

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book One



Mikey with his 100 pound pumpkin in 2012.

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book One

read

/rēd/

verb

1. look at and comprehend the meaning of (written or printed matter) by mentally interpreting the characters or symbols of which it is composed.
(Example: How can you read that gibberish?)

gib·ber·ish

/'jib(ə)riSH/

noun

1. unintelligible or meaningless speech or writing; nonsense.

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This book is dedicated to:

My wonderful wife Donna E. Pszeniczny for putting up with my incomprehensibleness.

My father Leonard S. Pszeniczny and mother Marcia A. Pszeniczny from whom I inherited my active imagination and bombasticity.

My brothers Leonard M. Pszeniczny and Brian J. Pszeniczny for all the good times we had growing up (The Tracks, The Land, The Ranch, The Ridge, Ron's Green LTD & The Forts).

July, 2016

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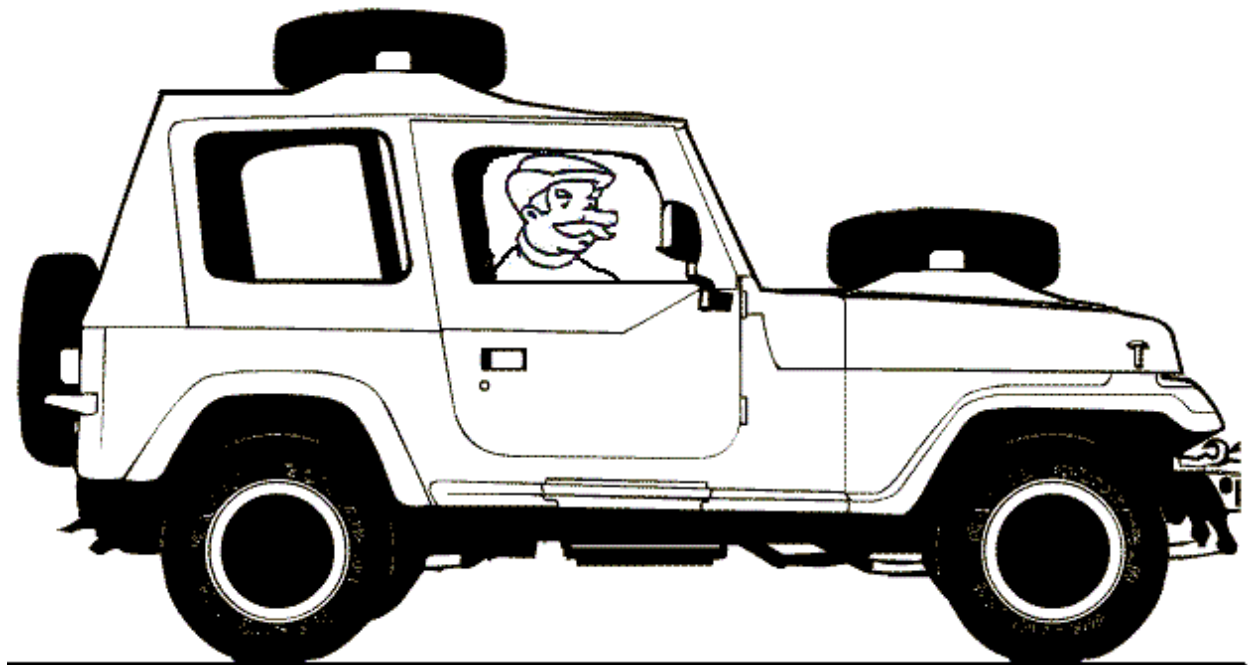
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1. Icky's Gold



1. Icky's Gold

As Icky drove his jeep, the rhino rammed the wheel of the spare tire mounted on the back. The rhino's horn was 3 feet long and very pointy. Icky thought that eventually the rhino would puncture the tire of the spare tire assembly. Icky wasn't concerned, since he always maintained 3 spare tire assemblies on the hood, roof and back of the jeep.

In the outback of Australia, roadways were few and far between, mainly trails actually. Most were barely wide enough for 2 vehicles to pass, without one of the vehicles having to go off the side of the road for the oncoming vehicle to squeeze by.

Even if the rhino ruined the wheel or popped the tire of the assembly on the back, Icky still had 2 spares left. The only problem was if the other spares were flat, which was possible, due to the oldness and patches in the tires. Icky typically drove on the tires until they were completely bald and the belts were starting to show through. Just because Icky had a spare, it didn't mean he would actually be able to use it. Many times in the past, Icky sustained a blowout after hitting a rock on one of the outback trails, only to try all 3 spares, with all of them being flat.

That morning, Icky had checked the pressures of all the tires on the jeep and the 3 spares, and they were all ok. Two of the spares had slow leaks and would only hold air for about 3 days before going flat, and Icky would have to inflate them again. He had an air compressor in the back of the jeep with all his gold mining equipment.

The rhino kept ramming the spare on the back. Icky could only go so fast on the rough road, which enabled the rhino to keep up with the moving jeep. Icky was able to speed up a little when the road got smoother, and pull ahead of the rhino, but then some boulders, trees or dead animals would appear, slowing Icky down again.

Icky knew that eventually, the rhino would get tired and not be able to keep up and Icky's problems would be over, but not just yet. Some of those Australian rhinos could run for hours, depending how old they were. In the blazing hot, dry weather of the Australian outback, animals can tire out quickly, if they hadn't had water in a while, but that rhino must have recently watered up at some nearby watering hole.

Icky looked back at the rhino each time the rhino got a solid ram against the spare. Icky had been chewing really juicy bubble gum and started spitting in the rhino's face each time he turned to look back at the rhino. The rhino became more enraged by the spit on its face, and then Icky began laughing while spitting. That enraged the rhino even more. Icky laughed so hard that he accidentally laughed the bubble gum out of his mouth and the gum landed on the rhino's forehead, between its eyes and stuck there. The combined heat of the Australian air and the rhino's hot leathery skin caused the bubble gum to start melting and running down the side of the

rhino's face.

Icky laughed even harder at the spectacle, but had foolishly looked back too long at the angry rhino. Icky had taken his eyes off the road and heard an explosion like the sound of a huge balloon popping. Icky slammed on his brakes and smelled something so bad and rotten that he involuntarily started crying and drooling.

Icky's jeep had smashed head on into a dead, bloated water buffalo that had been lying in the middle of the road. When animals die in the outdoors, their bodies start to quickly rot and decompose and bacteria cause the bodies to fill up with gases like a balloon. It was a balloon filled with really bad smelling air. When Icky's jeep hit the water buffalo, the inflated dead body popped.

The rotten, smelly air that was inside the body was accompanied by millions of maggots and flies that were eating the water buffalo. The maggots and buffalo guts exploded out of the inside of the buffalo, covering Icky and his jeep like a wet, slimy, stenching king sized blanket. The millions of flies that were swarming on the body sounded like a squadron of World War II airplane propellers.

The rhino that was ramming the jeep skidded to a stop when the jeep halted. The rhino caught a whiff of the horrendous stench of the dead buffalo and heard the cries of Icky as Icky was covered with the rotting meat, guts, maggots and flies. The rhino snorted in disgust, turned around and stampeded away from the scene as fast as it could, leaving a dust cloud behind it. Rhinos hate the smell of dead rotting animals, because it gives them a sense of their own mortality.

Icky's jeep came to a stop on top of the water buffalo's body. The stench of all the stuff covering Icky overwhelmed his senses. He felt soaked with stink. The maggots were in his mouth, nose, eyes, ears and hair. The swarm of flies began feeding on the rotting guts that covered Icky. Icky drooled, burped, and then barfed out the side of the jeep. He accidentally barfed a little on his leg. With his always filthy fingers, he wiped the maggots from his eyes as best he could and tried to drive the jeep off the top of the buffalo. He could barely see, with the flies filling his eyes where he just wiped out the maggots.

The jeep was stuck! Icky tried to rock the jeep off by alternating between forward and reverse over and over again. Eventually, Icky managed to back up the jeep a little. He got out to see if he could free the jeep from the carcass. Icky had electric winches mounted to the front and rear bumpers of the jeep, which could be used to drag the jeep out of unfortunate situations.

Three vultures had been feeding on the dead water buffalo at the time that the jeep had impacted with the body. Two of the vultures managed to fly away just as the jeep hit, but the third vulture

was still trapped under the jeep. Even though it was imprisoned by the jeep, the trapped vulture continued feasting on the dead body. The vulture seemed to Icky to be uninjured, as it squawked at him between bites of maggot and fly-infested rotten buffalo.

Icky unreeled the cable from the rear-mounted winch, about 30 feet worth. When there were no trees available to which to attach the cable, Icky used an 8-foot long iron rod that he hammered into the ground as a connection point. Icky hammered the rod, attached the cable and operated the winch, gradually easing the jeep off the buffalo. As the jeep cleared the buffalo, the trapped vulture flew out and attacked Icky, scratching, clawing and pecking at Icky's dirty face. The other 2 vultures that flew away before, returned and joined their friend in savagely attacking Icky.

Icky tried to fight off the vultures as he ran toward the rod with the winch cable attached. With the 3 vultures pecking and clawing at Icky's face, he managed to undo the cable, pull the rod out of the ground and run back to the jeep. Icky hopped in the jeep, threw it into reverse and backed quickly down the road away from the dead pile of buffalo. The 3 vultures returned to feast on the water buffalo.

Icky shifted into a forward gear and proceeded up the road toward the buffalo, veering off the road, making a wide turn around it, to avoid the feeding vultures, and then onto the road again on his way. Icky still had to deal with the stench of the maggots and dead buffalo parts that covered his jeep and his body. A swarm of flies continued to harass him as well. After an hour, Icky pulled off the main road and drove down a trail that he remembered had led to a nice watering hole that had water in it year round.

As Icky got to the watering hole, a flock of geese that were drinking water flew away from the hole towards him, pooping on him from the air as they left. Icky pulled up to the edge of the water as close as he could. He removed the 4-55 gallon water barrels from the jeep and proceeded to fill them with fresh water by submerging the barrels in the pond. As the barrels filled, Icky drove the jeep into the water, just deep enough to cover the filth-soaked hood. Icky found the big bar of soap that he kept for emergencies in his supplies and jumped into the water. He stripped naked and washed the maggots and rotten buffalo from his clothes and his body. He put the clothes on the roof rack to dry.

Normally, Icky never got near a bar of soap and he never washed his body or his clothes. That is how he got his nickname of Icky. Icky was the foulest smelling human being in Australia and proud of it. On that day though, the stink of the rotten animal was too much to stand. Icky had to make an exception and bathe his stinking body.

The smell of dead, rotting animals was not strange to Icky, since there were dead animals lying around all over the place in various states of decay. Since there were only so many vultures around to eat the dead bodies, the bodies would sit around for a while near the roads and trails.

Vultures weren't the only animals that ate the dead bodies though. There were always dingoes around, eating their share of carcasses. There were always more dead animals lying around than there were animals to eat them.

Icky continued swimming around in the watering hole while his clothes dried and the jeep soaked. He thought back to another rare occasion when he had to bathe. One time about 3 years ago when Icky was returning to town from a gold mining excursion, a flock of 40 vultures flew over his head high in the sky and they all seemed to poop at the same time. It was right before a thunderstorm was about to take place, and lightning had started flashing. The vulture flock was probably frightened by the lightning and their bodies responded to their fear by involuntarily pooping. Just before the vultures started pooping, they squawked and called like crows. Icky had heard the squawking and looked up to see what the racket was, just as the vultures dropped their poop load onto his upturned face. Since vultures only ate rotting, stinking meat, the stuff that fell on Icky was like no other. The poop kept falling, covering Icky with its stench. At first, Icky started crying at the shock of it, then started laughing at the absurdity of being rained on by vulture poop. Icky was laughing so hard that he started farting, then the fact that he was farting made him laugh even harder, to the point that he pooped his pants a little. He then reluctantly drove to a friend's house to use a water hose to wash off the vulture mess from his jeep and body.

As Icky swam in the watering hole, he noticed a large snake approaching him in the water. He swam back to the jeep and hastily climbed on the roof, his wet feet slipping. He reached into the back of the jeep, pulled out a rifle and shot the snake dead with one shot. He stayed there on the roof until his clothes were dry. Then he dressed, drove the jeep to the shore and loaded the heavy water barrels back into the jeep. He then drove back to the main road to continue to his latest gold mining operation.

In Australia, gold mining was a wide-open thing where nobody really owned any goldmines or had claims on them. All they had to do was find a nice little stream that hopefully had gold in it and start mining it. A small-scale gold miner only required a prospector's pan the size of a pizza pan that they used to scoop from the stream a little bit of sand, pebbles and dirt. They then gently rinsed the sediments with water, looking for the precious specks of gold dust left behind.

The next step up from the small-scale gold miner was what Icky was. Icky had a portable sluice system made out of aluminum that he assembled on the stream. The system was heavy, weighing 400 pounds and consisted of narrow panels that sat on a frame over the stream. Icky shoveled material from the stream and placed it onto the sluice. The particles ran down the sloped sluice, separating along the way, depositing the smallest particles at the end, where he looked for the gold dust.

Icky was heading for his latest gold mining operation that he called Josephine. Icky named his mines the same way that naval vessels are named with female names. After 50 minutes of

driving, Icky turned off the main road onto the trail toward Josephine. Two miles in on that trail, Icky ran over what he thought was a log across the trail. Icky's jeep had a lot of ground clearance because he had a raised suspension with extra leaf springs, for extra heavy-duty weight carrying ability. The jeep also had higher than normal wheels and tires, giving about a foot of ground clearance.

As the wheels passed over what he thought was a log, Icky noticed the log lifting up off the ground, raising the jeep into the air. A gigantic crocodile had been lying on the trail, probably on its way to a watering hole to get a drink and something to eat. Icky stomped the gas pedal to the floor and was able to drive off the crocodile away to safety. Perils existed everywhere in the outback of Australia.

When Icky reached Josephine, he noticed that the stream was flowing a little higher than usual. The higher water level created more hydraulic force to act on the sediments of the bottom of the stream. More gold dust would be kicked up by the stream and hopefully end up in Icky's pocket! He carried the pieces of the sluice system and stacked them along the stream. It would take a little time to assemble the system, but by the end of the day, he would have some of the precious gold. After a little while, Icky paused for a snack and something to drink. The most important thing about working in the sun and heat in Australia was to rest often and drink as much water as possible. The best thing was to feel almost full of water all the time out there. The body used the water to cool itself and process the salts and toxins.

Icky snacked on some jerky that he had picked up during the last supply stop. The jerky was tough, but tasty. The good thing about the jerky was its convenience and protein content. It didn't take up a lot of storage space and was inexpensive. The problem was the high salt content, which made him even thirstier when he ate it. He found himself having to drink more water after eating the jerky, but he needed the water anyway, so it didn't bother him. Icky tried not to think too hard about little things, because when he really put his mind to something, he got headaches.

After the quick snack and water intake, Icky resumed assembling the sluice system. He had to make sure the support posts had an adequate footing area that wasn't too uneven, to maintain the proper slope. He started loudly singing, "If I were a rich man, yada dida dida dooda dooda deedle deedle dum!" Icky was a severely tone-deaf singer with a raspy voice.

A rhino had sneaked up on a herd of kangaroos and caused them to stampede in Icky's direction. The startled animals were soon running amok at full tilt, not watching where they were hopping. Rhinos had been known to cause kangaroos to panic in that manner; for some reason, the rhinos enjoyed it. The speeding herd arrived at Icky who was in the middle of his raucous singing. At the apex of the lead kangaroo's leap, one of its large feet kicked Icky in the back of the head and Icky fell into the stream face first. The remaining kangaroos and the rhino ran over him while he was in the water.

2. Spar's Flock



2. Spar's Flock

Spar had been circling with the vulture flock for 13 hours already on that typically hot African day in the skies over Ethiopia, when he caught a whiff of something. As always, Spar was the first bird in the flock to smell the rotting flesh, probably of a dead zebra, he figured. Spar had a good nose for determining the species of an animal to which a particular smell belonged. He was famous for it. He wasn't the leader of the flock for nothing.

Vultures have the greatest sense of smell of any animal on earth, which they need, because their food sources are usually spread out for many miles. Their only way of finding food, rotted as it usually is, is by coasting through the skies for miles and miles, for hours and hours, until they catch a whiff of a dead, stinking animal. That stink was a beautiful perfume to the vultures. Vultures weren't the only creature on earth that lusted after that rotten smell. They were the animals most known for craving it. They couldn't help liking it; it was their instinct.

A vulture's eyesight wasn't as good as that of a hawk, which relied on its eyesight to spot an animal moving far beneath it on the ground. Hawks and falcons eat live prey, whereas vultures eat rotting animal flesh, which vultures prefer, for whatever reason. The red fox was another animal that ate rotten, stinky decaying animals. Even the common housecat occasionally liked to catch a mouse and allow it get disgusting before it eating it. It's probably a result of the cat's natural instinct.

Dax was flying to the right of Spar, about 20 feet away. Vin, Po, Trik, Cab and Drum were gliding behind Spar and Dax, the lead vultures of the flock.

Status in the vulture flock was determined by a vulture's ability to sniff a dead body sooner than the other vultures in the flock. The vultures with the best sense of smell always flew at the front. Somehow, Spar had just been born with a better sense of smell than the other vultures in the area. He was immediately recognized for his great sniffing ability within the first 3 months of his vulturehood.

Spar began his life flying with his father Vin and mother Po. Once, while on the way up to the altitude of 1000 feet at which the vultures typically glide, Spar thought he smelled something before his vulture parents smelled it. Vin said to Spar, "You couldn't possibly smell anything!" Po said the same thing. Spar said, "I do smell something; I swear!" As it turned out, Spar had sniffed out a delectable dead impala, which just happened to be the favorite food of vultures. Vin looked down to the ground, just to humor himself, to see if Spar had in fact detected a rotting animal corpse. At their high altitude, Vin motioned to Po to look down. Po said to Vin, "Is that what I think it is?" Vin said, "Yeah, it's an impala, a nice fat one at that!" Discovering that impala before his parents established Spar as the leader of that flock of 7 birds. It was natural for geese, vultures and other birds to allow one or two birds to lead the flock, whatever size the flock

was. It was a vulture's nature to be led by another vulture; it relieved them of the responsibility of flying in the correct direction when going somewhere or of detecting food for the for the other flock members to eat. The vultures that stood out from the flock to become the leaders were the rare ones.

Spar had sniffed that dead impala from a long way off, and then Dax caught a whiff. Then Vin and Po smelled the impala, followed by the other members of the flock. Spar began his descent to where he thought the dead impala was, and at approximately 500 feet, Spar sighted the impala, behind a bush. The 7-bird flock swooped down to the dead impala, feeling tired, hungry and hot. Vultures in Africa always felt hot; it was unavoidable. It was Africa after all. Africa was known for being hot, dry and barely habitable. Somehow, all the animals of Africa managed to survive in the heat, dryness and deprivation. The limited amount of moisture that the animals obtained from eating flesh seemed to be enough for them to survive upon.

Spar and Dax were the first to approach the food and start eating. They were the first to get at the tastiest morsels of the dead animals, which to vultures, were the intestines. Spar particularly preferred the small intestine, which usually still contained some undigested food that the animal had eaten the day before. Spar liked a nice grassy tasting small intestine the best.

Dax had earned his status as the number 2 vulture to Spar's number 1 by having a distant second sense of smell to Spar. Vin and Po were farther back on the line. Trik, Cab and Drum were even farther back on the line, probably having only an average vulture sense of smell.

Dax had earned his great sniffing status 2 years before, when at the age of 2 years old, he scented 3 dead ostriches that had been hit by lightning when they were feeding on dates that had fallen to the ground under a date tree. Ostriches couldn't resist the tangy sweet dates, which gave the feathers of the ostriches a nice sheen.

Ostrich was the second favorite food of vultures, next to impala. Dax's family at the time was really glad that he had discovered those ostriches when he did, because the flock that Dax belonged to had been without food for weeks. The vultures of Dax's flock at that time were really skinny and barely able to ascend to soaring altitude, when he had smelled those luscious ostriches. Dax gained immediate front of flock status with that ostrich-discovering incident.

Over time, vultures gravitated from one flock to another, sometimes bringing their parents and other relatives with them. Dax's previous flock before he teamed up with Spar contained Dax's uncle, until Dax's uncle died of old age. Old age for vultures could be as high as 33 years.

When the seemingly always-hungry vultures descended onto a carcass to begin the feasting, occasionally status played no part in who was allowed to eat first. Sometimes, whoever was the hungriest vulture was the first to attempt to stick his sharp curved beak into the soft stinky body

of the dead animal. However, Spar never tolerated any other vulture of his flock getting the first choice to eat before he did. Spar's flock stayed in line with his wishes, always allowing him to eat first, when the flock began the feast. Occasionally, multiple flocks came upon a carcass at the same time, and clashing occurred over who would get the first beak into the succulent stenching flesh.

In addition to Spar having an enhanced sense of smell, he also had superior size and strength to virtually all the other vultures in that part of Africa. By Spar getting to eat first at the carcass, he was able to intake the most nutrition and get bigger and stronger than all the other vultures. Spar's flock had encountered rival flocks at feasting events in the past, but Spar's ferocity and greater size and energy, enabled Spar to defend the food source. Most of the vultures in that part of Ethiopia knew of Spar's aggressiveness. Spar had even been known to viciously attack and kill hyenas that approached the feast. A vulture having its way with a hyena was really a sight to behold. The first time Spar had attacked and killed a hyena, the other vultures of his flock couldn't believe what he was doing. Vin and Po thought that Spar was insane to try to kill a hyena, but Spar was no ordinary vulture. Spar had killed many hyenas in his 5 years of life. The best thing about killing a hyena while gorging on a carcass, was that the vulture flock was then able to feast on the freshly killed hyena.

