act, so I heard, with pictures of the crimes, and

everything. She so slyly and very wisely remained expressionlessly quiet about it all until the appropriate time, since she knew no one would believe her if she just came outright, and told this very true tale of debauchery.

“What really tipped people off that something was badly wrong, was when about the same time an enraged parent marched into the church building, demanding to know where the preacher was; and when the preacher man could not be located, the man pulled out his thirty eight caliber revolver, and shot the entire pulpit area full of bullet holes, screaming at the top of his lungs that he was going to slay the son of a bitch on sight.

“Well if you can remember the story, fellows, several of the young boys who were molested, were interviewed by the police investigators, as were many adults whom had attended in the decades past; and it was soon discovered that this garbage had been going on for well over thirty years by then, essentially for the entire period of time that the church had been in existence here and that those damning masquerades had commenced.”

“Seems as if I might recall, but I am not sure. What else happened after that?,” asked my wife who finally spoke out after remaining quiet for so long.

“Well, the preacher man went home and put a bullet through his head one evening, not long afterward, later confirming more or less, that he was guilty of the accusations. He knew that he was not only going to go to both hell and to jail, but one hell of a jail at the same time, if you know what it is that I mean?,” Mr. Hubert spoke on a somewhat sarcastic notation, just trying to break the dark icy air surrounding us.

“No doubt,” both Fish and myself replied with a sigh as we slowly shook our heads from side to side.

“...But there is more here that I must tell all of you before we begin our church services there,” spoke Mr. Hubert.

“Sir, we are all ears,” all of us replied at the same time, not knowing what else to say.

“Follow me into the graveyard there. Can you see the trails that I chopped out? I done it in such a manner that one cannot discern anything from the road or the churchyard here, but once one moves into the proper position, then all becomes readily apparent.”

As all of us followed his slow moving, gaunt figure, dressed proudly in a very tattered but badly stained dress suit. The dense cover gradually opened up, exposing well concealed but elegantly manicured graves at the same time.

“Yeah, it seems like we can see what you speak of around here,” replied Fish.

It felt as though we had traveled miles into dense cover, but in reality, we may have only gone in fifty yards, or even less. The gaunt figure then suddenly paused, turning to face all of us behind him, pointing ahead of himself with his homemade, lee spring of a parang knife that he had plucked from it's concealed place well within the standing thickets. In our local coded slang, we always called any homemade tool doubling as a weapon, a *harlebusque*, but so it goes for homemade names as well.

“Do you see the large gravestone of *Wells* ahead there, *Author Wells*, to be exact?”

“Yes, we do, to speak the truth,” we all replied.

“Do you recall the incident involving him and his family?”

“Unfortunately, we do not,” replied my dear wife, the rest of us pausing only to shake our heads in the “no” sign.

“Well as you all should recall, more than twenty years or so ago now, the state came in and bulldozed down his huge confiscated family mansion estate. This estate had been in the family for well over two hundred and fifty years. All of this went down in about the same time frame as all of the other occurrences that I have made mention of here this evening. It seemed that each occurrence happened back to back, as the people and the town surrendered into a virtual disguised satanic worship ritual, while submitting to the general corrupting debauchery that always comes in with it. All of us elders

tried to warn them, but sadly, they just would not listen to us. They simply would not listen,” he sighed deeply as he hung his head slightly.

“The Lord himself even went as far as appearing to them in numerous forms, but they even went as far as to ignore him . So these horrors and misfortunes we all have suffered here is the penalty for our insolent disobedience, as both individuals and as an ignoring community, at large.”

“What happened? Continue on with the story, please dear sir?,” I responded with new found shock and eagerness in my voice.

“So the story goes, one certain child was pulled aside by some school officials, and questioned about some strange behavior at school. This child related that she had been savagely raped by her own Grandfather, old Archie there in the grave. This man was already in his nineties. When the authorities went into the home and questioned the mother, what was discovered was certainly the most shocking story to behold..”

“What happened?,” we all inquired in wide eyed amazement.

“Well what they had found out was that old Archie had held his own daughters as virtual prisoners in his estate home there for dozens of forlorn years, and was the father of all their children, and even his own grandchildren! The others had fled his controlling abuse, which had been going on for many long years by then. The state authorities came in and removed all of the children from the place, placed the mothers under guarded psychological care and management, and threw old man Archie there into hard core prison where he rightly belonged. Like I said earlier, even the good Lord had given his own personal warning to everyone, but they all refused to listen to him, to our sad position in standing.”

“How did the Lord warn the town of their folly?,” inquired my wife in a voice betraying great curiosity.

“So the tale goes., over in the Butter-field community just down the railroad tracks there, on passed the old crumbling rubble heap of a cotton mill; it was said by many that sometimes on the night of a full moon, a lengthy bearded old man dressed in a long, Greek styled toga, would come out a walking down the railroad tracks, swinging a lantern and screaming proclamations aloud, damning the town for their evil debauchery, and prophesying of certain punitive horrors to come. Some had claimed that he appeared more an eerily illuminating floating spectrum than simply a crazed, if not intoxicated elderly man.

Most of the insolent locals all stood around laughing at him, and shaking their heads saying;

“What a fool is he, oh what a fool indeed, just look at him there!,” all of them pointing and laughing in their jaded mockery.

As time went on the elderly man had changed his form, now taking on the persona of an old moldy smelling, rag tattered, mud covered, disheveled, drunken railroad man, swinging a lantern and declaring loudly that we were all corrupted and certain to suffer dreadfully for our sins, if we refused to repent. He would rush at people, adults and children, as he screamed those piercing, raspy, damning words of warning.

“As events such as this tend to go, the locals and the police decided to put a stop to it all. When they went out searching for him, he seemed to vanish into thin air, in spite of their best efforts to find him. He continued to return for a while, but then those times became spaced out more and more, until they ceased, and he seemingly vanished into thin air for good. Not only did the people refuse him and his words of warning, when the horrors themselves materialized, they even refused the very reality standing right there before them.

“All that I can say here now is this much, *let the penalty for sin stand here as it's own witness*, and if this terror has not ventured into your direction, then it most certainly shall, in it's own due course of time.”

As the grizzled old man calmly spoke his heavy-laden words to us, the cool night wind lightly puffed our faces, scattering our hair as it did so. In the prevailing empty distance before us, we all stood about in astonishment at the despairing whine of a distant diesel locomotive moaned down the largely empty

tracks, seemingly into the thick but perfectly still surrounding nighttime mist. This train sang into the perfect stillness underneath a foreboding, fully developed but increasingly hazed moon above, many miles away into the motionless night air.

The empty night sky above abruptly winked, lighting up in a quick flash of blue fire as our truth stricken eyes passed from one stunned face to the next, each of us taking notice of the astounded expression on the other, all now knowing well without speaking the dreaded place of this moaning locomotive's dismal destination. I could only continue to gaze with widened eyes in a continuing wave of disbelief at the disparaging surroundings in my own astonishment that we were all still standing around talking about this prevailing situation. The surrounding woods filled with the distant yelp of pursuing bloodhounds, as the rat-a-tat-tat of automatic gunfire from maybe three miles away suddenly burst from a multiplicity of directions, shattering the stillness of night.