It isn't that vultures necessarily enjoyed eating hyenas. Actually, the hyenas had a rather nasty taste and were excessively tough. It was just that in Africa, food was so incredibly scarce that the carnivores ate anything they could find. They didn't care too much what kind of animal they were eating, as long as they were engaged in an activity that resulted in meat being added to their bellies.

Spar came to be known as the fearless hyena-killing vulture of Ethiopia by the other vultures. In fact, it was physically impossible for an average vulture to kill a much stronger animal such as a hyena. It was Spar's size and tremendous strength, due to eating so much of the carcasses that enabled Spar to be such a savage beast of a vulture. The only animal that Spar actually feared was a lion. It was the only animal that he would ever realistically encounter that he couldn't beat in a fight.

The greatest feast of all for Spar's flock was the rhino. A lion had killed the rhino and dragged it into a small cave to rot for a while. The lion had planned to return in 2 days to begin eating the rhino after it had softened up a bit. In the meantime, an elephant had exterminated the lion. Since the lion had been unable to return to the rhino in the cave, it sat there for a while. No other animals had been able to detect the decaying rhino, due to it being tucked so neatly in the cave. The mighty nose of Spar had detected the stench of the rhino while cruising with his flock, but couldn't see the carcass from the sky. He and the flock descended to the general area of the stink and finally located the rotting rhino in the cave. The flock gleefully camped out inside the cave

for a month and joyfully feasted each day until they were full to bursting. The rhino meat was excessively gristly, but adequate to stuff their stomachs. They gorged and napped at will, until there was nothing remaining but a rhino skeleton. That rhino was a great food discovery that only came along once in a vulture's lifetime.

The only thing better than a rhino feast was an elephant feast. Spar had ogled elephants his entire lifetime, but never came upon the carcass of one. He had heard that when elephants felt as if they were dying, they went to a place called, "The Elephant's Graveyard." Wherever that place was would be heaven for vultures if they could ever find it.

Spar's flock had located a dead giraffe on a couple occasions, but those bodies had been attended to by so many lions, hyenas and other vultures, that it would have been too risky to participate in the feasting. Most of the vultures that had risked their lives to get a morsel of giraffe had been eliminated by the lions or hyenas.

The dead zebra that Spar located on that day was a particularly large one, probably the leader of its zebra herd. That big zebra was probably 14 years old, which was old for a zebra. Since zebras typically only lived 10 years, that one had likely died of the natural causes of old age.

As Spar's flock landed next to the reeking zebra, a large swarm of African flies lifted off the zebra's body, with a great buzzing sound. The zebra had probably been dead there behind the bush for about 2 days and was really ripe by that point in time. Spar wondered why the zebra's body was pushed so snugly against the bush. The zebra's hidden body hadn't yet been discovered by hyenas, and was still whole. It was rare for the vultures to discover a carcass in virgin condition that hadn't been sampled yet by other carrion-eating animals. It was a lucky day indeed for Spar and his flock.

When an animal died, various bacteria infiltrated the animal's body, and performed the mysterious things that bacteria do, causing the animal's body to fill up with gases. As long as the dead body didn't have a hole in it, the body inflated like a balloon.

As Spar approached the zebra, he saw that it had inflated to about twice its normal size, looking really tasty to the always-hungry vultures. Spar made his first lunge at the zebra's belly, hoping to get to the delicious small intestines that he always craved and hungrily gorged. As Spar's curved beak made contact with the tightly stretched, gas filled belly of the zebra, the belly exploded and a tremendous stench poured forth from the belly. Vultures loved that smell. Spar sawed through the tough skin of the zebra, and then through the layer of tissue that enclosed the intestinal cavity, and then finally cut into the small intestine. Yummy, thought Spar, as he gulped down the tasty partially digested grasses that the zebra had previously eaten.

Suddenly, as Spar gorged, he heard a flapping of many wings. Spar knew that the flapping of

wings could only mean one thing, that another flock had seen Spar's flock gathered on the ground.

Spar paused from eating and instantly flew to the first vulture that landed, probably the leader. Spar slashed the unexpected vulture's throat with his sharp curved beak, killing the vulture instantly. Spar then turned to the next closest vulture of the invading flock, biting that vulture in the head with his sharp curved beak. After killing that second vulture and 3 more vultures of the pesky pirate flock, in the same savage manner, the remaining 6 vultures of the pirate flock hurriedly flew away.

Spar laughed at seeing the remainder of the pirate flock fleeing, as he tore into the chest of the dead leader of that pirate flock, ingesting the still-beating heart of the dead vulture with one gulp. Spar shrieked in victory as the other 6 vultures of his flock also shrieked in laughing arrogance. The 4 dead vultures of the pirate flock were torn to shreds by Spar's flock and hungrily devoured, as Spar continued eating his fill of the zebra.

After Spar's flock finished eating the 4 vultures that Spar had so easily killed, the flock stood in line to eat the remaining bits of zebra. Spar ate as much as he could of his favorite parts and ate so much of the zebra that he had vomited. Spar then ate more of the zebra for 15 minutes and barfed again. Spar was determined to keep the food down and he was going to keep eating until he was successful. Spar was too intently gorging on the zebra to hear the flapping of wings. His flock had abandoned him, leaving him alone with the zebra. The vultures had flown away from the scene in mortal fear of being attacked by something. Deep down, most vultures were cowards, too afraid to face a real fight. Since vultures were typically scavengers and not aggressors, it was understandable. Spar had always assumed that his flock would have his back covered in case of a real emergency. He had assumed incorrectly.

The lion was returning to the big old zebra that it had dispatched previously and had hidden against the bush. He thought he had hidden the zebra well enough to prevent discovery by the lowly vultures. Somehow, the scavenging birds had found the food that he had put so much effort into securing. Lions hated vultures because they took advantage of other animal's efforts. Lions enjoyed removing as many vultures as they could from the African landscape.

The lion had watched the vultures fly away from his food, all except for one. The lion couldn't believe that a vulture was still there eating from his zebra. The lion hunkered down and sneaked up to the vulture. Spar had heard something while his head was buried in the zebra's carcass, but was too busy gulping down the entrails to care. Spar pondered for a moment, removed his glistening head from the zebra and listened. He heard a growling sound that was intensifying. He sensed too late that his flock was no longer with him. That could only mean one thing. Spar muttered to himself, "Huh? What's that? Uh oh!" Spar turned his head to see the lion standing a few feet behind him, panting and growling. The lion leaped.

3. Rocky's Treasure



3. Rocky's Treasure

Rocky was worried about the temperature of the water he was diving in, because normally in water as warm as it was, there were moray eels about. Sure enough, as Rocky swam under an underwater coral bridge, a moray eel as long as Rocky was tall and about as thick as Rocky's leg, darted out at Rocky from a small cave.

Rocky had been scuba diving in those Florida Keys waters his entire life, since he was 7 years old, so he knew that anything could happen at any time, as far as feisty sea animals were concerned.

Rocky had just noticed the eel from the corner of his right eye as it emerged from the cave. The eel lunged at Rocky's ribs, probably hoping to take a bite out of Rocky's guts, but Rocky was too fast for the eel. Rocky instinctively did what scuba divers call a "dolphin maneuver" and arched his body like a dolphin, launching upward, out of the water, causing the eel to only slightly graze Rocky's belly through the wetsuit, scratching it a little, drawing a few drops of blood.

The eel nearly caused a major injury to Rocky, since eels have almost as many teeth as sharks have. Whew! Rocky thought to himself. That was a close one! Rocky was used to narrow escapes such as the eel attack, because Rocky was in the eel's world. To the eel, Rocky was just another meal, nothing more, and Rocky respected that.

Animals in the wild, whether on land or sea, look at other animals either as food or as something from which to escape. Depending how big the other animal is determines if the other animal is food or enemy. If the other animal it sees is bigger than it is, then the other animal is an enemy and it has to run from it. If it sees another animal that is smaller, then the other animal is food.

The eel slithered across the opening under the underwater bridge, directly opposite from the cave from which it emerged, into another cave. The eel had a plan of attack where it waited at the opening of a cave, peeking out with its nose and eyes, just enough to see fish and other creatures swimming by. When the moment was right, the giant eel would fly out, attacking at lightning speed, hoping to nail the prey on the first try, which the eel usually does. However, on that day, the eel encountered the lucky Rocky, the great treasure hunter, and missed. There would be other fish in the sea for the eel to eat, so the eel wasn't worried.

Rocky made a pretty good living from diving for treasure chests that had been on sunken ships. That part of the world near Key West, Florida had been a very common navigation route for Spanish vessels transporting gold from America back to Spain. The main danger of that part of the ocean back in the 1500's was that pirates would wait for the treasure-laden ships to come by, and the pirates would attack the treasure-laden ships. The pirates would attempt to get onto the treasure-laden ships, take the treasure chests and sail away.

The Spanish ships would resist the pirates and try to fight them off with cannons and other guns. The pirate ships usually had many more cannons and guns on them than the Spanish ships, and would typically try to fire on the Spanish ships until the Spanish would surrender. Unfortunately, sometimes the Spanish ships would have an unusually large amount of treasure on them, and they had the responsibility to protect the treasure at all costs, forcing them to resist heavily. In those cases, the pirates would end up firing too many cannon at the Spanish ships and the Spanish ships would sink.

When ships sank in the ocean, as they went down into the water, the underwater ocean currents carried the ships far away from where there were on the surface. That made it difficult for the pirates to know exactly where the Spanish gold ships ended up on the bottom of the sea, compared to where they were when they last saw them, when they were last firing on them.

Unless the ships were sunk in shallow water, the pirates couldn't go underwater to get to the sunken ships, even if they knew where they were, because 500 years ago there was no diving equipment available like there is today. The particular sunken Spanish ship that Rocky was searching for on that day was called the Mara Lago.

Anyone can go to a library and locate the manifests for ships from the 1500's to investigate the routes the ships were on when they sunk and disappeared forever. The problem is always the way the undersea currents carried the ships away as they sunk, sometimes miles off their original manifest's courses. Therefore, it is like trying to find a needle in a gigantic haystack, when searching for a sunken ship in an ocean. It takes many years of trial and error and knowing a little about the ways of the undersea currents, and an enormous amount of luck to even come close to finding a sunken treasure.

The next problem after the undersea currents is the 500 years of silt, seaweed, coral and sand that deposit on top of the sunken ships, and sometimes covers them completely. In addition, often when the Spanish treasure ships were being attacked, they were really destroyed and fell apart as they went underwater, pieces going down in different directions. By the time the pieces of the ships hit the ocean bottom, they sometimes didn't resemble ship parts. If someone happened to be scuba diving, searching for a sunken ship, they would never find one.

After 40 years of treasure diving, Rocky gradually got better and better at it. He read numerous books about all the great sunken treasure discoveries over the past 5 centuries and gained a lot of knowledge in the process. First, the most important thing to realize is that when diving for sunken treasure ships, you are not really looking for what looks like a ship. Over a long period under water, many of the parts of a ship dissolve in the salt water and other parts are eaten by tiny undersea creatures. Then, after a really long time, whatever is left is covered.

The Mara Lago ship that Rocky was looking for had set out on its voyage in the year 1503 in

February. It sailed out of what is called New Orleans today in a southeasterly direction toward Florida. It would have passed through the Florida Keys on its way around Florida toward the Atlantic Ocean, on its way to Spain.

Unfortunately, it never made it to Spain. Most of the time when ships didn't make it back to Spain, it was usually because of bad weather or from hitting something floating unseen just below the surface. The worst-case scenario was that pirates had sunk the vessel.

They didn't always know why ships were unable to complete their journeys. All they knew was that the ships didn't come home, many lives had been lost and the vast treasures of the ships were buried at sea.

The way Rocky finds treasure ships is he sets the compass on his boat to the same heading that the lost ship was supposed to have been sailing on, and he follows the route. He then drops anchor along the route and scuba dives in an attempt to completely cover the area, to try to find the sunken ship.

It takes a lot of patience and time to find a ship or what is left of a ship, but sooner or later, it pays off. Rocky had been diving for the Mara Lago for 5 years up to that day and he was starting to get discouraged. He was beginning to believe he would never find the Mara Lago.

Usually, it only took 3 to 4 years to find what he was looking for, with an average take of \$40,000 worth of gold doubloons per ship. Rocky had to melt down all the gold he found into gold ingots, and then he sold the ingots to a guy he knew for whatever the going rate was for gold per ounce. Rocky had to melt the gold doubloons down to make the gold untraceable by the governments that always wanted the gold back.

Depending where in the world the gold doubloons were found, the local governments always wanted to claim the gold as their property, because insurance claims were paid out for the lost gold years before, and the government wanted compensation. Melting the doubloons makes them go from recognizable coinage to unrecognizable blocks of gold. This is common practice among treasure hunters.

Rocky's average of \$40,000 per shipwreck was enough for Rocky to live comfortably for 4 years. He lived on his boat, which had a cabin with 2 beds, kitchen, refrigerator, toilet and sink (where he bathed, requiring no shower). The boat also had a generator for power, radio, TV, stereo, etc. Rocky had everything he needed to live on that boat.

Rocky stocked up on supplies in Key West, including oxygen for the tanks, provisions and fuel, enough stuff to be out diving for a month at a time. Rocky was beginning to run low on provisions and had to start selling things to survive. Rocky lived pretty cheaply, and really didn't

have many expensive things on his boat, but one luxury he had for about 32 years was his amazing diving watch. The watch was given to Rocky by a guy, Jimmy, who knew Rocky's mother, Gwen. Jimmy had been Gwen's friend for a long time, but one day decided to become a priest, so Jimmy left Gwen to join the priesthood.

Since Gwen was very religious, she understood and respected Jimmy's decision. Rocky had loved Jimmy like a father and went to church all the time with Jimmy and Gwen, when they all lived together. On the day Jimmy left to become a priest, he gave Rocky the incredible diving watch. The watch was designed by Jacques Cousteau and was sold under the Cousteau diving equipment line. The watch cost about \$7000 new and was still worth \$3000 when Rocky sold it to a guy he knew, Brent. Rocky really hated selling the watch, but Brent said Rocky could always buy the watch back for the same \$3000, whenever he wanted. Brent said he would hold the watch for Rocky, like a pawnbroker. Brent knew Rocky loved that watch. Brent loved that watch almost as much as Rocky did, but Brent was such a nice guy that he was willing to lend Rocky the money, and only hold the watch as collateral.

Brent had been Rocky's oxygen tank supplier for quite a while, and was an avid scuba diver for many years, like Rocky. Brent knew Rocky was having a hard time lately and really liked Rocky because Rocky was a really straight up guy who always paid up front and always referred business to Brent. To a businessman like Brent, the most valuable thing he can have is people who refer other people to him for more business. It's like getting free advertising.

Rocky had been living off the \$3000, which Rocky could stretch for 4 months of existence. Rocky could live longer on the money if all he did was float in his boat, not working, but he had to work to live. Rocky didn't have a retirement plan or stock dividends. He had to work to live, or eventually die.

Rocky had another month of surviving on the \$3000 until he would have to sell something else. The only other reasonably valuable thing Rocky had was the mariner's compass with which he used to navigate. That old compass was supremely accurate and had a lot of old school navigational aids built into it. In the right hands, the compass could be used to sail around the world and the user would never get lost. The compass came with a kit of sighting tools that folded out from underneath it, so the user could crosscheck locations using the sun and stars, the same way Christopher Columbus did on his 4 round-trip voyages across the Atlantic.

That old compass and tool kit were worth about \$12,000, and Rocky could survive for over a year on the money if he sold it, but that compass was essentially priceless to him. To someone like Rocky, that compass was worth 10 times as much as he could sell it for, but he never wanted to sell it, no matter what happened. That compass had gotten Rocky out of many messy storm situations. Rocky would never sell the compass. It simply meant too much to him. To him it was like the blood in his veins. He would take the compass out of the boat, sell the boat, and live

in a tent on the beach somewhere, like a beach bum, before he would sell the compass.

As Rocky was admiring an enormous brain coral down on the sea bottom, he felt a shiver down his spine, which was weird because the water was so warm. It wasn't a shiver that you feel when it's cold. It was a shiver like Spiderman feels when somebody is sneaking up behind him. It was a shiver that Rocky had felt many times before, a shiver that always resulted in something bad happening.

A shark!

From behind the brain coral, a massive great white shark exploded from its hiding place. The shark had sensed Rocky's movements and smelled the little bit of blood trickling from the eel injury, if it could be called an injury, being so minor. A shark doesn't need much blood in the water to be able to sniff it out, however. Just ask all the people attacked by sharks every year. Some of those people had only cut themselves shaving on the morning they were attacked.

When Rocky scuba dives, he always swims with a spear gun in his left hand with his finger on the trigger. He also has a diver's knife strapped to his right leg in case the spear gun misses and he isn't able to load another spear in time, and close hand-to-hand combat becomes necessary.

The shark bolted toward Rocky at full speed from below. The shark had its enormous mouth wide open, rows of sharp yellow teeth gleaming. As he had many times before, Rocky had no time to think, only to act. Rocky fired the spear gun at the shark. The spear launched from the spear gun, flying at the shark, missing the shark's face. The spear instead went up over the shark's head, hitting it in the tail, sticking there. As the shark instinctively turned to see what had just caused the stinging sensation in its tail, Rocky quickly pulled another spear from the quiver. Rocky hastily loaded, cocked and fired again at the enormous shark that was turned sideways at the time, looking at its speared tail.

Rocky's second shot hit the shark behind the gills. Not wasting another second, Rocky loaded and fired a third spear at the shark, hitting it 2 feet farther back on the body from the second spear. The tough bull shark had 3 spears in it at that point, all trickling blood into the water, though none of them were seriously injuring. The shark had had enough of Rocky, who the shark thought was going to be an easy prey. As Rocky readied the 4th spear to fire, the shark changed its plans and left the area, in a cloud of blood.

Rocky was too quick to celebrate his victory with the shark however, because while Rocky had been concentrating on his battle with the giant shark, a large sneaky octopus had wrapped 2 of its 8 tentacles around both of Rocky's legs and started to pull Rocky downward toward the ocean bottom.

In the battle with the shark, Rocky had used a lot of oxygen and had very little time left. He had to get to the surface or he would be the octopus' supper in no time flat.

Rocky fired his 4th and last razor sharp spear at the octopus, chopping the tentacle that was engulfing Rocky's right leg. This freed access to the diver's knife. Rocky quickly unsheathed the 10-inch bladed knife and slashed the octopus tentacle that was strangling his left leg. The defeated octopus sank back down to the ocean bottom, from where it came, waiting for its 2 tentacles to grow back someday.

Both sections of the severed octopus tentacles were still stuck to Rocky's legs, held in place by large powerful suction cups. Even though the tentacle sections were detached from the octopus, the suction cups were still sucking. It is similar to when a snake's head is cut off from its body. The body of the snake keeps slithering along the ground; or when a chicken gets its head cut off and the headless chicken body keeps running around the barnyard.

The tentacle sections were only sucking on Rocky's wetsuit, not really causing damage to his skin. Rocky scraped off the tentacle remnants with the back of the diver's knife and swam to the surface as fast as he could, just as he ran out of oxygen and the warning alarms started buzzing on his empty tanks. Rocky was having an unusually dangerous dive on that day, probably because it was so sunny and all the predators were able to see a long way under water for things to attack and eat.

After resting and snacking back at the boat, Rocky resumed scuba diving on his current compass heading of due west. Rocky's heart started beating rapidly when he thought he spied what looked like an old iron cannon that might have been part of a ship. However, he was wrong. It was just another of the thousands of shadows that appeared to be something and were nothing.

It was getting toward the end of his diving for that day. Just another 2 hours and he could go back to his boat for the day, eat some canned chili, and drink some fresh lemonade, Rocky's favorite drink. Rocky always bought a bushel of lemons when he bought his supplies and loved fresh lemonade made from freshly squeezed lemons. Lemons were inexpensive in Florida, since they were grown everywhere.

Rocky's mind daydreamed as he swam along, imagining he was drinking the tart sweet lemonade. Then he felt something ram into the oxygen tanks on his back. A giant sea turtle had slammed into Rocky, pinning him to the top of a coral tower. The turtle was as big as a Volkswagen Beetle car and was probably 130 years old, judging from the size of the beast. Turtles are the longest living animals on earth, and can grow to enormous size.

That turtle was probably just messing with Rocky, because sea turtles don't have teeth, preferring to graze on seaweed, instead of meat, which is probably why they have such long lifespans. It's

possible that the turtle didn't even know it was sitting on top of Rocky, because the turtle started calmly eating the light green seaweed that was growing in a large bed on the top of the coral tower. Rocky tried to wiggle out from under the great turtle, but couldn't.

Rocky noticed the turtle eating the seaweed and figured he would just have to wait the turtle out, until it was done eating and would then leave. The turtle kept eating and eating, staying on top of Rocky's back longer than he thought it would.

Rocky's oxygen tanks were running low. Rocky took out his knife and started banging on the turtle's belly with the handle. Rocky's arm had limited movement, preventing him from getting any real force behind the strikes against the turtle's hard belly. Rocky kept hitting the turtle as hard as he could, to no avail.

In a last act of desperation, Rocky took a deep breath and pulled off his oxygen mask, allowing the stream of oxygen bubbles to go from the tanks directly into the water. The stream of bubbles made its way to the face of the grazing turtle. The turtle had never experienced the sensation of oxygen bubbles in its face and quickly found that it didn't like it. The perturbed turtle lifted itself off the tanks on Rocky's back and swam away.

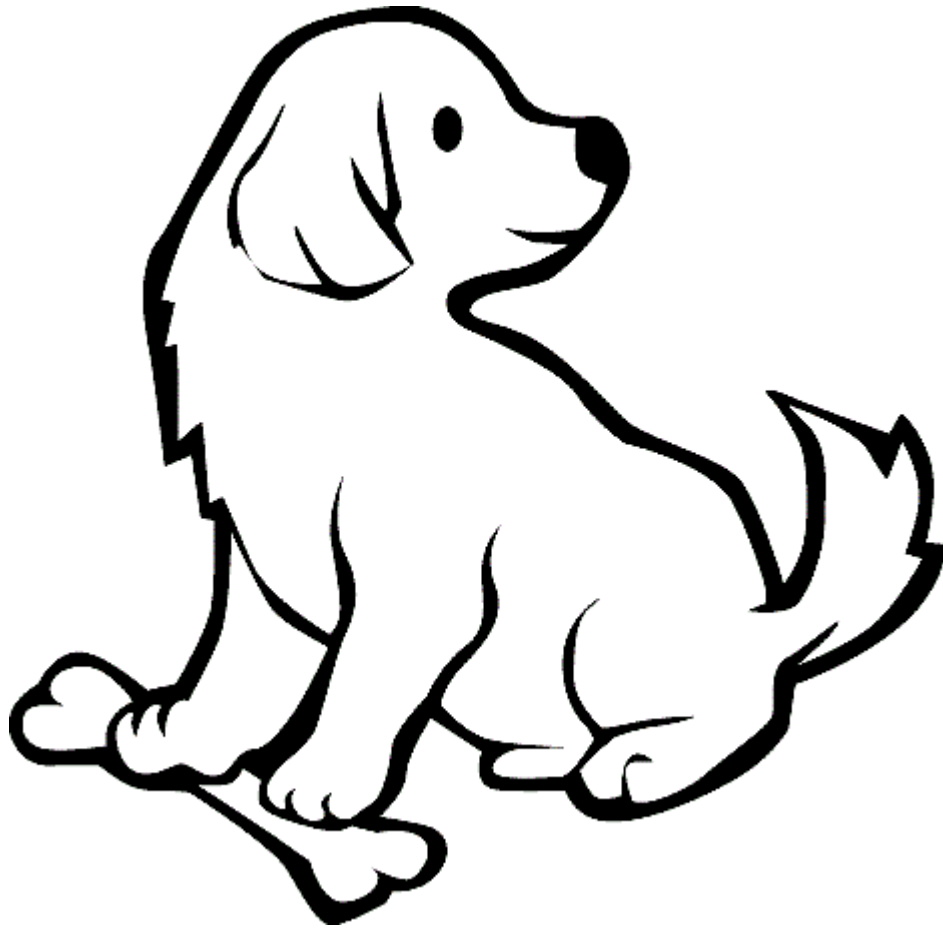
The relieved Rocky put his mask back on and swam to the surface. When Rocky surfaced, he looked around for his anchored boat. He usually didn't get too far away from his boat when he did his scuba diving. Somehow, on that dive, he must have drifted with the currents farther than he estimated he would. Finally, he spotted his boat, called "Tuna Fish," about 100 yards away, the length of a football field.

Rocky started swimming toward his boat. He was an excellent swimmer from being a treasure diver for so long, so swimming long distances to him was no big deal, even when he was wearing his full diving gear. He didn't need oxygen while swimming on the surface of the water, so he had the mouthpiece of the oxygen system dangling loosely in the water, but kept the mask on to keep the salt water out of his eyes.

Rocky resembled a seal swimming along, only because his wet suit was shiny black. He didn't swim like a seal though, because seals swim gracefully like fish, beneath the surface of the water and Rocky was clumsily squirming on the surface.

To the flock of pelicans flying in the air over Rocky's head, Rocky appeared to be a wounded seal, helplessly flopping around in the water. Pelicans normally eat smaller fish, but when an easy prey appears to them, they take advantage of it. The lead pelican in the flock thought he had spotted an injured seal and swooped down for the attack. The other members of the flock began drooling, joined their leader and rapidly descended to the feast.

4. Beagle's Tale



4. Beagle's Tale

Beagles are great dogs. The Native American maize farmer, Walks-with-Sun, knew so all his existence and was eternally in the company of one or more of the cavorting hounds. His spouse, Twirling-Oak, also preferred beagles as the family pet; her upbringing was as Walks', with beagles always freely trotting on the family grounds. Walks and Twirling recently had their female beagle, Biffy, impregnated by a pedigreed sire from down the Rock Trail. The stud, Bronco, was a belonging of their Mexican American friends Rico and Rosalita Sanchurro.

Walks was a character who savored watching animals engaged in mating activity. On the day of the breeding, Walks disgusted Twirling by filming the dogs while they were mating. It wasn't long before Biffy began showing signs of a brood in her ever-bulging body. It was just a matter of time.

One day, Twirling-Oak navigated into Forkstown in her rusty '62 Ford flatbed pickup, with the bloated Biffy in the back, meatily clinging to a bale of hay. Biffy's toenails were left untrimmed specifically for the purpose of steadying herself on truck rides into the hamlet. Twirling needed to pick up some potato chips, pretzels, spicy beef tongue and 5-pound blocks of cheddar cheese for the always-eating Walks so he could satisfy his cavernous gut. Walks-with-Sun really liked his cheddar cheese. As was the usual case, Twirling reckoned that Biffy would be safe in the back of the truck. No one would ever fancy to steal the animal. However, Biffy was a purely bred creature and in her state of impregnation, she was worth her weight in Liberty dollars to any stinking, slimy dirtbag, eager for leisurely returns.

Twirling left the truck, politely commanding to Biffy, "Stay!" Twirling entered the grocery store owned by the Turk, Axmed Yetsinbobo, with whom she went to preparatory school. Axmed and Twirling openly parleyed for a piece while the deli associate hacked up a pound of spicy beef tongue. Walks-with-Sun often slobbered over the tongue sandwiches that Twirling lovingly prepared for his midday meals.

Little did any of the emporium's inhabitants comprehend, but while they jovially pranced, outside an infraction was taking place. As a shabby, reeking man who feared razors, stood scratching his butt, the wheels turned in his clouded cranium. He perched near Twirling-Oak's oldish Ford, reading the Daily News. His cobalt eyes squinted as he let out a fart, causing himself to chuckle. He surveilled until he saw only one person on the street. As he stepped into the barbershop's vestibule, the reeking man spiked into action. He slithered closer to the fidgety Biffy.

As were all of Walks' dogs, Biffy was ingrained from birth with the attribute of silence, except while apprehending rabbits. As the snot-nosed man closed in on the curious Biffy, she wagged her tail. The degenerate snatched her from the vehicle. The man's oily locks were shrouded by a New York Giants cap, which took flight from his skull as a nor'easter breeze briskly blew in. His

cap flopped into a mucky puddle. Dang it! He was pissed. Did anyone see him? No. However, there was no time for hesitation.

Biffy was startled by the goof's dawdling, and croaked a muted hoot. The dog thief rescued his headgear from the puddle. The strategy then seemed to flow without flaw as he climbed into his '78 Eldorado and motored hither from the spectacle. Twirling bade farewell to Axmed and the other deli personage, and left the store with her purchases. Verging on the pickup, she felt a virus-like shiver. Her forehead twitched when the flatbed appeared empty. "Oh no!" she shrieked. "Oh no! Biffy!" Twirling vainly called out for Biffy and whistled. No Biffy. Twirling ran up and down the street, peeping into alleys, hollering and whistling. Biffy was gone!

The dognapper cruised toward the outskirts of the township. The agitation of her imprisonment disconcerted Biffy to the point of having contractions. She was on the threshold of giving birth! She sensed that somehow things would manage to take care of themselves. She merely began her breathing exercises and kept herself composed. A half-hour of motoring along Highway 107A found the couple nearing the turn-off to the man's rundown, boorish shanty, a dwelling that only a fiend like him could ever call home. The Eldorado was a reasonably adroit vehicle, even though it tipped the scales at a bulky 4390 pounds. That's a lot of iron and vinyl to be punching along a road, at the command of an idiot. Even a Formula 1 racecar would be a sloppy scrap of machine in the hands that derelict dognapper.

Biffy perceived peril as her seizer veered sporadically. An especially knifelike bend lay ahead of the dynamic duo, as their velocity multiplied. Spiraling and weaving was the roadway. Biffy whined, causing the driver to spit at her. Biffy had foreseen his aggression and vaulted to the back seat, just in time to dodge the phlegm. In his uncoordinated circumstance, the driver cocked the steering wheel when he lunged to spit. Before he could regain control, the car pounded into the guide rail and swooped through it. The car's momentum was awesome.

The vehicle plummeted down a hill and crashed into a 37-inch diameter oak tree. The galoot driver shuttled through the Eldorado's windscreen and sailed into the tree's branches. The big tree never knew what had hit it. Neither did the galoot. His gall bladder disintegrated as the branches lacerated his torso. He burped an inhuman gurgle before his eyes revolved back in his greasy head and his jaw fell unbolted.

He was extinct. Luckily, the captive Biffy had been in the back seat. She was only boomeranged into the front seatback and was rendered momentarily unconscious. When she awoke, she grasped that she was ensnared beneath a fleshy Voit golf bag, and her respiration was moderately arduous. Anxiety had accelerated her contractions to the juncture of no return. The nativity had begun!

One by one, the pedigreed puppies emerged from Biffy, greeting the world with audacity. In

entirety, 6 of the choice nursing doggies had surged onto the scurvy carpeting, all anticipating their matriarch's purifying tongue. Two of the puppies were female and initially appeared more assertive than their male relatives, in the fashion that they assaulted Biffy's udders for milk. However, the bull puppy of the brood soon exercised his authority over the others by battling for and attaining the choicest teat. For some reason, that choicest teat seemed to yield more milk than the others did.

Biffy was not disquieted by the bombastic puppy's behavior, since she herself had been a little female of a pup and had often scrapped with her brothers and sisters. Twilight soon arrived for the newly-sprung clan, ceasing their engaging day at the depths of the arroyo. Some wrangling crows were bewitched by the hullabaloo of the car's misadventure. They scented, probed and poked around in the darkness until they detected the mother lode, a veritable goldmine for carrion eaters. They had found the car!

The crows started by picking the dog thief's brains off the Eldorado's crackled windshield. They then proceeded to eat the rest of the guy that was stuck in the tree. It was chilly in the car, with all the windows broken out. The family huddled close, to preserve body heat. The dogs slept fitfully. Daybreak's radiance brought lightning cracks and thunder roars, awakening the senior pup. He wriggled his way through his brothers and sisters, drank dog milk for about half an hour from his momma, then squeezed out from under the golf bag to freedom.

Avoiding the glass shards, he trotted out through what used to be the rear windshield. The morning's deluge had made the trunk lid as slick as eels. The dauntless puppy glided along the steel trunk lid, snagged the bent CB antenna, and flipped end-over-end through the air. He landed out of control on some decomposing hardwood boards, from which several nails protruded. A section of plywood had rusty 12d nails poking out, one of which pierced the dog's temple. The puncture instantly rendered the animal unconscious.

Suddenly, a million-volt blast of lightning struck the car, causing it to erupt in flames. The unconscious dog snapped half awake and dragged himself and the still-attached plywood a distance away from the bonfire. He groggily wondered what befell his mother and family. A thorny yelp from his mother placed her behind a blue refrigerator. She must have escaped from the car just after he did, with her pups in tow. Biffy and company were cognizant of the lone pup's plight and trotted over to furnish assistance.

With the aid of 4 sibs standing on the plywood, and his mother and brother pulling on him, the wounded pup was able to dislodge the nail from his head. Fortunately, the nail had not perforated the brain pocket, but had stopped short in the skull. Obviously fibbing to the horde, the bull pup asserted that the stab was unoffending, and that he could have mustered a few more nails with no adversity. The other puppies were dumbfounded at his stunning resistance to distress, but Biffy knew he was faking. It had to hurt a lot.

At that moment, she reckoned that he must be an exceptional dog indeed. She concluded to desert him and dispatch him off on his own to find his way in life. Biffy and the leavings of her household nuzzled the biggest pup farewell, and trundled down a passage through the thicket. With his head slightly oozing blood, the solitary puppy steered up the slope to the roadway. He progressed to the road's shoulder, where he sat in the rain waiting for something to happen. He heard a not too distant rumble.

An old woman soon tooled up in a blue '66 Stingray. The woman appeared to be about 98 years old and her auto did not seem to suit her at all. The Stingray resonated as if it had a high performance motor beneath the cowl. She smirked as she pried open the passenger door for the beagle to enter. She shooed to the back jump seat, her Siamese cat that had been perching on the front passenger seat. The cat declined to stir. As the dog clambered into the car and caught a whiff of the cat, the dog perceived his intrinsic loathing for felines.

While entering the car, the dog wagged his rain-soaked mane, incensing the cat. The Siamese wheezed and clawed the dog's face, incising the outside corner of his left eye. The dog was in no disposition to be messed with by some sissified cat. He snarled and clamped his barbed puppy incisors into the cat's gullet. The old woman became delirious. Panic-stricken, with the engine still running, she hastily pulled the emergency brake lever, which was located between the seats. She then advanced to harass the puppy.

Incessant slapping and screeching could not emancipate the dog's grip on the cat. In desperation, the woman poured a can of Pepsi on the beagle, causing the dog to release his grip on the feline. In the commotion, the sticky dog inadvertently reeled into the emergency brake lever, disengaging it. The car sneakily began to creep along the pavement. The biddy scooped up the snapping puppy and pitched him out onto the grassy shoulder. That maneuver profoundly enraged the dog, as he tumbled through the weeds, coming to rest on a rock. Ouch!

He observed with fascination as the car drifted down the road with the old woman shrieking behind the leather-wrapped steering wheel. She rabidly stomped both feet trying to brake the ever-speeding car, but instead hit the gas by mistake. All the engine's 300 horsepower hitched to the tires and sent the car off like a rocket. The tires painted the asphalt black. An escaped billygoat that had been feeding on some Campbell's soup cans, just then decided to cross the road. The old lady farted quite loudly and likely pooped when she eyed the goat. She skewed to miss it.

An awful lot of farming goes on in that neck of the woods. Jess Trendill had been hauling a recently purchased jumbo manure wagon, three quarters full of cow manure right down the middle of the road. Some of those farmers treat the road as if it's their backyard! Most of the farmers around those parts had the police in their back pockets, so anyone who hits a farmer hauling something, is always to blame. Jess was on his way to the cornfield with the manure to

fertilize the soil for next year's corn crop. Just as Jess accomplished the crook in the road, he spied the Corvette.

Since the hayseed never wore underwear, a brownish-black blotch was immediately seen on the seat of his work clothing. He thought little of the digested remains of yesterday's beans and ribs dripping from his butt. He spat his fist-sized wad of Redman chew and snorted, trying to steer the mighty John Deere away from the Corvette, but failed. The old woman was near a myocardial infarction as she successfully slammed both feet on the brake pedal.

The Chevy spun feverishly and collided with the manure wagon, demolishing it to splinters. At his ringside seat on the shoulder, the beagle laughed his hardest laugh, so hard that he also crapped a pile! Cow poop flew in every direction. The momentum of the car smashing into the manure wagon transferred to the tractor. Jess was jettisoned from the poop-smeared steel tractor seat and landed on a blackberry bush 45 feet away. His red-necked excrement-covered body was pricked mercilessly by the ponderous plant. He blasphemed and bleated from the sting of the thorns and from the loss of his new manure wagon.

Jess collected himself and crawled over to check on the howling gorgon stuck in poop. She was spewing a load of vulgarity. She slapped Jess and spat in his right eye. He attempted to console her with softly spoken muttering, but she was inconsolable. She finally surrendered and said she was regretful. The frolicsome beagle skipped over to the duet, chortling at the poop stains on the farmer's butt. His tail wagging fiercely, the dog provided some comic relief for the distressed humans. They all broke down and laughed.

The dog's head wound had stopped bleeding, probably because the Pepsi had glued it shut. Jess extricated the woman from the wreckage and squired her and the beagle to his picturesque domicile down the strip. En route, they spotted the crashed Cadillac and the undoubtedly dead, tree-impaled man, being devoured by crows.

At the farmer's house, they telephoned for tow vehicles and ambulances. Jess possessed 14 dogs of diverse mongrel status, including a pit bull female named Paulina that was suckling her new litter. Jess placed the just found beagle puppy with the pit bulls, hoping the mother would accommodate the pup by letting it nurse from her. She did. Good. Another problem solved, thought Jess. The beagle appreciated the gusto of the pit bull's milk better than his beagle mother's milk, and greedily fed. The other pit puppies took an immediate liking to the beagle and made him feel right at home.

Jess decided to keep the purebred beagle to raise it for possible future stud fees. Jess christened the beagle Barry, after his great, great grandfather, on his father's side. Jess was always partial to the monogram Barry, but was unable to use it to designate any of his children, since his kids were all girls.

For a dog only two days old, the beagle had already been through a lot. Being extraordinarily haggard, he hit the sack with 10 or so other dogs in the barn and did not get up until 2 days later. When Barry awoke, he looked for Paulina for some breakfast. Paulina had been goofing around with some of the other dogs, but returned to feed Barry and her other pups. Barry drank a ton of milk, and then fell asleep for the rest of the day.

The next morning, Jess took Barry into town with him to the gun shop, near the railroad station. Jess needed to inquire on the status of a muzzle-loader that he dropped off a fortnight before. The antiquated weapon needed a new barrel and minor preservation for the forthcoming bear season. Jess took pride in his armaments and always maintained them at the pinnacle of performance.

As proprietor of the gun shop, master craftsman Hanz Hermanner was responsible for the gun repairs. Hanz was known provincially as the most detail-oriented "gun slob" that money could buy. He administered many old-world practices to distill the best from the alloys and hardwoods of his clients' toys. It took a lot for Jess to entrust his gun with another man. Jess' father had always admonished Jess about letting just anyone tinker with his weapons, a warning which Jess heeded.

Even though Hanz was 89, his hands were still as steady as pig iron, and his eye for precision, true. Recently, Gun Digest ascertained that in 14 categories, Hanz' custom checkering was ranked in the top 10 of the county. Jess left Barry outside the shop to rove and went in to powwow with old man Hanz. Jess knew he would be in the repository for quite a while, since Hermanner esteemed to endlessly jaw about weaponry. In fact, on one occasion, Hanz trifled for 2 hours with Jonny Smedd, a local huntsmen, about triggers. Triggers! Jess had hoped that Barry would hang close to the store, since he looked a little tired from the ride out.

Barry was indeed somewhat tired from a morning swim with the geese and ducks in the pond, so he rummaged for a place to relax. He wandered over to the train yard, where he eyed some cool shady spots. A rust-cankered red boxcar had a door partly unsealed and a loading ramp leaning on it. The train must have just been off-loaded, because there were heaps of crates on pallets in front of the train, awaiting removal by fork trucks. Barry jitterbugged up the ramp and glimpsed inside.

It smelled agreeable in there. He went in and picked out a nice squat in the corner. Bags of birdseed were disseminated on the dusty plank floor and a bag would serve nicely as a pillow for his little head. He dragged a bag clear, then lay his head down, and nodded off. In a twinkling, the pooch was in slumberville. Not 4 minutes passed before a smarmy, trench-coated man ambled into the boxcar.

The man had arrived in the metropolis the day before, but was already prepared to move on. He

was one of those migrants who travel everywhere, in, on, or under trains. The guy went by the name, Sando. Sando had been roving around the nation for the last 23 of his contemptible 41 years, and abominated his life and all those around him. His face and body were multi-scarred from countless fights, and his toothless one-eared head was too gruesome for even a mother to love.

Sando never presumed his life to be wholly without value, because after all, he was his own boss and he made his own hours. If he didn't feel like hustling on a chosen day, he wouldn't. Of course, no hustling invariably meant no sustenance, so he pretty much had to bust his balls unceasingly to persevere. One thing that Sando could be proud of is that he had no criminal record, and essentially didn't exist on society's books. It doesn't sound like such a great thing, but to a hobo, being untraceable is platinum. Sando had stepped his dirty shoes in every state of the nation except Hawaii and Alaska.

Once, Sando got into a wrangle with a bag lady in Salt Lake City over the daftest thing. He and the woman had clashed over the occupancy of a choice cardboard box that once contained a Tappan refrigerator. It was a nice box that could weather rain without leaking, a box that any lowlife would fight for, like a gladiator fighting for his evening snack of bread and tea. Sando had dragged the box down the alley just after the restaurant flunkies unseated from it the refrigerator. After bracing the carton against a fire escape railing, Sando turned around to take a piss in a garbage can. As he halfway unzipped his rusty zipper, he eared a rustling.

He turned back to the box, to find a crusty woman lying in the box, surrounded by bags of rumpled clothing, mismatched shoes, and defiled underwear. She was really quick! As Sando locked eyes with her, she flaunted a knife and gawked at him. Sando detected a half-rotten watermelon on the filthy ground. He lunged for the melon, but too ineptly, and skidded on an ice cream sandwich wrapper, falling face-first onto the melon. Dozens of watermelon seeds and stinky melon jammed into his nostrils. Sando sneezed and gagged on the stench of the decomposing fruit, but was humbled more by the dry cackle of the woman.

She sniggled and sniggered until she dry heaved, then cleared her throat with a large spewing cough of yellow phlegm, which she spat in Sando's watermelon-lacquered face. He wiped most of the fetid fruit and sour saliva from his face and hoisted an old dried-out Christmas tree that had been lying next to the watermelon. Hundreds of needles sprinkled from the tree, many of them into the woman's eyes, making her fizz with displeasure. With the douglas fir overhead, Sando intended to bludgeon the woman into relinquishing the box. Like a rattlesnake, the woman leaped to her feet, with the knife blade outstretched like a fanged head.

Sando worked the tree at her dodging neck, slightly jostling her stained ski cap. She countered with 3 lightning slashes, slicing off Sando's right ear. In agony and overwhelmed by her speed and skill with the blade, Sando retreated. He asked himself if he were really willing to risk his

life for a freaking box. He immediately answered himself, "No!" However, he was too slow! The hag slashed Sando's forehead and kicked his balls with a worn steel-toed boot. Ouch! Sando doubled over from the pain, barely being able to breathe. She kicked him again and laughed. Sando gave in to the she-devil and shuffled past, but not before he honked a humongous yellow loogie in her eye, causing her to screech, owl like. Sando increased his escape pace from a shuffle to a skip, then to a run as he saw her arm herself with a hunk of the rotted melon. As the hag leisurely catapulted it, Sando was already securely out of the alley, into the street.

While scouting around the boxcar for food scraps to silence his bellowing belly, Sando glimpsed the birdseed sacks in the corner. As Sando reached the bags, the door of the boxcar was slid shut like a bank vault and the train lurched. All illumination was removed from the boxcar, so Sando had to light his mighty Zippo lighter. The lighter had been a gift from a dry-faced Cherokee woman of his distant past. She was a massive smoker and gave him the Zippo just before she died of lung cancer. Sando thought people who smoked were idiots and only used the lighter for starting fires and lighting candles. The lighter had never failed to light.

The train car pitched again, much harder, jolting Sando onto one of the birdseed sacks. Sando landed next to Barry, waking the dog from his nap and into the reality of a reeking lummoxy lying next to him. Barry yiped, startling Sando, who didn't think any entities were in the boxcar. Sando was so startled that the still-lit lighter went flying across the chamber, landing on an old brown shirt. In seconds, the shirt was ablaze, intensely befouling the car's atmosphere. Sando gagged on the foul air, spouting mucus on the walls. Barry had similar difficulty in the inferno and also coughed and retched.

The flames increased until the dog and man could suddenly see each other in the exciting glare. At first, Barry was bewildered and a little nervous to awaken to the sight of the bewhiskered blockhead, Sando. However, Barry's trepidation quickly calmed when the man cast a near-toothless smile at him. Sando gingerly offered his hand to pet Barry; at first, Barry snarled under his breath. Sando disregarded the murmuring mutt and petted its fuzzy forehead, putting them both at ease.

Meanwhile, while his pooch was in turmoil, Jess was kicking back on the cracked leather sofa in the gun shop, sipping sarsaparilla. Hanz' sarsaparilla was homemade and delicious. Hanz always furnished complimentary libation to his patrons. Hanz supplied his home-brewed stuff, robust from the copper still, bottled in pink ceramic jugs. Hanz' turnaround time on weapon jobs was extremely slow, but the work was of the utmost perfection. People would rather wait months or even as long a year or so, to have their gun repairs or custom work done by Hanz, because they knew the wait was beyond worth it. Jess began to fall asleep on the sofa.

In the boxcar, Sando took an immediate liking to Barry. Barry sensed a good man in Sando and

politely wagged his tail as Sando stroked his fur. He even licked Sando's hairy, sinewy wrist. Sando found a new traveling associate in the hound, and would christen him Barney, after Barney Rubble, Sando's favorite cartoon character. Sando hoped that since the dog was still juvenile, whatever name it had already, couldn't have been ingrained in it too steadfastly yet.

The shirt on the floor stopped burning, but it was still suffocatingly smoky in the boxcar. It became time for Sando to put into play some of his skills. With a piece of timber pulled from a lettuce crate, he tried to jimmy the latch, which bolted the doors shut. After some heavy prying, the latch was broken and the door was forced open about a foot, enough to let out the smoke.

Barney hoped to taste many hours of uninterrupted sleep, to help him repair his battered body. Many hours would in fact be available, since the man and dog were on their way to Alaska! It mattered not to Barney where they were headed, because he was so tired. The first order of business was sleep. Barney drifted off quickly to a pasture of grasses and wildflowers, where he was pursuing a rabbit under a great fallen oak. He almost caught it, but it tucked inside a hole. It didn't matter, since the sun was shining and it was warm and fragrant. Sando fell asleep beside Barney. Sando dreamed of submarine sandwiches and pizza. A deluge of dreams flooded their minds. Fantasies flourished. Barney's tail twitched. Sando farted. Barney farted.

The train stopped en route to Fairbanks, to board passengers, fill freight and suck petrol. The colossal diesel-electric locomotives required thousands of gallons of fuel oil, so the stop would be for several hours. The stopover would enable the man/dog team to search out some grub. Inside Sando's gooey nest of a brain, a plot was hatching. He would sell Barney!

They slipped unseen from the boxcar and walked to a barbershop between a garden center and a pet store. With a smelly body and high hopes, Sando went into the men's salon. Barney would have to wait outside for a few minutes. While pretending in the barbershop to wait for a haircut and shave (he had no money), Sando garnered facts from the revolting locals. He sat silently and listened. Beagles were apparently a valuable dog there.

Hunting was popular and rabbit-hunting dogs were always needed. Nothing tracks a rabbit quite like a beagle. A thoroughbred beagle pup could fetch \$50 to \$100, just on sight of the dog, more if pedigree documents were presented. Having heard enough, Sando exited the barbershop and carried Barney into the pet store next door to do some dickering. The lout behind the counter was a devout hunter who recognized a good beagle when he saw one. Without the pedigree papers in his custody, and being obviously desperate for cash, Sando was forced to accept only \$55 for the doggie.

Sando deposited the dog with the clerk and departed the store to go shopping with the loot. Sando had left the door slightly ajar when he left the pet store. At the Piggly Wiggly, he picked up some rye bread, turkey bologna, Evian, Swiss cheese, and his favorite beverage, Pepsi.

Barney lingered in the pet store for 10 minutes or so, munching on the savory biskies contributed by Clem, the clerk. As Clem was selecting a collar for the new beagle, Barney made his way to the door, slipped out and was free! He sprinted down the street to the supermarket, where Sando was waiting out front. They ran back to the boxcar, hopped in and ate heartily.

Sando scrounged a pitted, but solid, hubcap from under a pallet, and poured some Evian for Barney's thirst quenching. Sando chugged 2 of the 6 Pepsi cans before he knew what was happening, and had to tell himself to conserve. Man, they were good! The prized cola had to last a while. Bologna and cheese were never so succulent. With \$30 in reserve, blue skies lay ahead. The grub would nourish them for a while.

Sando fell asleep. He was having a weird dream. He was standing behind a crying woman who was lying on a stained white couch and she was watching something on the scratched screen of her TV. As Sando watched the woman crying at the TV, on the TV screen suddenly flashed a black and white movie. Sando awoke from his dream with a start. He was hyperventilating, gasping and sweating. In his waking fervor, he inhaled a piece of filthy burlap string through his right nostril, down his throat.

His gagging and choking alarmed the snoozing beagle and the pup awoke, barking and snapping at the darkness. Sando jumped to his feet, pulling the string through his nose out of his throat. The sensation caused him to sneeze, and then vomit. The dazed Sando looked at the drowsy pup and the puppy looked back. After a moment, they gave up the staring contest and simply went back to sleep. During their rest period, the man and dog were transported by railroad car into Alaska. Alaska is the land where opportunity waits, the wind blows and the snow falls.

Sando arose and quickly shook the beagle into consciousness, taking the doggie into his arms. With the sleepy-eyed Barney under his left arm, Sando disengaged the railcar door with his free hand. He slid open the steel structure just enough to peek through. Clinging to the handle, he poked his face into the cold airflow, which was refreshing, and spotted the station just about 2/3 mile down the snow-covered tracks. With a heave and a ho, he leaped out of the car into the frigid air, beagle in tow, piling into a snowdrift. They landed softly in the white stuff, only tumbling 2 times. Sando felt the wet snow trickle down his collar and pants and into his holed socks.

On impact, Barney was released from Sando's control and yiped as he impacted with the fluffy stuff. The beagle rolled a few more times, pissed off at his master's stupidity. Upon regaining his composure, Sando found and scooped up the snowball of a beagle and trudged down the snow-white dirt road that meandered parallel to the train tracks. Since it was still early, few people milled about, and the few who did were disheveled bums like Sando.

Sando knew what went through the minds of the frosty, rag-clad, famished, hopeless men and

tried to put what were their likely thoughts out of his mind. They would disrobe a dead, stinky body to get the clothing. They would rob and kill and bury, or stuff into a dumpster, anyone foolish enough to walk down the alley for a shortcut. Sando approached some ragtag loser who stood standing next to a large charred whiskey barrel. Brown corn kernels were stuck to the side of the barrel.

Sando made eye contact with the guy, whose eyes darted from Sando's eyes, to Sando's beagle, then back to Sando's eyes. Sando flinched. An instant too late, Sando recognized the guy's glance as that of a thief and killer. Dang it! As Sando passed 3 feet in front of the guy, Sando reached for the hunting knife in his jacket, then felt the back of his head cave in. Sando's hand never reached his knife. Sando saw stars then nothing, slumping to the frozen ground.

The dog fell free to the ground. Sando was unconscious. Barney tried to bolt. The guy grabbed the dog and held tight. Barney countered like a lion that was interrupted while taking large gulps out of an alpaca's entrails. Perhaps it was because he had never been scared so much before, or maybe it was because he had never been picked up and clutched so carelessly. On the other hand, maybe it was the man's intense body odor. Whatever the case, Barney could not stand the sensation of the man's arms around him.

Barney sunk his sharp puppy teeth into the guy's right wrist, luckily cleaving into an artery. Blood spurted fountain-like from the bitten wrist, as Barney similarly, but more forcefully, chomped the guy's other wrist in the same spot. Blood then gushed harder from that wrist. The guy was bleeding badly and fell to the ground crying, dropping the dog to its freedom.

Another quick-thinking hobo removed the ragged vinyl belt from his waist to use as a leash, looping it around the beagle's heaving neck. Barney was again a captive and became silent. The hobo knew a guy named Tek who was in the market of buying and selling sled dogs. The young beagle would definitely fetch a good price. Tek lived on the other side of the fur-trading town in a 10 by 40 foot trailer, which reeked of cat piss. Tek bought the mobile home from an old cat lady for almost a song; she even threw in a 5-gallon tub of her homemade chili. How could anyone resist a deal like that?

The hobo stopped in at the 24-hour diner, with Barney, to borrow a cross-town ride. One of the diner's inhabitants, a redheaded woman, sat slumped at a corner table. Many empty, fork-scraped plates sat on the table before her. She was one fat woman, probably 280 at 5' 6", with pretty blue eyes, though. With her wet burping, guttural grunting and plate scraping, a lot of noise filled the air. Someone invested a quarter in the jukebox to hear Elvis' beautiful "Love Me Tender," but the record was scratchy.

The woman's red hair matched the hue of the marinara sauce that she had spilled on her shirt. The redhead seemed to pause between the serving spoon-scoops of the pasta, maybe to allow for

swallowing or digestion or reflection, maybe just to catch her breath. Soon, it was determined that she was pausing to blast large, silent farts. Tables around her cleared as she excreted the fermentations of her many past meals into the air. Because she was such a good customer, though, the diner permitted her sinister behavior. The only condition was that she always had to sit by the slightly open window.

Another character sat at the counter, trying to eat a ham sandwich. The bald fool with the 5 o'clock shadow on his shiny head must have been tired, because he didn't notice when his mealy sandwich's only slice of ham had slipped out. It landed, Dijon-mustard covered, in his glass of milk, yellowing the milk's whiteness. If anyone in the place had been paying attention, joyous laughter would certainly have rung out, as the bald guy boldly plunged his dirty thumb and forefinger into the glass of milk and fished the ham from the glass. The brown eye patch over the guy's right eye became spattered with milk during his ham transfer. He wiped the slop from his mustache with his hairy forearm. The rustle of the forearm hair brushing against his face was audible in the kitchen!

The diner was named, "Mudd's," after Cokie Mudd, its gargantuan, 7 foot 1 inch, whitish-haired owner. The diner was known for its free fried-garden-slug appetizers. Cokie explained to the patrons that the garden slugs were known as escargot in France. Cokie gave away the free appetizers to both rid his garden of the pests and to attempt to add a bit of class to the old joint. Cokie's mother had actually named Cokie, Bartholomew Maxwell, a name he rejected outright.

The hobo asked Cokie if anyone in the place were planning to go across town after their meal. As it turned out, the trapper, Max Rocks, was on his way to Tek's. In addition to dealing in sled dogs, Tek also sold traps and trapping sundries, even fine quality bear jerky. Max needed to buy 114 dozen raccoon traps. Since so much snow had recently buried the streets of the town, travel by car was impossible. Max possessed a snappy snowmobile with a cargo sled hitched to the back. Max agreed to transport the hobo and Barney for the fee of 6 dollars. Batter offered 5 dollars. Max finally accepted \$5.50. It was all about dickering in Alaska.

Barney was cold and tired, anxious for things to settle down. Everything was happening so fast. Barney yearned to be back on the hill with Jess, relaxing in the afternoon sun. The endless goings on were on the verge on making him whine, but he resisted. When Max finished eating, they left.

Barney finally got some much-needed rest. Sleep instantly came to the beagle and his depleted brain did some dreaming. He found himself in a fragrant meadow, sniffing, pissing, pooping, farting and looking around. He chased butterflies and hummingbirds. The air was fresh, clear and warm. Sun bathed him and everything around. What a fantastic scene. It was so good to be a dog, free and running and a part of the grasses. The butterflies that he chased were happy, because they knew that chasing them made him happy. He ran and ran. He stopped at a cool

spot under a massive elm and slept for 2 days.

In a passage of 3 hours and 27 minutes, Max, the hobo and Barney arrived at Tek's. Barney was startled awake. The hobo carried Barney into Tek's abode. Tek took over the business transaction saying, "What do you want?" The hobo said, "Here's the product," showing Barney. Tek bought Barney from the hobo and on the next day, Tek sold the dog to Checker for his sled dog team. Checker never asked where Tek got the dogs.

Checker fed all his sled dogs a diet comprised exclusively of the big Salmon Canning Factory's rejected fish matter. The humongous Salmon Canning Factory was the area's largest employer. Weekly, Checker towed with his snowmobile, a 13-sled convoy to the factory, to retrieve the fish remains from the factory's great dumpsters.

Checker had happily gone into the sled dog business. He assembled good teams, trained, bred and sold the beasts. The business was especially good around Iditarod race time, when racers liked to grab a few spare dogs. Checker had nothing but mongrels and rejects, but his dogs were great spares for the real racers.

Checker's feeding and training methods were the secret to turning any dog of about 30 pounds and up, sometimes 25 pounds, into a durable and dependable puller. Nobody understood how Checker was able to transform atypical dogs into such aggressive and willing pulling machines, rivaling the huskies and malamutes. Some think he learned everything from the Eskimo people. Whatever the case, he would never tell. He had the area's 2nd nicest home, fully furnished with primo stuff, and many luxuries.

Checker picked Barney up and cradled him like a baby. "Now you're Bink." Checker used only single-syllable names for the dogs. Barney/Bink cared not what this guy called him, since he was always being called something different every once in a while. "You're gonna like it here, boy." Checker continued holding Bink until the trotter dozed to sleep. All new dogs got their own doghouse. Checker carried Bink to the hi-tech hut that was state-of-the-art, as were all of Checkers' \$400 doghouses. All the dogs there got their own doghouse when they first arrived, so none was jealous of the little beagle's circumstances.

Checkers' dogs rarely fought or growled at each other, since Checker's primary teachings were that sharing was a virtue and envy, evil. A year passed at Checker dog camp, as Bink grew bigger, stronger and more vigorous. Checker's vast experience showed him that the size of a dog only had a limited affect on its robustness. More importantly, a dog needed endurance to be on a sled team. Each dog only pulled a percentage of the sled's total weight. The individual dog's ability to run nonstop for hours was its most important trait.

Checker had developed the endurance trait by allowing the dogs to eat as much fish product as

they could at a sitting, then he would harness and run them immediately. This trained their bodies to be at a maximum useable body weight. Some of the dogs at first would eat to the barfing point, barf and then have to run on empty bellies. Their bodies quickly corrected to accommodate the unnatural process of bloating then running. As unorthodox a method as it was, it produced truly happy, heavy duty, running dogs. Once those dogs got the sled going, it was amazing at how facilely they could keep the thing sliding along, kilometer after kilometer. Somehow, they seemed to sense Checker's regard for them as they ran.

Each dog pretty much had to develop its own plan of attack in the big scheme of things. The dogs intermittently pulled like crazy, at some moments feeling they were the only dog tugging, and then at other instants, they only needed to trot easily in the harness. That's the way it is on a dogsled team. It's like being a pallbearer at a funeral. Sometimes the weight seems to be all yours, when you almost feel like you have to drop the freaking casket, and then at other times, you chuckle to yourself, knowing someone else just got the load. Then, suddenly, the load comes back to you.

Bink had early on developed the reputation of being a comedian. Every half kilometer or so, Bink would tell a story of his amazing life or just make something up. Bink was always seeking the pure humor of life. Whatever had the inkling of being funny, Bink would attempt and succeed, to extract the humor of the situation and make it funnier. He could imitate any of the other dogs at will. That was Bink's most fanciful trait.

One of the second string duo, Tug, had a discernable stutter, and it didn't bother Tug if others noticed, even if they mocked. Tug was a walker coonhound, formerly a coon chaser from Pennsylvania. All Tug's team members had a healthy respect for him. Fortunately, Tug had a good nature. Bink could imitate Tug to a tee, even getting the ahem, and gurgle. Bink would orate to the rest of the team, cracking them up for great distances.

Checker was wholly unaware of the real meaning behind the team's guffaws and barks and howls and woofs. He naively assumed that they were adulating him. Checker had his ego. Having experienced dog pack evolutions many times, Checker had ignored the subtle differences in the group's chatter level upon roster changes. Bink, however, a short time after his addition, had seemed to make his fellow dogs get busier, both noise-wise and running-wise. Checker wondered why his crew became louder, more boisterous and faster, after Bink had arrived.

Bink worked his way forward through the duos as the months passed, earning his wings, advancing toward the front of the sled dog team. Bink hit 2nd string after 7 months, where he would have to stay, since a sub-30-pound dog could never be a lead dog. Bink ran with Daryl, a Dalmatian. Trike and Myx were the lead twosome, both at least 65 pounds, and ferocious athletes. Bink knew in his heart that he could be in the lead duo with either of those arrogant dogs, but no, it was not to be. He was forced to hang back, 2nd rate schlep, plumber's helper,

apprentice, and wait for a turn at the real glory. Would he ever see it? Was running in the front row even worth it?

The front duo had to break the trail for those who followed. The front duo had the flesh-biting wind in the face. The front duo risked falling through the thin ice. Bink still wanted that pole position! He just had to be in that front duo! An occasion took place when the crew set out on a typical training day: cloudy, snowing, cold, foggy, and windy. The lead trotters had special sunglasses affixed to their heads to aid somewhat in the travel. Suggestions from the second duo or farther back were unappreciated and essentially ignored by Trike and Myx. The human who guided the sled team ultimately had the final word on where they all went, so that person was really the key.

That human relied wholly on the front duo's instincts and training to safely guide the troupe. On a day just like any other they progressed along, then the snow started squalling. The dogs had inadvertently drifted off the trail. Whoa! The entire convoy of dog and sled and Checker suddenly dropped from sight in a puff of white, descending, falling, plummeting through the snow and ice layers, eventually impacting on the snow-padded floor of a great ice cave. They all tumbled and rolled around like the dice of several Yahtzee games tossed simultaneously onto the playing table.

Unconscious for hours, the beasts one by one awoke to a glittery, chilly sight, fresh and bright. Sunlight lasered down through the snow hole, through which they had fallen 101 feet. They could only glance, sniff and look around in awe for many moments until their dimmed senses gradually returned. Stomachs were growling. They were hungry! Part of the cargo that Checker's team had yanked included 859 pounds of seafood stuff for the dogs to feast upon, as necessary. He also had 40 pounds of various canned goods and 10 cases of Pepsi for himself. The combined foodstuffs could sustain the gang for 8 days, if necessary. Three lanterns, 77 lantern mantles, 112 gallons of lantern fuel, and various cold weather necessities, including heaters, sleeping bags, clothing and 6 first-aid kits also inhabited Checker's overstuffed industrial-grade sled.

Checker farted. Bink squatted to poop. Daryl growled and bit Bink's butt. The 2 dogs hunched and snarled. Checker hurried over to separate the two from their harnesses, and then unharnessed the rest of the dogs. Checker disallowed fighting among the dogs, his main rule. As a child, Checker had read the book, "Call of the wild," and had cried for weeks. He vowed to never permit dogs to bite one another, or even to let them growl at length. Immediate separation of the brawling animals, then overfeeding, then putting them back together, was Checker's method. It always worked. Checker took advantage of a dog's primary need for food and used it to his constant profit.

The remaining dogs wandered the massive cavern as Daryl and Bink happily bloated on fish

parts. As they feasted, they forgot why they had been quarreling. Magic? Not likely. Checker looked to the back of the cave and spotted a tunnel that grew darker the further he looked into it, blurring and clouding his squinting eyes. The dogs merrily trotted about, slipping and sliding on the clear, pure ice floor.

Checker shuddered as something unexpectedly wrapped around his ankle. How silly, he thought, it must be Bink's tail. Then Checker fell to the ice floor. It wasn't Bink. Checker was dragged away by a lasso strangling his ankle. What the heck!? His back, butt, shoulders and head beat against the ice, as he trailed behind the dragging force, whatever it was. It felt like being dragged on a ski lift. The dragging stopped. He was in the dark tunnel with the captor. He felt a hand clearing the lasso from his ankle, a human hand! The hand then clutched his ankle. Checker lay still. He felt free, but still captive. "Eek!" he cried. He was scared. "Hey!" he barked. The specter yielded, releasing the grip on his ankle. "I'm Tayly," said a girlish voice. Checker replied, "Okay." Tayly said, "I like you boy. I like you a lot." "Who are you, woman," said Checker. She said, "I'm your dream come true!" Checker seized the moment and pushed her to the ground. She howled, "No!" She got up and ran off into the darkness of the tunnel.

Checker made camp as far away from the tunnel as he could, establishing a fire pit near the wall of the cave. He drank heavily from a can of Pepsi, made a fire, and settled down with the animals, telling them stories until they all fell asleep. In the morning, Checker awoke to a big pile of snow under the ice cave's ceiling hole. The pile stood about 24 feet high and the dogs pissed, pooped, climbed on it and gleefully slid down it. Bink seemed to like being at the top of the pile. The dogs played "king of the hill" and Bink always ferociously maintained his spot on top.

They survived another 2 days in the cave, bored and pissed off, the lot of them. Tempers wanted to flare, but the act was forbidden. The snow continued to fall through the ceiling hole, adding to the height of the pile below. How are they supposed to get out? Checker searched the cave and followed the dark Tayly tunnel as far as he dared, never finding Tayly's lair. The only evidence of habitation along the dark corridor consisted of bones, fur, excrement, urine, and small animal skeletons. How and where did she live?

Tayly reminded Checker of Sarrah. Sarrah Tamms was a girl he completely devoted himself to, heart and soul in the 10th grade. They made a pact that they would be married sometime after high school. As part of the pact, they plucked each other's eyebrows, until blood trickled from the brow. They then pressed their bleeding brows together, waiting until the blood mixture started to scab, and then slowly pulled apart. While they were waiting, they whispered their vows to each other. How barbarically romantic! Checker lost Sarrah when her father Tico forced her to enlist in the Army to get money for college.

Checker noticed Bink barking at the top of the snow pile at 77 feet above the cave floor. Of

course! In 2 more days, the snow pile would be at the ceiling! The snow continued for 2 more days, not reaching the ceiling as predicted. Dang! One more day of snow and the pile reached the ceiling. Yes! Checker climbed to the top the pile and began the chopping and hacking and chipping, to widen the hole. He was out! He one at a time hoisted the dogs out in their harnesses with rope, starting with Bink. Then he hoisted the rest of the dogs. The dogs were all ecstatic when they hit the aboveground world again, spastically running in circles, pissing all over the snow, and then rolling around in it. Then he hoisted up the sled in pieces, and then the cargo. Checker headed home, taking it easy on the gang, stopping often.

Bink was sick of being a sled dog, due to the obvious hazards, and when they got back, he would plot his escape. They got back on a Friday, a day that Checker usually devoted to watching sports at the local bars. Checker always had stories to tell his usual listeners. The locals loved Checker, because he could always find something exciting to do and talk about. Checker tethered the dogs to their houses, overfed them more than usual, hugged them all, and then trekked off to the first bar.

The leather leashes that connected the dogs to their huts were made of full grain bull hide, but a determined dog could saw its way through, given an hour or two. Checker would be gone all night and probably connect with some friendly floozy. Bink started the gnawing as soon as Checker left. In 2 hours, Bink was free. Daryl helped by chewing the collar off and tearfully bade farewell to Bink, his running mate. Sled dogs were an emotional bunch. Bink ran as fast as he could away from the slave labor camp, not looking back, hoping to get away from the hard work and bondage.

The experience with Checker convinced Bink that he hated hard work and would never do it again, if he could in any way help it. He found the train station and skulked in any shadow he could find, until the choice moment. He remembered how the train station was the place that provided travel, relocation and freedom, if only temporary. The train station harbored danger, if care weren't taken, but the train station was his only way to go anywhere. Bink waited and waited.

A train was heading to Seattle, Washington, filled with various dry-iced fish stuffs. The people of Seattle craved Alaska's natural wildlife products, which included the likes of crab, salmon and other fish. Bink watched the loading men pack a train car with crates until full, then one of the guys cut his finger on a metal tag, causing bleeding from the webbed part of his hand between his thumb and forefinger. The injured goof's fellow Einsteins gathered in amazement at the largish blood flow, until eventually one of the brainiacs escorted the injured idiot to the station.

The moment! Bink trotted at full gallop to the train car with the ramp still attached to it. Bink motored up the ramp, and then ran into the car to the right, skidding on the oak-slatted floor. He was in! Phew! Bink lay down in silence and waited for the train to depart, which it did in 16

minutes. He fell hard asleep. He dreamed. He was trotting in a meadow, sniffing the tall green grasses. Bink eventually landed in Seattle, some time later, hungry and thirsty and pissed off. Maybe he still harbored some frustrations from his time with Checker. Maybe he just woke up on the wrong side of the train car. Maybe he was scared. Maybe he was just hungry. Bink was always pissed off until his first meal of the day, anyway.

Bink spied a rat running back and forth in the back of the car, probably trying to find the exit. Stupid rat. Bink trotted over, sat down and watched the rodent. The little grey demon was surprisingly quick in its spastic movements, sometimes blurring Bink's following eyes. Soon Bink had the rat's running synchronized. He cat-leaped forward at the precise moment that the rodent was just to the left of him, snagging a canine tooth on the animal's butt. Bink grabbed the rat, tossed it into the air like a breakfast cook in a diner flipping a pancake, then bit the rodent into two pieces. He gobbled down the head half, burped and swallowed the butt half. Well, that certainly hit the spot. The rank meal should tide him over for an hour or two maybe. At least his spirits were perked up a bit. Poor Bink always had to have a full belly, or he simply wasn't happy. He felt his energy level increasing. Hours and hours passed. When the heck will they arrive? While he dosed again, the train sneakily slowed. Pulling into town? It was. He cowered, as the door was pulled open by some flunky.

When the coast cleared, Bink trotted out the train car into Seattle. He was met by a gloved, hat-wearing man, wearing a blue shirt, pushing a heavily laden cart over-stacked with cabbage crates. The man said to Bink, "Hey boy, what are you doing here?" Bink woofed. The man said, "Humph!" and pressed on. Another even greasier man spat at Bink, missing. Bink growled at the spitter. The third guy he encountered, not one of the lowlife workers, dropped on the ground the remainder of a sausage/egg/bacon sandwich, saying, "Here boy!" Bink wolfed it. Approaching the station, Bink was hit by a wet sucker, tossed from a passing baby carriage. The sucker stuck to his back. He circled frantically, vainly attempting to bite the thing off. He ran to the back alley, next to the station restaurant and rolled around on the wet pavement, eventually shattering the lollipop. He ate the pieces. His back was wet and stinking. The ground was wet and stinking, probably from garbage water. Bink hated garbage water. Now, he reeked of garbage!

A kindly enough looking middle-aged woman clad in a large hat and frumpy dress, wearing a hearty trusting smile, walked up to the stenching, pissed-off dog, with her hand extended in friendship to pet the innocent-looking beagle. Bink snapped at the strange hand, clipping off the "French tips" of the longest two fingernails. He growled. She instantly recoiled her hand, gasping at the dog's voracity. She said, "Bad dog!" He cowered, squealing. She crouched down, almost falling over backward on her 3" heels. He rolled over onto his back. She rubbed his furry belly. He laughed. She giggled. Then she gave him a 10-inch stick of pepperoni from one of her bundles. He barked and ate. She sat there with Bink for 15 minutes while he savored the best

meal he ever had. She sang with a squeaky voice, "Michael, row the boat ashore."

Bink liked when people sang to him, not something that had happened much in his life, but he just the same enjoyed it. The woman said, "We could use you, beagle." Bink burped and farted a wet fart that squirted about a teaspoon of chocolaty diarrhea out of his butt, down the back of his right hind leg. She laughed. He grimaced and turned around, kicking the poop-dripping leg, splashing some of the excrement onto her frumpy dress. She laughed again. "You little dickens!" The woman scooped up the passive beagle and walked to her car. After strapping the dog in the back seat of her Karman Ghia in a car harness for dogs, she sped off to The Institute.

She showed Bink to her supervisor, who immediately approved. Bink was to become a Seeing Eye dog. The Institute was always looking for stray dogs to fill its ever-growing need for animals to help blind people get around in life. It seemed that every day or so, another need arose for a Seeing Eye dog. Beagles were especially sought out for their size, temperament and vast dolphin-like intelligence. Mary Red was the woman who found Bink. She introduced Bink to Dr. Ratch. Dr. Ratch was an animal and people lover, an ideal director for such a training facility. The waiting list for Seeing Eye dogs was longer than that for human hearts or lungs or livers. Although the beagle was the preferred dog, The Institute trained all breeds of dogs, believing that any dog could be useful in the task of guiding the blind. Dr. Ratch was the person who matched the dogs to the users.

A 41-year old woman, who was forced to retire from the Lego Factory where she had worked for 25 years since age 16, was Bink's selected owner. She went only by the name of Trish to her friends. Trish had diabetes since age 4, the disease finally resulting in blindness. The Lego Factory had to let her go, because her increasingly reduced eyesight was causing her to mix up the Lego pieces' colors, resulting in lopsided children's toy kits, with too much of one color versus another. Some of Trish's friends called her Bags, because she always carried 2 tote bags around.

Dr. Ratch chose to name all The Institute's dogs something that the owners could relate to, thus choosing "Bags" as Bink's new name. Bags would need 6 weeks of intensive training, including socializing with people, to guarantee his reliability and trustworthiness. Trish couldn't wait to get Bags, because she was tired of wandering around the crowded sidewalks with only a white cane, which not everyone noticed and acknowledged. She was always hitting people in the shins with the white stick, bruising the people and in turn, her own ego. People heeded Seeing Eye dogs, perhaps because so many people loved dogs.

Bags entered into his comprehensive training program, where he learned how to lead the person and sense the dangers of traffic, etc. He was treated very well, the best in his life. He was glad to get away from the barbaric cold, poor conditions and slavery of Checker and his wretched Alaska. He was in a far more hospitable place, being pampered and fed well and most

importantly, learning a trade. It was about time, he thought. Bags immediately took to his training and his trainers. He was finally happy. What was next? All he knew was that he was going through these strange daily rituals, for whatever reason and was being treated fantastically in the process. Gradually, he was expected to perform more and more complex tasks, including fire rescue, paper fetching and food tasting, his favorite. He also had to memorize various routes in the city that he would help Trish to meander on her travels.

On the last week of training, Bags and Trish were standing on the corner, waiting to cross, when a blind guy and his dog walked up to wait with them. The guy's dog was a cute female beagle that Bags took an immediate liking to. Going against his training, only on instinct, Bags tried to mount the female dog. Trish felt the pull on the harness and said, "No!" and Bags climbed down.

Bags graduated with honors. The first couple of days, Bags and Trish walked around the house and grounds to get familiar with everything. Trish lived on a 101-acre estate that had been willed to her by her Uncle Raif. Trish had to call The Institute to get someone over to plan out some walking routes along the varied paths and sidewalks of the manor. A week of traipsing over and over the routes and Bags was finally ready to take the woman anywhere. Trish especially liked to go to a place that took about 20 minutes to get to, on the north corner of the property, in a grove of huge Norway spruce trees. Trish always brought her tote bags full of stuff to the grove. In the middle of the private grove was an assortment of colorful chaise lounges scattered around a large bluish fountain. Imported British gas streetlights stood on the outer edges of the paved enclave. Weatherproof speakers were installed in the circular bench that surrounded the scene. She always had a variety of music cranking through the speakers, fed by the immense stereo in the main house, on the 100-cd player. The music was so loud and pure, that the entire grove vibrated from the concert-like sound.

Trish produced from one of the tote bags food and water dishes for Bags, then filled the containers. Trish was 41, but she had the looks and body of a 28-year old. Trish's husband Clay left her a year ago, because the loser was unable to deal with her recent blindness. After Clay left, Trish managed to get a few dates from gentlemen whom she had met via a dating service, suggested to her by some of her divorced friends.

Bags trotted around in the fountain to keep cool. Swimming in the fountain were numerous coy and goldfish. Bags was still hungry from the inadequate amount of food provided by Trish, and proceeded to kill and eat all 23 of the fish in the fountain. Trish had noticed the splashing and figured it could be only one thing. By the time Trish started yelling at Bags to stop, it was too late. Trish immediately called The Institute with her cell phone and reported that Bags wasn't going to work out. Bags had heard his name mentioned by Trish on the phone and decided his own fate by running away. He ran as fast as he could to the edge of the estate. Trish called, "Bags? Bags?" Bags didn't hear her.

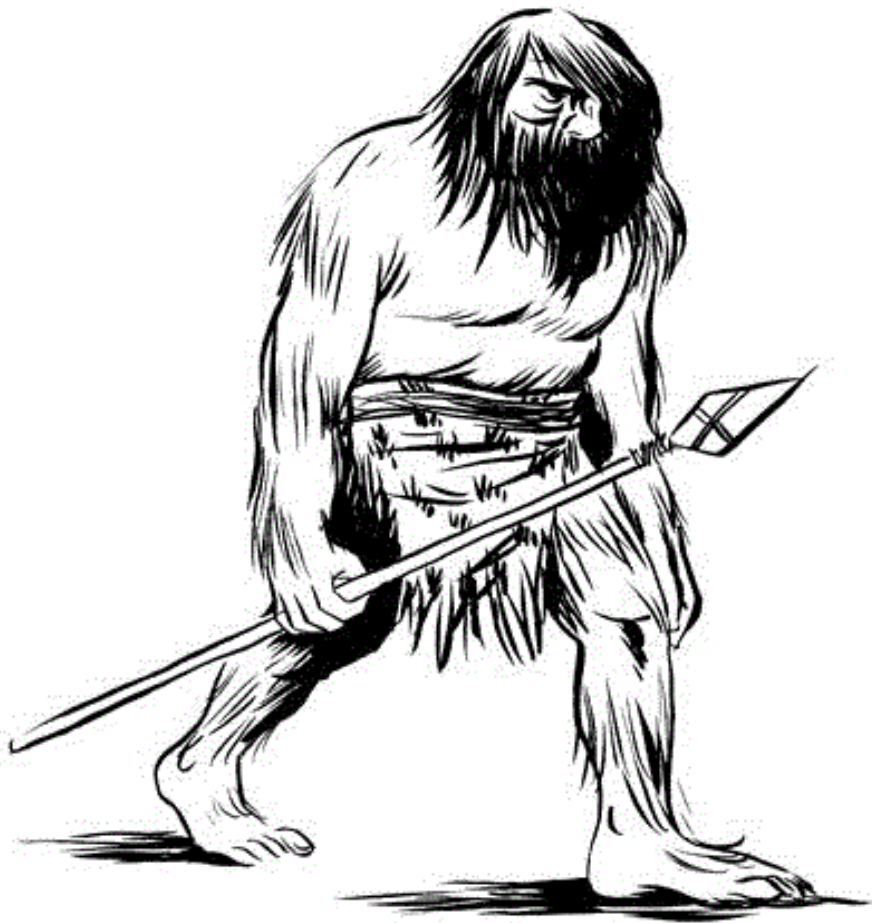
Bags ran for about 12 minutes, until he got really thirsty. He found a nice puddle on the edge on a big front lawn that had the sprinkler running. The lawn belonged to the St. Diddy Elderly Center, where elderly people were placed by society and their kids to rot. Trey Gordie was tending to the flowers and shrubberies in front of the Center, when he noticed Bags. "Hey doggie! Here boy!" Trey called to Bags. Trey tossed a piece of sugarless bubble gum over to Bags, which Bags quickly picked up and started to chew. It was grape flavor. Bags liked the taste and continued chewing as Trey walked over to him. Trey called toward the front door of the center for Gert. Gert glared through the front window at Trey. Gert went through the front door and onto the stoop. "What now, Trey?" she called. Trey replied, "Get a piece of rope to catch this dog with!" "Righto," said Gert. Gert went into the building, came out with a rope and shuffled over to Trey and Bags. "Nice dog, huh?" he said. Gert replied, "a perfect little dog for our center." Trey loosely put the rope around Bags' neck and walked with Bags and Gert back to the building, where they went inside. Trey handed the rope to Gert and went back out to finish his gardening. Gert got on the phone right away to the Center's supervisor to report her important find.

After a couple minutes of mumbling on the phone, Gert took Bags down a hallway to a big office in the back on the left. Jason Sard ran the place and was pleased to see the cheerful looking little dog that Gert brought into the office. Gert and Jason discussed the matter for a while, and then Gert took Bags back down the hall to a little corner with an old bunched blue comforter sitting on the floor. Gert tied Bags to a banister next to the corner while she went to look for a collar. Bags gladly collapsed on the comforter and sighed relief.

Since all the old men living at the center had their belts constantly traded in for either shorter ones or longer ones, they always unused belts on hand. Gert selected an old belt from the belt box behind the front desk, cut it down to a suitable collar length for Bags and brought it back to him. Gert put the collar on Bags' neck and called him "Boot" as she petted his fuzzy head. "You're our Boot," she said to him. A nurse working nearby heard Gert call the dog Boot and asked Gert why she chose that name. Gert said that there were two things in life that she always wanted: one was to have a dog called "Boot" and the other was to have a nice cashmere sweater. Gert had waited a long time for that dog, but still hasn't gotten the sweater. The nurse shrugged her shoulders and continued her task of feeding canned peaches to her 92-year-old patient. "Sounds like a stupid name to me!" the nurse said to herself. Her patient slobbered out a line as well, "Yeah, what a stupid name!"

Boot was getting sick of people calling him so many different names, but he was very adaptable and took it in stride. Gert brought a big water dish over to Boot full of cool water, then gave him a little pile of biskies. Then she gave Boot a bowl full of Eukanuba dry dog food. All these supplies the Center always had on hand for their many "petters," as they called them, the dogs and cats that lived at the Center to provide the therapy of touch for the inmates.

5. Bone's Clan



5. Bone's Clan

Bone woke up that morning next to the smoldering fire, lying on top of the saber toothed tiger rug and farted a long sickening smelling fart that smelled like digested bone marrow. The caveman next to Bone woke up immediately, because the other caveman's head was next to Bone when Bone farted and the other caveman heard, and then smelled the awful fart.

The smell of the fart was so bad in fact that the other caveman got sick to his stomach and barfed. Bone laughed when he saw the other caveman barf, because Bone was proud of the sound and smell of his farts, as were all cavemen. The more sickening smelling, wet and weird sounding that a caveman can make a fart, the better it established his status within the clan of cavemen.

In the clan at that time, more important than the sound of the fart though was the smell. The stinkier the fart, the better. Fart stink was more important than fart sound, although they were both important. Anybody could get a good sound out of a fart by the way it was let out, by applying more pressure or less pressure. Sometimes jumping up and down made a fart sound funnier.

A fart could be dragged out over a long time by just letting it barely squeak out and not putting too much pressure. Usually the longer lasting farts weren't as loud though and were squeaky. If the cavemen wanted a louder fart, the cavemen would take a deep breath and put a lot of pressure behind it.

The cavemen in the clan would hold contests every day to determine who had the stinkiest and best sounding fart. Again though, the smell of the fart was the most important part of the fart. Anytime a caveman could blow a fart that would make another caveman sick and barf, that fart would almost always win the contest. If a caveman could ever blow a fart that stunk so bad that whoever smelled it would faint from the stink, that fart always won, hands down.

It was pretty difficult to blow those "fainting farts," as they called them, but once in a while, somebody blew one. Usually, it was Bone who blew those fainting farts. The other cavemen couldn't figure out how Bone managed to blow all those bad smelling farts, and win all the farting contests, but Bone did it.

The cavemen of the clan gave Bone the name of Bone for a reason. Any animal that the clan killed and ate, Bone always ate all the bones of the animals and let the other cavemen eat the meat. What Bone was really deriving from the bones was the meat inside the bones, called the bone marrow. Bone fashioned a device similar to a nut cracker for cracking the bones so that the marrow could be easily scooped out and eaten quickly, in large pieces.

The bone marrow that Bone was eating was actually the thing that made his farts smell so bad,

giving his farts the capability of making the smell of the farts faint.

Back then, cavemen were not very smart, essentially surviving on their instincts and occasional coincidental and lucky events taking place. Bone was the most intelligent of the cavemen in his clan, which is how he discovered that eating only bone marrow gave him the stinkiest farts. Nobody else in the clan managed to make the connection that the food they ate is what gave the smell to the farts they made.

It was back when Bone was 17 years old that he noticed his farts were really stinky on every day of a particular week. That week, the clan had killed a woolly mammoth and had large amounts of meat and bones to eat. Since no one else wanted the bones, Bone had been chowing ravenously on the bone marrow, and his farts became really vile. He figured that it must have been the bone marrow causing the foulness. From that point on, he only ate bone marrow, which was fine with the rest of the clan. Everybody preferred the easier to eat meat to the difficult to get at bone marrow.

Since the status of the cavemen in the clan was determined by the stinkiness of the farts, Bone became the leader of the clan, because he always won the daily fart contests.

Being the leader of the clan had its benefits, because whenever the clan would catch an animal to eat, the leader of the clan always got the first choice of the fur of the animal. Animal fur was very valuable to the clan, because all their clothing, beds, toilet paper and pillows were made from animal fur.

One time during a fart contest 2 weeks before, Bone blew a fart while standing too close to the fire and the intense gas from the fart burst into flames, igniting the hair of one of Bone's best buddies. The guy's hair on his face and head all burned off in about a second, leaving the guy completely bald headed and clean-shaven. The guy looked like a bald kid. Everybody in the caveman clan usually had long hair down their backs and long moustaches and beards down their faces.

The caveman clan gave that poor bald guy the name Kid, because he ended up looking like a kid. Kid didn't mind being called Kid, because everybody in the clan had a name given to them by the other members of the clan, and everybody liked the names that had been given to them. They didn't really have much choice anyway. If a caveman didn't like his given name and chose to ignore the other guys when they called him, he was quickly kicked out of the clan, resulting in many problems.

The moment that Kid's hair had been burned off by Bone's fart flame, Kid started laughing at the fact that Bone's fart caught on fire in the first place. Kid had laughed so hard that his fart had also burst into flames and ignited the fur clothing that Bone had been wearing. Bone quickly

threw off his flaming clothing, to avoid being burned, which left Bone standing there momentarily naked.

All the other cavemen laughed at seeing Bone naked, causing Bone to start laughing, which caused him to start farting again. Since Bone was still standing next to the fire at the time, his farts kept bursting into flames and the cavemen laughed harder and began farting themselves. Soon, the cave started to smell so bad from all the farting that 14 members of the clan had fainted from the combined fart fumes. The 14 fainted cavemen had to be dragged outside the cave so they could get fresh air and revive.

Bone put on a new set of fur clothes and went outside the cave with Kid. All 59 of the caveman clan went outside the cave to allow the cave to ventilate before they went back in. Once outside, the clan continued to laugh and fart uncontrollably for another 15 minutes. Bone and Kid went back into the cave to get some burning logs from the fire and brought them outside to continue laughing, farting and lighting their farts on fire.

One of the cavemen was named Butt by the clan, because for some reason, he had an unusually large butt. Nobody could figure out why he had such a big butt. He just did. Butt had to have a special fur suit made so it would cover his whole butt. The clan didn't want to see any body parts hanging out of the fur suits of its members, so Butt needed his special suit badly.

Another guy in the clan was named Leaner, because his head was so big, he couldn't hold his head up straight, and his head always leaned a little to the side.

One caveman was named Poopoo, because no matter how hard he tried, he was unable to blow a fart without taking a poop in his fur suit. Poopoo thought it was funny that he always pooped when he farted, and so did everybody else in the caveman clan, so Poopoo liked being called Poopoo. The only problem with Poopoo was that when he went to bed at night, everybody knew not to fall asleep too close to Poopoo, because in the middle of the night, if Poopoo farted and then pooped, you would smell fresh poop for the rest of the night. If Poopoo's fur suit were lifted up in the back, by his squirming as he slept, some of the poop might come out onto the floor, getting on the person sleeping too close.

Everybody like Poopoo, because he had a really good sense of humor and could always be relied on for a good laugh. He knew many funny jokes. The only problem with Poopoo was that he always smelled like poop and everybody had to breathe through their mouths, to avoid smelling the poop. All the members of the caveman clan stunk, since they never bathed, and never got wet unless they were accidentally caught outside in the rain. Poopoo just stunk a little more than the rest of them.

The oldest member of the caveman clan was named Burpo because he was the best burper. In

the old days of the caveman history, status in the clan was determined by how loud and smelly a caveman's burps were. Burpo had been the leader of the clan for many years, always winning the daily burping contests. Burpo's burping secret was that he always ate the eyeballs of the animals the clan caught. There was something about animal eyeballs that gave Burpo huge amounts of stomach gas, and the gas was really foul smelling.

Somewhere along the line, the cavemen voted and decided farting was a better way to determine the leader of the clan than burping. This status-changing event enabled Bone to take the leadership of the clan away from Burpo.

Another proud member of the clan was named Buggy because his eyes bulged out of his head like a bug. The condition happened to Buggy when Buggy was trying to win a daily farting contest 3 months before. Bone had already established himself as the king of the smelliest farts and as the leader of the clan, because of his farts. Buggy was determined to beat Bone in the farting contest. The night before the contest, Buggy ate more than usual at supper and sneaked more meat in the middle of the night, filling his stomach to the point of bursting. Buggy hoped that by eating more and putting as much pressure as he could behind a fart, it would make him the contest winner. Everyone gathered around in their usual positions to start the farting contest.

The scoring of the farting contest was based on a score of 1 to 10 and the scoring was controlled by one of the 2 members of the clan who could count. One of those guys was named Count. The other guy in the clan who could count was called Count 2.

By the time it was Buggy's turn to fart, he had been practicing his technique for a while, inflating and deflating his lungs and holding his breath and trying to concentrate the pressure. The guy who farted just before Buggy had farted a loud vibrating fart that had loosened dust from the ceiling of the cave, causing the dust to float downward. As Buggy went to fart, he took a deep breath of air, which he inhaled through his nose. Some of the loose dust floated into Buggy's nostrils as he took his big inhale. Buggy sneezed the biggest sneeze he ever sneezed in his life, a bigger sneeze than anyone in the clan had ever heard, even old Burpo. Buggy then farted the loudest fart he ever farted. Because of the fullness of Buggy's stomach, the pressure of the sneeze had nowhere to go and made Buggy's eyes bulge out of their sockets from the force.

The fart was indeed a very loud one, but was not smelly enough to win the contest. When the rest of the clan saw Buggy's eyes bulging out like a bug, they laughed and started chanting, "Buggy, Buggy, Buggy!" Buggy then got the name Buggy. Buggy laughed along with them, farted, pooped and went to sleep, because he was still so full and drowsy.

Another member of the clan was called Boomer because he had the loudest farts. He was the guy who farted the loud fart in the farting contest before Buggy. Boomer was the tallest of the cavemen, being almost 8 feet tall. If the leader of the clan were determined by size and strength,

Boomer would have been the hands down leader, but since the leader of the clan at that time was determined by fart stench, Bone was the designated leader. Other clans back in the caveman days all had their different ways of determining leadership. Boomer was designated as assistant leader, since he had the loudest farts.

One day, the hunting group of Bone, Boomer, Kid, Burpo, Leaner, Poopoo, Bugsy, Count, Nose and Eagle were out hunting. Eagle was given his name, because he had such great eyesight and he was always in the front of the hunting group, being able to spot their prey a long way off. Nose was given his name, because he had such an astounding sense of smell. Nose followed Eagle, and then it was Bone in third place, with Boomer at the end of the line with his great height.

That day, the hunting group was on a jumbo rooster trail. Jumbo roosters were the best tasting of all the animals that the clan liked to eat. The roosters were a tricky animal to catch and kill. The only way for the cavemen to kill a jumbo rooster was to get onto the back of the huge bird and ride the animal until it collapsed dead from exhaustion, sometimes taking days in the process. Many times, the cavemen died from exhaustion first, being unable to outlast the rooster, and being too afraid to jump off the rooster's back.

Burpo had devised a jumbo rooster call that he fashioned from the dried skeleton of an iguana. When the bones of the iguana skeleton were rubbed together in just the right way, it sounded very similar to the call of the rooster. As Burpo operated the call, Eagle squinted and Nose sniffed the air for the foul smell of the huge bird. The jumbo roosters got their stink, because part of their mating ritual was to poop in huge piles, then pee on the huge piles of poop, then roll around on the huge, peed on, poop piles. The roosters rolled around until they were covered with a thick coating of pee and poop paste. Somehow, the smell was attractive to other jumbo roosters, enabling them to get together to mate and lay their giant eggs.

The group progressed along the rooster trail in the direction of The Great Tree, which could be seen from many miles away. The Great Tree was a huge tree, the largest tree in the caveman world, as wide and tall as a skyscraper of modern times. Three hours had passed, when Eagle raised his right hand straight up in the air, signaling the group to stop and be quiet. Nose had caught a whiff of a jumbo rooster and tapped on Eagle's shoulder in order to silently signal to him to stop the progression of hunters. Eagle spied a jumbo rooster, then another and another. When the clan got close enough for Count to see the roosters, Eagle motioned to Count to count the roosters. Count counted a total of 13 roosters in the flock.

Jumbo roosters were difficult to sneak up on, because they had such great eyesight. The roosters were super cautious when they came out of their underground tunnels during the day to feed.

The cavemen each carried a long pole to be able to pole vault onto the backs of the jumbo

roosters. The trick was that the cavemen had to be close enough to the roosters to do it.

The hunting group slowly sneaked along low to the ground, carrying their poles at their sides. Poopoo started getting nervous as he always does when they go hunting and started farting and pooping. Boomer started smiling when he noticed what Poopoo was doing in front of him and wanted to laugh. Boomer tried to hold in his laugh, but still managed to snort a little. Poopoo heard Boomer snort behind him, turned around to look at Boomer, and smiled at him. Poopoo also wanted to laugh, but managed to keep it down to a little snort.

Boomer had to be careful not to step in the poop that was falling out the back of Poopoo's fur suit onto the trail. Since all the members of the hunting group were all barefoot for quietness, the last thing that Boomer wanted to do was step on Poopoo's warm slippery poop with his bare foot.

Kid was walking in front of Poopoo and had heard Poopoo farting and pooping, causing Kid to snort a laugh. Even Leaner who was in front of Kid, heard Poopoo farting and pooping, causing even Leaner to snort, which was rare for Leaner, who usually took hunting very seriously.

The closer the group got to the roosters, the slower they sneaked along. Luckily, for the hunting group, the roosters were upwind, unable to smell the poop and farts. The roosters were eating blackberries in a thick thorny patch of bushes.

The average height of a jumbo rooster was 14 feet to the top of the feathers on its head. The backs of the roosters were 10 feet off the ground, necessitating the poles used by the cavemen for vaulting.

Closer and closer the group got until a bird flew out of a tree to the left of Eagle, causing the startled Boomer to look over at the bird. As Boomer turned his head, he took his eyes off the trail in front of him and he stepped in a pile of Poopoo's poop and slipped. When Boomer slipped on the poop, his feet went out from under him and he accidentally tossed his pole at Poopoo's back. Poopoo was so startled that he blasted a really loud wet fart and started laughing because of the funny sound the fart made. Kid heard the fart and started laughing. In seconds, the entire band was laughing and farting.

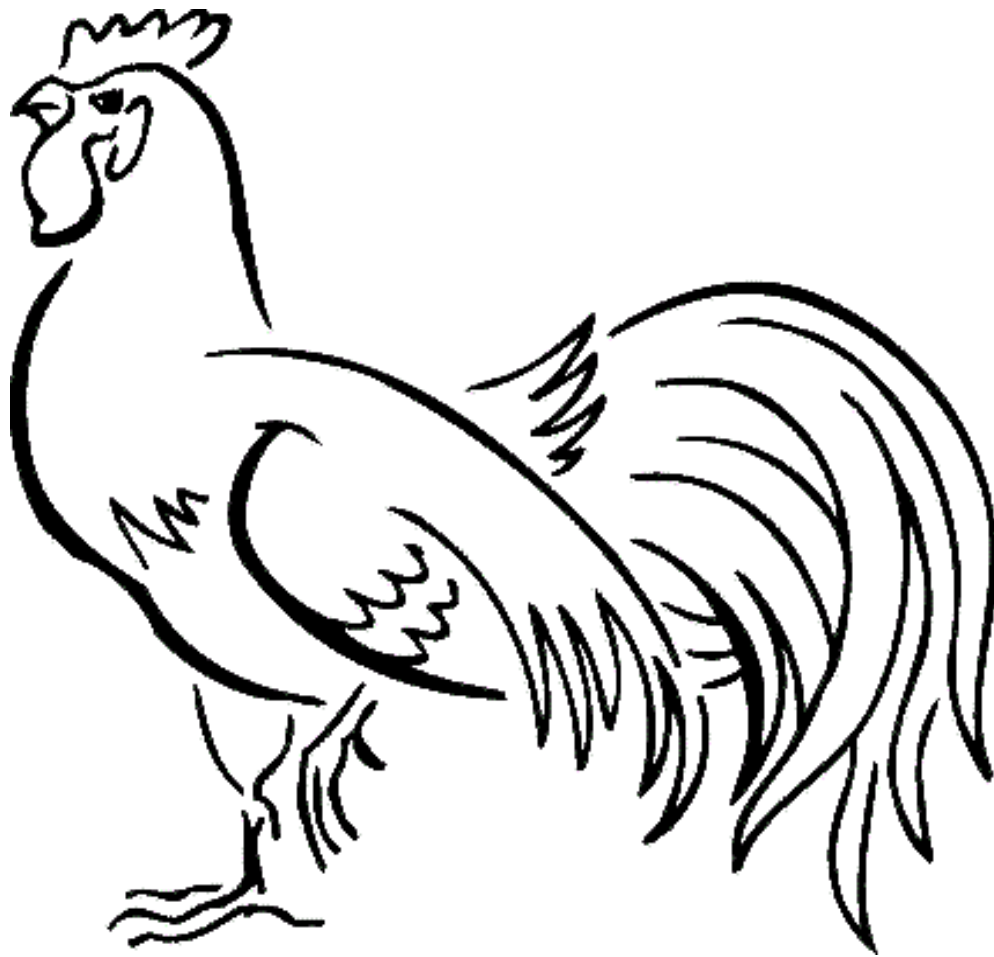
The roosters heard the ruckus the cavemen were making and instantly sped away into the heavy growth. When the hunting group finally stopped laughing and farting, they proceeded down the trail to the immense blackberry bushes from which the roosters were feeding. The cavemen filled their fur pouches with the berries. They loved the berries when they were in season and always brought some home when they were near a patch. The group then headed back to the cave.

On the way home, the hunting group came upon a large nest of rattlesnakes. There were so many

snakes that the hunting party was soon surrounded. The typical way that the cavemen dealt with rattlesnake encounters was by sacrificing one of the cavemen to the snakes. The snakes would move in on the one victim and the others would be able to escape. The decision had to be made quickly before the entire clan was annihilated. Bone and Boomer looked at each other and then looked at Poopoo. They looked at each other again and nodded to each other. All the cavemen of the clan knew that somebody had to go. They didn't know who it would be. In such situations, the leader and assistant leader usually silently decided it. The others didn't have a say in who was to go; they only hoped it wouldn't be them. Boomer picked up Poopoo and threw him onto the nest of snakes, as the rest of the clan ran away. Bone was sad to lose Poopoo from the clan, but Poopoo had caused too much trouble sometimes when they went hunting. The weakest link in the chain of the clan was normally the first one to be cast aside.

When the remaining members of the hunting party made it back to the cave, they related the news about Poopoo. Some of the cavemen cried and others muttered things under their breath. Life was hard as a caveman. Everyone had to always look out for themselves. When the dust had settled, they created a huge bonfire, ate, told stories, laughed and lit farts on fire. The cavemen found that the best way to overcome the loss of a fellow clan member was to sing. Bone started singing along to the sounds of the farting. Other cavemen joined in with the singing. Boomer started banging a log with another log. They were making so much noise that no one heard the T-Rex crashing through the trees, thundering toward them.

6. Bong's Farm



6. Bong's Farm

Bong seemed to be just like any other rooster living on a farm, but anyone you ask would tell you a different story. Bong was the king of the farm on which he lived. It didn't matter that there were Australian sheepdogs herding the sheep, or 1000-pound horses in their corral, or a 2000-pound bull living in a heavy-duty enclosure, or even that a human owned and operated the farm. Bong felt he was stronger, more intelligent and more capable than all the other creatures around, including any humans. Bong was a megalomaniac and was the master of all he surveyed. Bong respected Zeke, the owner of farm, but Bong still felt he was more important than Zeke. Zeke did whatever he did on the farm, but Bong watched over everything, safeguarding everything and everyone.

Farmer Zeke had to farm the homestead alone, since his wife Cleotilde had died 3 years before of complications after surgery. On that spring day, Cleotilde had been towing the hay wagon back from the field and it was full of hay bales. She had been smoking a cigarette. Zeke didn't like when Cleotilde smoked and he especially didn't like when she smoked while processing the hay. Cleotilde had lit a cigarette with a wooden match, the only kind of match available back then, and had flicked the spent match to her left. At least Cleotilde had assumed the match was spent. The wind grabbed the glowing match and deposited it on top of the piled hay bales in the wagon. The hay was thoroughly dry and extremely flammable.

Cleotilde didn't notice the smoldering hay behind her, because the wind was blowing in her face. She was driving the old tractor along the path that led from the field to the barn, pretty much the same way that she always had. To pass the boring time, she had been singing the song, "My Wild Irish Rose." The wind suddenly reversed direction, blowing from directly behind the hay wagon, blowing on the hay, causing it to erupt into a fireball. The flames of the burning hay blew toward Cleotilde's back. She heard the roar of the inferno too late, as she turned to be consumed by the fire. She jumped off the tractor with her hat, hair, clothing and gloves in flames, screaming as she landed on the ground.

Cleotilde screamed Zeke's name and he came running from the barn. Zeke had been in the middle of shearing the sheep, whose wool they sold for great profit. Seeing Cleotilde in flames, Zeke ran to her with the full fleece that he had just finished shearing. Zeke covered Cleotilde with the fleece and rolled her around on the ground. Cleotilde had been burned pretty badly by the fire, even though Zeke had put it out as quickly as he could.

Zeke covered Cleotilde with a thick layer of goose grease from head to toe, wrapped her in a blanket and rushed her to the hospital that was 52 miles away as fast as the old truck could go, which wasn't very fast. Cleotilde had passed out from the pain of the burns and was unconscious when they arrived at the hospital. Cleotilde required surgery to repair the burned skin, involving skin grafts and other drastic procedures. The doctor told Zeke that there was a 50/50 chance of

Cleotilde surviving, because of the severity of the injuries. All anyone could do was hope for the best. After 3 weeks in Intensive Care, Cleotilde died from infections caused by the many skin grafts. The doctors were unable to fight the infections with medications due to the amount of damage done. Zeke considered suing the hospital for malpractice, but thought that it wouldn't bring his beloved back, so why bother.

Bong had been born with an extremely acute eyesight and sense of smell. Additionally, his voice was so loud when he crowed, that it could be heard for miles. Bong was enormous for a rooster, weighing 15 pounds. He was hatched a big rooster from an oversize egg and had been fed beef scraps by the owner that raised him. The beef scraps made Bong grow bigger and stronger than a typical rooster could ever get. Feeding beef to roosters was a practice frowned upon in America, but the farmer who raised Bong was from Russia, where they knew the secrets of raising the biggest and strongest fowl. That farmer operated in America the same way he was taught in Russia.

Bong started his typical day on Zeke's farm by waking up after nice sleep in the henhouse with his hens and then crowing loudly from the top of henhouse to wake up the farm. He then headed to the cow barn for rodent duty. Zeke didn't need any cats on the farm, because in the mornings, Bong patrolled the barn, catching and eating all the mice and rats he could find. After his daily barn duty, Bong proceeded to do his favorite thing of all, watching over his kingdom. Bong would spend the entire day at the highest point of the farm, which was on top of one of the barn's ventilators. The barn was 90 feet tall and the ventilators were another 10 feet high, making a total height of 100 feet. From that elevation, Bong could see the entire huge farm. Bong would stand on the ventilator, slowly revolving in a circle, tirelessly looking and sniffing for danger. Few things missed being seen or smelled by Bong.

If a coyote sneaked into the sheep area, Bong flew down to the scene, slashed the coyote to death with his super sharp leg spurs and ate the coyote. If there were more than 1 coyote, it didn't matter. Bong would kill and eat them all. Zeke allowed Bong to eat whatever Bong killed as reward. Bong didn't really eat much typical fowl food, preferring to eat meat. Since Bong had been raised eating meat by the Russian guy, it was only natural that Bong continued to be a carnivore. The sheepdogs on the farm did what they could to protect the sheep and did a good job for the most part, but it was Bong's vigilance and savagery that saved the day most of the time. Once, a hawk had swooped down to grab a newly born lamb and Bong flew to the rescue, killing and eating the hawk. A wolf had escaped from a farmer down the road and had tried to get into the sheep's fenced area. Bong spotted the wolf as it started digging under the fence to wiggle through. Bong swooped down on the wolf and slashed it several times on the forehead until it ran away yiping with its tail between its legs. The wolf never came back.

Another time, one of the 2 sheepdogs became jealous of Bong and attacked Bong as he was in

the process of killing a coyote. The dog snapped at Bong, causing Bong to slash the dog, then the coyote. Bong went into a frenzy, clawing, pecking and slashing everything in sight. The dog came close to being killed along with the coyote. Zeke whistled for the injured dog, which gladly ran to him with its tail between its hind legs. Bong ate the freshly killed coyote, while the dog licked its wounds. Zeke warned the sheepdogs to stay clear of Bong in the future. Both dogs did.

When Zeke first brought his bull home, he had help from the guy, Dorian Little who had sold Zeke the bull. Dorian carefully backed the truck with the bull in the back to the bullpen's open gate. Zeke was supposed to shut the gate after the bull was inside the pen. The bull had other ideas, which bulls usually do. Before Zeke could close the gate, the bull rammed the back of the truck, moving it forward a couple feet. The bull slipped through the opening between the truck and the fence and began running through the barnyard! The bull was running down the dirt road on which it had only moments before had been transported, with Zeke and Dorian chasing behind it with lariats. The bull had great speed and it appeared that it was about to escape.

Bong had seen the commotion from his ventilator perch and zoomed down to the scene. Bong had landed on the bull's back and started to claw it and screech at it. The bull tried to buck Bong from its back by jumping and kicking. Bong spat on the back of the bull's head. The bull swung its head back and forth, trying to spear Bong with its sharp horns. Bong aggravated the bull into stopping its running just long enough for Zeke and Dorian to catch up and get 2 ropes on the bull. With Bong's help, they were able to guide the bull back to the bullpen and put it inside. Dorian was impressed by Bong's fearlessness and had offered to buy Bong from Zeke, but Zeke told Dorian that Bong was priceless. Dorian agreed. Zeke wouldn't sell Bong for anything.

Four years before, when one of Zeke's horses had bucked off Cleotilde while she was on her Sunday ride, Bong had flown down to fend off the horse that was trying to stomp Cleotilde with its hooves. Cleotilde was not very patient with the horses and against Zeke's wishes, used a riding crop to make the horses go faster. The horses always hated the abusive riding crop and disliked Cleotilde for using it on them. It was just a matter of time before one of the horses would throw her. In the battle with the horse, Bong had been kicked in the head a few times while Zeke pulled Cleotilde to safety. The rooster was none the worse for wear.

One evening on his perch, Bong was stubbornly maintaining his vigil, as thunder approached and the sky became really dark. A storm soon erupted with heavy rains and thunder. Zeke had begged Bong to come down during the storm, but the rooster had chosen to hold fast. Zeke had all the farm animals safely stowed in their various buildings and he went inside the house, keeping an eye on Bong through the kitchen window. Bong stayed up there as the rain pelted down on him, soaking him to the bone. Zeke was amazed at Bong's apparent fearlessness or just plain stupidity. Bong began crowing his loud rooster call just to hear himself above the noise of

the torrential rain. Zeke watched Bong as he crowed, wondering if Bong had gone insane. Bong continued crowing as the thunder became louder and louder. Zeke at the window had just taken a bite of a piece of beef jerky from a fresh batch that he had just made, when he heard the loud crack. Bong had been hit by a lightning bolt that charred the feathers off the top of his head. Bong fell off the ventilator structure, onto the roof of the barn and lay there twitching for a minute.

The lightning flash had caused Zeke's eyes to close for a millisecond. One moment he saw Bong on the ventilator and the next moment he was gone. Zeke rushed outside to see Bong lying there motionless on the roof of the barn. Zeke called repeatedly to Bong, who was unconscious. Another bolt of lightning hit the ventilator next to the one Bong was perched on, waking Bong from his state of delirium. The racket caused Bong to awaken and jump to his feet. Once he had regained his senses and figured out where he was, Bong flew down from the barn roof to the waiting arms of Zeke. Zeke cried and said to Bong, "Whew! I thought I lost you boy! You crazy rooster! What am I gonna do with you?" Bong licked Zeke's face with his thin leathery rooster tongue.

After Bong's near death adventure with the lightning, Zeke installed lightning rods on all his buildings, making sure they followed the electrical code, to protect his farm structures and his beloved rooster from future lightning strikes. Zeke then had the piece of mind that when Bong was up there on his ventilator lookout platform, he was a little safer. The added benefit of lightning rods is that their installation reduced his homeowner's insurance by 10%. Running the farm was a proposition where Zeke only broke even financially, so any breaks he could get on insurance or taxes were greatly appreciated.

Zeke's niece, Jilly and nephew, Jocko visited the farm often, being dropped off by Zeke's brother to spend the day on Zeke's property. One day while swimming in the pond, Jocko found himself on the verge of being dragged into the pond by a large old snapping turtle. Jocko had been wading in the shallow water on the edge of the pond when he encountered the turtle that he thought was a big rock. The turtle had a viselike grip on Jocko's swimming trunks. Jilly and Jocko started screaming at the top of their lungs. Jilly started beating on the turtle with a stick. Bong heard the screams and soared down to the pond. Bong landed in the water next to the turtle and slashed at the turtle's neck. The turtle released its grip on Jocko's trunks and Jocko went flying onto the grass from the force of being released from the pull of the turtle. The turtle was standing there on the edge of the pond with its neck bleeding, when Bong bit its head off and swallowed it. Zeke ran to the pond, brought the frantic kids back the house and gave them some beef jerky to quiet their nerves. Jocko was unhurt except for a bruise on the back of the thigh where the turtle had gripped his trunks. Zeke ran back to the pond where Bong was trying to get at the rest of the meat inside the turtle, which was encased by the hard shell. Zeke didn't want Bong to try eating the turtle's guts and heaved the turtle into the woods. Zeke gave Bong some

beef jerky instead.

Jilly and Jocko were fishing at the pond on a Saturday when Jilly got a huge bite on her line that was too much for her to handle. The line fed out quickly and because she had the bail on the reel set too tight, the rod was yanked out of her hands. Jilly screamed and Bong descended to the pond. Bong got there just in time to bite onto the fishing rod as it started being pulled out into the pond. Bong tugged with all his might, digging his claws into the mud on the pond's edge, as he dragged the rod away from the pond with the big fish still on the line. Bong gradually got some momentum going and soon began trotting along the grass with the rod in his beak, until the fish was pulled out of the pond. Bong ran back to the pond where Jilly was reaching for the fish to unhook it from the line. Bong snatched the fish from Jilly and ran away with it, breaking the line. Jilly yelled at Bong as he stood a distance from her defiantly eating the huge catfish.

One late winter, the kids were skating on the pond, when Jocko fell through the thin ice. Jilly was too jerky to get close enough to save Jocko and could only manage to shriek. Zeke heard the screams and headed for the pond with a ladder. Bong was faster to respond than Zeke and flew to the pond just as Jocko went under the icy water. Bong landed on the ice next to the hole and grabbed the collar on Jocko's winter coat. Bong wasn't strong enough to pull the 40-pound kid out of the water, but managed to keep Jocko's head above the water to prevent the kid from drowning. The ice started cracking under Bong's feet. Jocko screamed, thinking that he and the rooster were going under. From a location far enough from the hole to not fall through herself, while stretched out on her belly, Jilly managed to grab onto Bong's foot, to keep him from being pulled any further into the water by Jocko. Jilly heard the ice cracking under her and howled like a cat in heat. Zeke soon arrived on the scene with the ladder to rescue everyone.

Zeke really appreciated the way Bong helped to protect the cornfield from damage by animals. Bong enjoyed pitching in wherever he could. Bong was permitted to eat anything he killed, so it was always worth his effort. Bong especially enjoyed killing and eating the small deer that invaded the cornfield with their parents. On a particular fall day, Bong had noticed a herd of deer moving into the cornfield to practice their destructive ways. Bong had dove down to attack the smallest deer that was munching on an ear of corn. A buck rammed Bong with its antlers, expecting Bong to retreat, which Bong didn't. Bong pecked, scratched and clawed the buck's face, causing it to back away. A doe starting bumping Bong with its head and Bong clawed its face as well. Another doe sneaked up behind Bong and tried to stomp on him, missing as he stepped aside. Bong had a sixth sense that protected him from rear attack. Bong ran at another buck and clawed its face. The deer herd became too nervous from the ferocity and backed their way out of the cornfield. Bong was unable to snag a deer meal on that day, content to call it a draw.

One evening, Bong noticed some raccoons eating in the cornfield. Raccoons are small, but in

large numbers can inflict their share of damage. Bong counted 24 raccoons as he swooped in for the kill. Bong was a demented bird as he hacked and carved the raccoons. Some of the raccoons were able to get a few bites in on Bong here and there, but Bong was invincible. Bong killed all 24 raccoons, virtually wiping out the entire population of raccoons in the area. Zeke counted 8 dead raccoons in the cornfield on the next day. Bong had eaten so many raccoons on that evening that he had become sick of eating raccoons. Raccoons weren't that tasty to begin with and after overeating on them, they really left a bad taste in his mouth. After that incident when Bong killed a raccoon, he just left it lying there for the crows to eat.

Crows posed another problem in the cornfield that Bong solved by screeching his loud rooster call repeatedly, before flying down and attacking the crows. On the first day of crow patrol, Bong killed 11 crows. On the second day, he killed 9. On the third, he killed 12. After the third day of killing the crows, all Bong had to do was screech from the top of the barn ventilator and that would be enough. The crows flew away the instant they heard Bong's rooster crowing. After a week, the crows stayed away altogether. Crows liked eating the corn in the fields, but it wasn't worth dying over. The crows had to be content eating road kill out of the sight of Bong.

One morning Bong happened to be looking in the direction of the machine shed, where Zeke stored the tractors and other agricultural equipment. Mice were always getting into the older of the 2 tractors, making nests. That older tractor had a less than ideal system to start it where wires were in precarious locations related to the battery and fuel lines, which leaked a little. A mouse accidentally touched a primary starting wire against a gasoline-soaked part of the engine, starting a fire. Bong noticed the smoke coming from the machine shed and started to call out. Zeke had been in the outhouse taking a poop when he heard Bong. Zeke ran out of the outhouse without wiping his butt, looking up at Bong to determine where the rooster was looking. Bong was looking at the machine shed while crowing, indicating to Zeke where to go. Zeke ran to the shed and put out the tractor fire after 20 minutes of baling water from the horse trough. The tractor that caught fire was damaged beyond repair. Other equipment in the shed was also damaged, though restorable. Luckily, the good tractor was still operable.

Bong had been on his ventilator one day minding his daily business of being a lookout. The rooster wished Zeke would thank him more for all the wondrous events at the farm in which Bong had been so instrumental. Bong supposed that Zeke probably acknowledged the value that Bong provided on the farm; he just wasn't the type of person to show it. As long as Bong was able to do his thing up on the barn, it didn't matter. As he pondered, the rooster spotted something way off in the distance, requiring him to squint to see it clearly. He couldn't make out what it was. He was concentrating so intently, that he didn't notice the shadow of the bird floating high above. The shadow passed over Bong back and forth, numerous times.

Bong thought he saw a wolf in the distance, but couldn't be sure. Bong saw some kind of animal,

but it was too far away to be able to identify it. He was convinced that he had ridden the farm of those pesky wolves. They wouldn't dare come back. The shadow became larger and covered Bong's body. Was it a coyote? It appeared to be some kind of canine, either a wolf or a coyote. Bong supposed that it could also be somebody's loose dog. Bong felt the cooler air produced by the shadow and looked up to the sky. A hawk had launched itself into a dive and was on its way to making impact with Bong. By the time that Bong had snapped out of his intense concentration on what kind of canine he was seeing in the distance, it was too late. The hawk hit Bong at full speed, knocking the rooster off the ventilator. Bong plummeted 100 feet to the hard ground and landed on his head. He bounced once and then just lay there twitching in the dirt. The hawk swooped down to the rooster to get a closer look. Bong opened his eyes and attacked.

7. Teddy's Run



7. Teddy's Run

Teddy had been running for many hours continuously and figured he was probably still in the state of Florida. Teddy had made a bet with his friend Bruno that he (Teddy) would be able to run across the country from one coast to the other. Teddy had bet the old steamer trunk full of various valuables that Teddy's grandfather Adan had bequeathed to Teddy when Adan died 11 months before.

Bruno had said to Teddy that there was no way that he could run across the country. It was an impossible task. There was no way that anybody could possibly run that long, that far. Teddy told Bruno how he got the idea while watching the movie, "Forrest Gump" when all of a sudden Forrest started running for no reason. Bruno said it was just a movie. There was no way it was possible to run for 3000 miles without stopping. It was equivalent to running over 100 marathons. "There's no way!" Bruno said. Teddy said, "I can do it!"

Bruno had to put up the restored 1962 Cadillac that his father Jeff had given to Bruno for a wedding present. It's pretty ironic that Jeff had given Bruno the car for a wedding present, because Bruno's marriage to Tina had only lasted 2 years, and Bruno still had the car, 3 years later. The Cadillac was worth about \$40,000 and Teddy figured the steamer trunk was worth about 40-50 thousand dollars, so the bet was approximately equal.

On the day of the bet, Teddy had been with Bruno on a typical Saturday, when Teddy and Bruno were playing catch with a football, baseball or Frisbee that they would bring to Robert E. Lee Park.

Bruno saw a really old looking guy shuffling around the park with a big dog on a leash, and Teddy said, "Look at that guy! He probably can't run for more than a couple minutes! That dog can probably run farther than the guy!" Bruno said, "I bet you can't run as far as that guy!" Teddy said, "I bet I can run a lot farther than that freaking old guy. He looks like he is about to pass out as we are watching him right now!" Bruno said, "No way!" Teddy said, "I bet that I can run farther than that old guy!" Bruno said, "Ok, how far?" Teddy said, "I bet I can run across the state!" Bruno said, "There's no way you can run across the state!" Teddy said, "Oh yeah? I bet I can run across the country!" Bruno said, "There's no way that you can run across the country, let alone across the state, let alone across the county, let alone across the village, let alone just down the street! I'll bet my '62 caddy against your steamer trunk!"

Teddy laughed and laughed and laughed, causing the gum he was chewing to fly out of his mouth. Teddy laughed so hard that he farted. Then he laughed again and farted again, and a little poop came out with the fart. Teddy always laughed really hard when something was funny. Many times, he farted when he laughed excessively and sometimes he pooped while farting. Teddy didn't think it was unusual that he sometimes pooped when he farted, just as he didn't

think it was unusual that he farted while laughing. Teddy lived his life to the limit. He wasn't about to restrain himself in any way. Teddy didn't want to be bogged down by society's restrictions. If something was funny, Teddy laughed. If something was really funny, Teddy laughed hard and occasionally farted. If something were really, really funny, Teddy would poop when he laughed and farted. It was no big deal to him.

Teddy considered Bruno's bet. Teddy thought about his trunk of valuables and agreed to make the bet for Bruno's Cadillac. "Ok," said Teddy. "It's a bet!" Teddy and Bruno shook hands. The bet was on!

Teddy had started running on a Wednesday, heading west from Fort Lauderdale, trying to keep on a basically westerly heading. Teddy had a small map of the United States with an approximate route highlighted with a yellow highlighter.

Teddy bought a new pair of sneakers at the local Walmart. He brought with him a Visa credit card, because Visa was accepted pretty much everywhere, as opposed to American Express. Teddy figured all he needed was sneakers, shorts, tee shirt and light jacket to be able to run in any weather. Teddy started running in April in Fort Lauderdale. The weather was nice, with temperatures about 65 to 80 throughout the day. The jacket Teddy was wearing had a hood and was supposedly rain resistant.

Teddy wasn't the most athletically inclined character throughout his whole life, so it is probably an unusual concept that someone like him would attempt to run across the country. He didn't care.

Hours into the run, Teddy was starting to get a little hungry and decided to get some Burger King action. Teddy really liked the burgers at Burger King and ordered 9 of them, because he was so hungry. Teddy considered if it was too much food to eat and then start running again right after eating, but he didn't care. Teddy didn't believe in such restrictions. Teddy always went swimming right after eating, sometimes eating while he was swimming. If he barfed, he barfed. So what?

Teddy went into the Burger King, sweating and stinking from his long running session and the employees behind the counter looked and stared at him.

Teddy didn't realize how strange he looked at the time. His face was beet red. He was sweating. He stunk like poop, because as he was running 3 hours before, he accidentally pooped in his underwear in his shorts. Teddy didn't think he smelled that bad, because he possessed that human trait of not being able to notice how bad you smell, when you actually stink. It must be a thing that your body does to protect your nose from getting overwhelmed by your own stink. In addition to pooping in his underwear/shorts, and being sweaty, Teddy had fallen 4 or 5 times. He

couldn't remember exactly how many. When he fell, he tripped on something, and because he always ran on the gravelly shoulder of the road or off the shoulder, in the dirt and grass, he fell headlong and landed on his face, getting dirt and other filth on his face.

Teddy made a pretty strange sight to the employees of the Burger King when he stood there looking at them red faced and reeking. Beth was the associate who took his order. Beth asked Teddy if he wanted extra ketchup with his 9 burgers and as Teddy responded, "Yes!" his dry throat made a scary growling sound, like a frog that had been smoking for 5 or 6 years. Initially, Beth was startled by the sound Teddy's voice made when he grunted his "yes" to her question. After 11 years of working in fast food, Beth had seen just about everything there was to see, or so she thought. Teddy genuinely scared Beth, even though he was not a very scary looking man, generally.

Teddy had a shabby beard growth. Teddy was one of those guys who gets a 5 o'clock shadow at 3 o'clock. Normally Teddy shaved every day, sometimes twice. With the running adventure, he was going for broke - no shaving washing, showering, etc. It was a pretty disgusting idea, actually. Teddy decided he would run as far as he could each day until he was exhausted, and then find a place to sleep the night somewhere off the road in the weeds or bushes or some other place out of sight, to avoid having something unfortunate happen to him. Teddy had a little backpack with a minimal sleeping bag to sleep in comfortably when he wanted to sleep.

Teddy cleared his throat and said, "Sorry. Yes!" again, to make sure Beth understood him. She said, "Ok!" and tossed a handful of Heinz ketchup packets into the bag with the 9 burgers. Beth handed the bag and large water to Teddy and he said, "Thanks!" Teddy's voice made that smoking frog croaking sound again, startling Beth again. Teddy cleared his dry throat again, and said, "Sorry!" again, and said, "Thanks!" again.

Teddy walked from the Burger King to a grassy spot with some trees to have his meal. Teddy was surprised how hungry he was, and wolfed the 9 burgers down, without drinking any water. He then drank the huge cup of water, which was about a quart of water. Then Teddy lay down on the grass to digest his meal. Within 4 minutes, Teddy started to feel queasy, and thought to himself, "Oh no!" He rolled onto his side and barfed out the entire 9 burgers and quart of water. "Great! Luckily I brought a credit card!" Teddy thought.

Teddy went back into the Burger King and ordered another 9 burgers from Beth again. "You're back already?" she asked. "You must really like our food!" she said. Teddy said, "Yes, I love it!" Of course, his voice had that smoking frog croaking sound again. Teddy cleared his throat again and said, "Sorry!" and said, "Yes, I love it!" again. He told her the story of how he had been running for a while and was excessively hungry and he had eaten the 9 burgers he just bought too quickly, and had barfed them out onto the grass.

Beth sympathized with Teddy and gave him the second set of 9 burgers and water for free. Teddy croaked, "Thanks!" in the frog voice again. He cleared his throat and said, "Sorry!" and thanked her again. Beth said, "No problem. By the way, you stink!" Teddy said, "I know!"

Teddy left the Burger King and found a new place to eat his 9 burgers and water. He tried to eat the burgers a little slower the second time, and drank the water gradually, as he ate the burgers. He rolled over to take a snooze, but after 3 minutes, he barfed again. "Argh!" Teddy exclaimed.

Teddy went back to the Burger King and bought 9 fish sandwiches, which Beth made him pay for, and he left.

Teddy found another grassy location in a tree growth where he would be concealed, and consumed the 9 fish sandwiches and water over a period of about 35 minutes. Finally, Teddy actually felt pretty good, and rolled over to take a nice snooze, being very drowsy.

Teddy had started running earlier that day at 6 am on that Wednesday, so it was about 9 pm at night when he fell asleep. Teddy slept through the night, through the next day, Thursday, and woke up on Friday at noon, to the sound of a garbage truck in the distance, emptying the dumpsters for the Burger King. "Whew!" thought Teddy, "I really needed that sleep!"

Teddy realized how out of shape he was, and how crazy he was to attempt to run across the country, but Teddy wanted that Cadillac at all costs. That Cadillac was the same year, model and color of the car that Tubbs drove on the Miami Vice TV show. Teddy simply had to have that car. He would show Bruno. Teddy convinced himself that he would run across the country, and get Bruno's car, or die trying.

Bruno didn't want Teddy to have any problems with his quest of running across the country, Teddy being Bruno's best friend. Teddy and Bruno kept in contact with each other through the run via cell phones. Every several hours, Bruno called Teddy's cell phone to make sure Teddy was ok. Bruno called Teddy that Friday, and Teddy answered. Bruno said, "Where the hell were you? Are you ok?" Teddy said he was fine, and that he had been sleeping for a while. "A while? Where were you yesterday?" asked Bruno. Teddy said he had been sleeping, apparently all day. "Holy cow! You must have been really tired!" "I was!" said Teddy. "Man!" said Bruno. "I know!" said Teddy. "I fell asleep on the grass!" said Teddy. "Nice!" said Bruno.

Teddy and Bruno chatted for a few more minutes, then said goodbye. Teddy headed back onto the road to start running again, amazed that his feet didn't have any blisters yet. "It must be the good fitting sneakers," thought Teddy. He didn't think it was possible to get good fitting sneakers from Walmart, but he lucked out.

Teddy had been running a couple hours when he reckoned that he had entered the state of

Alabama. All of a sudden, Teddy heard what sounded like panting approaching him from the rear. "What the hell?" Teddy asked himself. "What could that be?"

When Teddy set out on his mission to run across the country, he didn't really think about what he may encounter along the way. He figured he would wing it, come what may. What could possibly happen?

A wily coyote had caught scent of Teddy and was now in pursuit of him. Teddy looked behind him and saw the approaching coyote. "Oh no!" screamed Teddy. The coyote growled. Teddy said, "Oh no!" again. Teddy reached into his backpack and removed the BB gun pistol from the small pouch in the front.

Teddy fired the gun's entire load of BB's at the rampaging coyote, hitting the crazed canine several times. The coyote felt the stings of the BB's, and must have thought to itself that it wasn't worth it to attack the guy.

The coyote stopped pursuing Teddy and ran off into the weeds. Teddy thought it was a good idea Bruno had to bring that BB gun, for just such a situation. Teddy immediately reloaded the gun.

Teddy called Bruno to tell him of the narrow escape with the coyote. Bruno said, "It's a good thing I told you to bring that BB gun!" Teddy said, "Yeah!"

Teddy continued running for another hour when he spotted a pile of something ahead. As Teddy got closer to the pile, he concluded the pile was a dead skunk and that he would have to think quickly. As Teddy hoped to avoid the skunk by running around to the right along the dirt shoulder, something unexpected happened.

A rat had started feeding on the skunk carcass, and scurried toward the dirt shoulder as it spied Teddy approaching. At the same instant, unseen by Teddy and the rat, a hawk had been descending at a rapid rate toward the rat, in the hopes of grabbing the rat for a quick and easy meal. As Teddy veered to avoid the skunk per his plan, he inadvertently entered the flight path of the hawk. The hawk was unable to slow down enough to make a correction in its dive, and smashed into Teddy's left hand, as Teddy was swinging it upward, as part of his jogging stride.

The hawk's right talon slashed Teddy's left hand index finger knuckle, drawing blood from the wound. "Ouch!" cried Teddy. The hawk had altered its flight path just after impacting with Teddy's hand, swooping upward to the sky. The rat disappeared into the underbrush.

In all the confusion, Teddy's left foot had stepped on the dead skunk, popping the bloated body, raising such a tremendous stench into the air that it caused Teddy to vomit uncontrollably. Teddy jogged off to the side of the road and sat down on a concrete headwall of a drainage pipe that crossed under the road. "Man, what a stink!" said Teddy.

Teddy's left sneaker reeked from the skunk, making Teddy throw up again and again into the drainage ditch. Teddy removed both sneakers and threw them into the drainage ditch. He bandaged his left hand with a bandage from the first aid kit in the backpack.

Teddy concluded that he would immediately need new sneakers from Walmart, and since there were Walmart stores nearly everywhere, he was able to buy new ones after only 20 minutes of barefooted walking. In the Walmart, Teddy encountered a few dirty looks and upturned noses from shoppers and employees, due to his stink and appearance. Teddy didn't mind, thinking his money was as good as everybody else's was. In addition to the sneakers, Teddy also bought more BB's and CO2 cartridges for his BB gun pistol.

Teddy couldn't get the exact same sneakers with which he had started running. They were a few dollars more than the last ones. They still fit nice, though. Teddy put on the new sneakers outside the store and continued on his running quest.

Teddy was surprised at the all adventures he had in the short time that he had been running across the country, but figured it was just part of the game. He had to win Bruno's caddy in the bet. What else could possibly happen?

To help alleviate some of the boredom of running, Teddy started thinking about something that happened to him in elementary school. He was in 6th grade Science class and they were watching the teacher performing an experiment. The teacher asked for a volunteer to add the chemical from a test tube into the test tube that the teacher was holding. Since Teddy had always been good at messing with chemicals, he volunteered. Teddy had brought a chemical from his chemistry set at home and had it hidden in his pocket. When the teacher wasn't looking, Teddy added the chemical to the tube that the teacher had handed him. When the teacher told Teddy to add the chemical from his tube into the teacher's tube a huge explosion occurred. The flash from the explosion burned off the eyebrows and hair of both the teacher and Teddy.

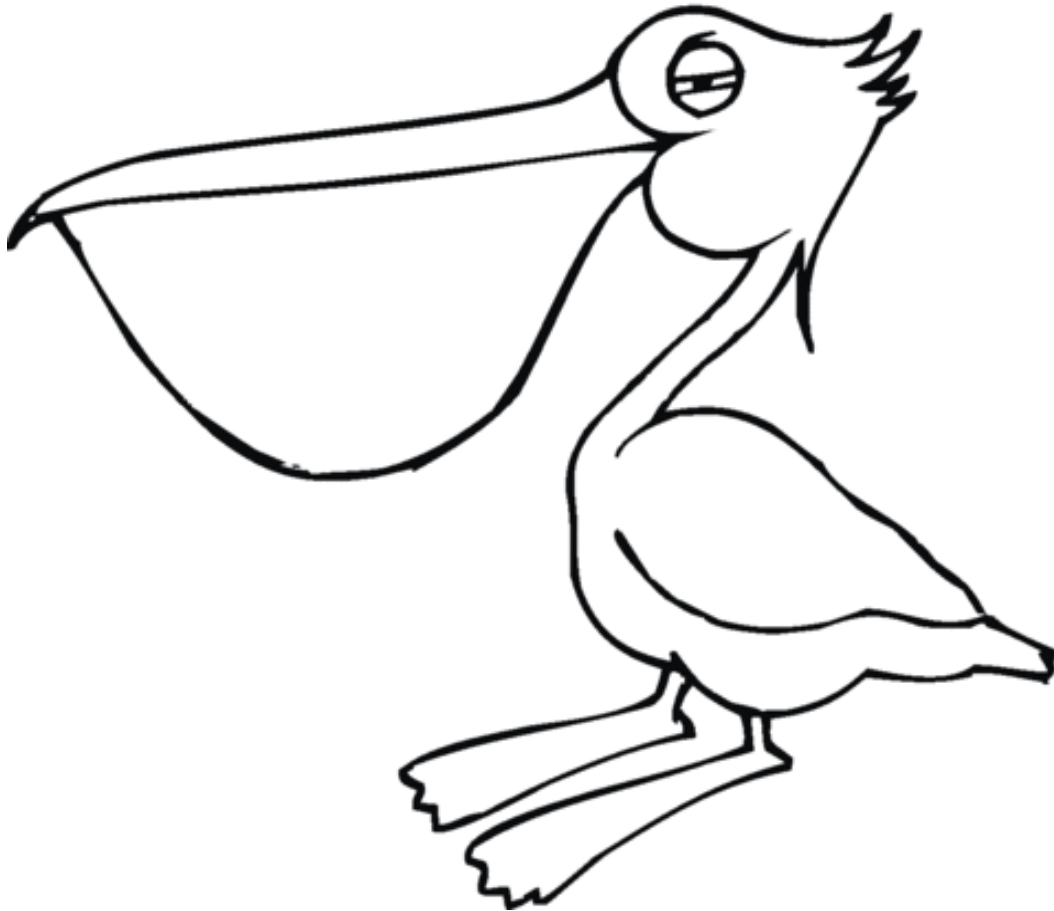
The class erupted into uncontrollable laughter. The teacher couldn't figure out what happened. Teddy hadn't intended on losing his eyebrows and hair from his prank, but it was still funny to get the teacher laughed at like that. Nobody liked that teacher because he gave tough quizzes every day.

Another time in elementary school, when they were playing dodge ball, Teddy threw the ball at the gym teacher and hit him in the balls. Then Teddy ran after the ball and hit the teacher again in the balls. Soon all the kids were hitting the gym teacher in the balls. They were all getting even with the gym teacher for hitting them in the balls when he was teaching them a lesson in how not to play dodge ball. They hit the gym teacher in the balls so many times that he was crying when they were done. The entire gym class got detention, but it was worth it.

Teddy's proudest moment in elementary school occurred when he was in 5th grade and won the school spelling bee, beating every kid in the school, including the 6th graders. His prize was a nice hardcover dictionary. His 2nd proudest moment was when he was in 6th grade and won the school spelling bee again, once again beating every kid in the school. The prize for the 2nd spelling bee victory was a nice hardcover thesaurus. Teddy thought about how when somebody was still a kid, they never knew what they might become when they grow up. They might become a writer, an astronaut, a president of a major corporation or a simple fool attempting to run across the country to win his friend's Cadillac.

The 17 year-old girl was excited about passing her driving test and was busily texting her friends the good news as she sped along the road. She was one of those idiots who believed they could do anything they wanted while driving a car and still be capable of driving perfectly. She was in the process of entering the long name of a new friend whose name wasn't yet a favorite on her phone. She was holding the steering wheel with her left hand while intently texting with her right hand and didn't notice her car swerving into the shoulder where Teddy was running. She heard a loud thump and looked up to see Teddy on the hood of the car.

8. Axon's Prize



8. Axon's Prize

Axon didn't know why he liked shiny objects, he just did. For as long as the pelican could remember, things that sparkled had caught his eye. Axon had quite the collection of twinkly things stashed in the large nest of the dead oak tree that was located about a mile inland from the boat marina there in Monterey, California. The nest was located in the highest branch of the tree, overhanging the Pacific Ocean. In Axon's nest were a man's gold ring, a woman's gold ring, a brass money clip, a stainless steel Zippo lighter, a gold chain, a pair of titanium eyeglasses, a brass door knob, a silver cream container, various stainless steel nails, screws, nuts and bolts, 4 complete place settings of gold plated forks, knives, spoons, cups, saucers, soup bowls and plates, a set of brass keys on a key ring, a titanium padlock, a nickel plated pocketknife, a titanium ballpoint pen, a gold tie clip, a brass handle from a cabinet, a brass hinge, a titanium drill bit, a copper plated frying pan, sauce pan, and Dutch oven, a titanium coffee mug, a titanium thermos bottle, numerous gold and silver earrings, various pieces of silverware, 2 brass ship's compasses, hundreds of coins, a pair of silver plated sunglasses, a gold plated hairbrush, a gold plated comb, a nickel plated pair of scissors, and a brass candle holder.

Axon found the man's gold ring lying on top of a handrail mounted to a boardwalk. Locals had been fishing from that boardwalk that encircled the marina for decades. The man had taken the wedding ring off his finger and placed it on the handrail for only a moment, to wash the fish stink from his hands. Axon had been in the sky circling the boat marina, looking down for something to eat or to add to his shiny object collection, when the man had placed the ring on the rail. Axon had spotted the glint of the ring and swooped down to the boardwalk to get it. The man was cleaning his hands from one of the many faucets mounted to the marina's boardwalk. The man's back was turned for a second, when Axon picked the ring off the handrail and flew away with it. The man turned back to where he left his ring, as he was drying his hands with a towel, but saw no ring. Axon thought nothing of picking up that man's ring, which he had probably been wearing on his finger for 30 years. Axon casually dropped the ring into his nest and flew back to the marina.

That was Axon's daily life. When he was hungry, he dove down into the water by the marina and scooped fish into his huge beak-pouch. If he spied something shiny while he was there, he snatched that object instead. A pelican's pouch holds a gallon of water or the equivalent volume of food or other objects. Sometimes, Axon would follow boats or yachts out of the marina into the Pacific Ocean and find his objects on those vessels as they navigated or were anchored.

A woman had been on her yacht heading out to sea when she decided to have her wedding ring cleaned by one of her yacht staff. The woman had removed the ring and her helper had placed the ring into the ultrasonic ring cleaner. As the ring sat in the machine being cleaned, Axon had by flying by, spotting the ring in the machine with his sharp eyesight. Axon flew down to get the

ring and to his surprise was met by resistance from 2 crewmembers on the boat. The crew members saw the pelican diving and thought Axon was attacking them. One of the crew swatted a long-handled pool-cleaning type net at Axon, as the other crewmember twirled a length a rope in the air trying to whip Axon.

Axon was too agile a flyer to be hit by either of the weapons that were been swung at him, ducking and dodging the panicked yacht staff. The woman whose ring was being cleaned was shrieking, "Kill it! Kill it!" The senior of the 2 crewmembers said, "We're trying!" Axon led the 2 crew people toward the front of the yacht, to distract them away from the location of the ring being cleaned on the rear sundeck. Axon quickly swung around to the back of the boat toward the ring in the machine. The woman screamed, "It's going to get me! Help!" Axon buzzed the woman's hat, knocking it off her head, and then he turned to the ring-cleaning machine that was on a table next to her. Axon knocked the machine off the table, causing the ring to spill onto the floor, enabling easier access to his prize. Axon picked up the ring with the tip of his beak, flipped it into the pouch and flew away. The woman yelped, "That pelican stole my wedding ring!"

On a sunny afternoon, a man was on the boardwalk buying a hot dog, fries and Coke from one of the fast food stands located on the boardwalk, when he reached into his pocket to get the money to pay for the food. The man didn't believe in carrying a wallet, because in the past he had gotten into the habit of carrying too much stuff in his old wallet, causing him to have back problems from carrying the wallet in his back pocket. He gave his old kangaroo skin wallet to his nephew, and bought himself a money clip and put only paper money and his driver's license in the clip. The clip occupied far less space in his back pocket than his old wallet had and his back problems went away. Always having stylish things, the man had decided on a nice heavy solid brass money clip. The clip was coated with 3 layers of polyurethane, guaranteeing that the clip's shiny brass finish would last forever. As the man produced the gleaming money clip from his pocket, the brilliant sun had caught the clip just right, reflecting into Axon's eyes as he cruised overhead. Axon determined that he must have that thing that was so shiny. Axon plummeted to the location, intent on getting the shimmering article.

As Axon approached the man, the man heard the wind passing through the wings of the great bird, startling the man into looking upward to see what it was. The sun glared into the man's eyes, blinding him to the approach of Axon. Axon plucked the man's money clip with \$521 and the man driver's license from the man's loose grip and flew away. The man shook his fist in the air, cursing obscenities at Axon, upsetting a woman and her 2 children who were buying ice cream at the food stand next to the man. The man was unable to pay for his food and the vendor took the food back. When Axon returned to his nest, he stood on the edge of it and separated the money clip from the money and driver's license. Axon dropped the clip into the nest and dropped the rest into the ocean.

At the county fair, a man standing by the chainsaw-carving guy, prepared to light himself another cigarette. The man already had lung cancer but was too stupid to quit smoking. He told himself that he wished he never started smoking those stupid cigarettes in the first place. Axon had been cruising back and forth over the fair scanning for something special to add to his collection. He was hungry and wanted something to eat first. He spied a half-eaten hotdog on the ground next to the Yak Woman. The woman probably discarded the hotdog, because she was eating a pepperoni pizza at the time, so she probably chucked the hotdog on the ground after only eating half of it. Axon fluttered to the ground and flipped the hotdog into his beak pouch. While he was standing there swallowing the hotdog, the Yak Woman tossed 2 pieces of pizza in Axon's direction and he opened his large bill to catch the offering. He easily caught the pizza and swallowed it. The Yak Woman laughed and thought the pelican was neat the way it caught the pizza and tossed to Axon half a meatball sub that she had started eating. He easily caught that food in his pouch, then swallowed it. The Yak Woman laughed again and threw Axon an apple and an avocado and he caught and swallowed those objects. Axon felt full and flew away from the Yak Woman, who was still laughing.

As Axon took to the air, he noticed the man who was preparing to light the cigarette, pulling a shiny Zippo lighter from his shirt pocket. Axon wanted that lighter. As the man lit the lighter, Axon flew at him just as the flaming lighter reached the cigarette. Axon plucked the flaming lighter from the man's fingers, and accidentally dropped it into the man's hair, starting the man's hair on fire. Axon lifted the still flaming lighter from the man's newly bald head and dropped the lighter on the ground, causing the lighter to close and put out the flame. Axon picked up the lighter and flew away. The man screamed to the people around him, "Did you see that? That pelican just burned all the hair off my head!" The chainsaw-carving guy saw what had happened and said, "Yeah, I saw it! It was the darnedest thing! That crazy pelican!"

It was the girl's 13th birthday, a special one in her family, where the birthday girl receives a very special gift on the occasion. The girl's entire family entourage, including aunts, uncles, etc. was at the celebration. The party was being held on a bluff overlooking the ocean, not too far from Axon's nest home. It was at about the time that Axon had headed out of his nest looking for something to eat and something glittery. He flew out to the ocean to a fishing boat where a party of fishermen were bringing in their catch and were cleaning the fish on their way back in to the marina. The men were tossing the fish guts out the back of the boat, where seagulls were already swarming on the water surface, eating the guts as fast as the fishermen could heave them. Axon swooped down to the boat and grabbed one of the whole fish from the fish cleaning station, flipped it into his beak-pouch and flew around for another pass. A guy yelled at him. Axon landed on the water among the gulls and snacked on some fish guts as the fishermen went back to their work. On Axon's attack run, he had noticed one of the fishermen wearing some shiny titanium eyeglasses. Axon took to the air and made a beeline for the man, hitting him in the side of face with his beak, knocking off the man's glasses. Axon picked the glasses off the deck as the

man slashed at one of Axon's wings with his fish-cleaning knife. Axon flew away with only some missing feathers.

As Axon turned back toward land, he saw a flash of shiny yellow metal at the party for the 13-year old girl. Axon flew to the party as an elderly woman was placing a lovely gold chain with a cross hanging from it on the girl's neck. The old woman said to the girl, "Treasure this forever. My mother gave it to me on my 13th birthday!" The girl said, "I will gammy!" Axon soared down to the woman and girl in time to grab the gold chain from the woman's hand and flew away with it. The girl screamed and burst into tears. The elderly woman did the same. A man threw a piece of cake at Axon. Axon nonchalantly flew to his nest and deposited the eyeglasses and gold chain on the pile of treasures. Axon particularly liked the gleam of the gold chain.

One afternoon, a man was out alone on his cabin cruiser floating freely and had just finished eating breakfast, leaving the food remnants and dishes on the sundeck to clean up later. He had just gone through the auto-locking door that led below deck to the bathroom to take a shower. The man had been meaning to add that door to the list of things that needed fixing on the boat. The doorknob was a little jiggly, almost coming off in his hand when the man operated it. The toilet kept plugging and the shower started draining slowly, among other issues on the list. The man had been out to sea an hour from shore, far enough to get into the currents. Axon had been soaring high in the sky when he spotted the man's boat out there in the ocean. Axon had noticed the large, partially carved country ham sitting out on the table and decided to investigate. Axon didn't see anyone around, so it would likely be an easy thing to get himself a huge breakfast. It didn't matter to Axon if there were people present or not when he performed his exploits. When no one was around, it was irresistible.

Axon landed on the table and ate everything on it, including the 8 pounds remaining of the country ham, most of a loaf of bread, 3/4 of a cherry pie and a container of milk. As Axon ate the buttermilk biscuits, his eyes caught a glimpse of the brass doorknob on the door that led below deck. The doorknob was really shining from the clear sky's sunrays on it and Axon wanted it. He trotted over to the door and started working on the jiggly doorknob. After 4 minutes, he had the brass doorknob off in his beak. Axon also took the silver cream container from the breakfast table and flew away from the boat. When the man finished with his shower, he reached for the handle of the door that led back upstairs to the main deck. The handle came off in his hand! When Axon had removed the door handle, he had also removed with the handle the part that went inside the door, which operated the lock. The man was unable to get back through the locked door! The man and his boat drifted out to sea and capsized in a storm, drowning the man.

Once when Axon was on his way back from the marina to his nest, he observed way out in the ocean what looked like a yacht, slowly drifting. Axon dropped off the beak-pouch full of various stainless steel nails, screws, nuts and bolts that he had found in a toolbox, next to a carpenter who

was working on the boardwalk. The carpenter had gone to the snack stand for lunch when Axon helped himself to the man's shiny hardware. Axon flew from his nest to the yacht out in the ocean. The yacht was a lot farther away than Axon had thought, taking an hour for him to get there. The yacht was abandoned! Apparently, the yacht and its former inhabitants had been the victims of pirate attack. Pirate attack was very common in that part of the world, with the Coast Guard unable to keep up with the number of crimes. The pirates typically boarded the yachts with guns, took all the valuables, kidnapped everyone on board for ransom money and left the yacht floating in the ocean. Axon couldn't believe his eyes at the bounty before him.

The people on board were probably just about to eat dinner when they were boarded by the pirates. The dinner table on the back of the yacht was set with an enormous bounty of the finest food, a gold plated pitcher and 4 complete place settings of gold plated forks, knives, spoons, cups, saucers, soup bowls and plates! Axon started in on the food, beginning his feast with the 4 T-bone steaks and mashed potatoes. Then he ate the baby green beans, homemade stuffing, portabella mushrooms, 8 ears of sweet corn and the entire chocolate 3-layer cake with his preferred butter cream frosting. After napping for 3 hours, Axon began the task of transporting the gold plated booty home to his nest. Axon was only able to fit 1 plate and the associated 2 forks, 2 knives, 2 spoons, cup, saucer and soup bowl per place setting in his pouch, so that he had to make 4 trips to get the 4 complete place settings home. At 2 hours per round trip, Axon decided to leave behind the gold plated pitcher. It would have been too much. When Axon was finally back at his nest again with his gold plated stuff, he slept for the next whole day, being so tired from flying for so many hours, which he wasn't used to.

The guy at the storage facility had just pulled the '63 Corvette into the garage he had rented and was about to put the titanium padlock on the steel door. The man had inherited the car from his grandfather, but had no place to store it at the moment. He had just moved into an apartment when his grandfather died and had willed his car collection to the many descendants, including the man. The man had always loved that Corvette and had coveted it when his grandfather still owned it, getting to drive it often. All the man could do was rent the storage garage until he could find a better place to put the car. The man put the padlock on the lock hasp with the key still in the lock along with his set of keys. The set of keys included keys to his apartment, his car keys, the key for the front door of the store at which he worked and 7 other keys for various locks. As the man was about to activate the lock and remove the keys, he remembered something his grandfather had told him about the car and hesitated for a moment.

Axon spotted the glimmering padlock and keys from his cruising altitude and dove for the attack. Axon snatched the padlock off the lock hasp with the set of keys dangling from it and flew away. "Oh no!" shrieked the man. "Come back!" Axon didn't look back as the man pulled a gun from under his jacket. The man fired 3 times at Axon, shooting a hole through his right wing. Even with a hole in his wing and fewer feathers, Axon was able to keep flying, due to the enormous

size of his wings, at over 8 feet tip to tip. Luckily, the hole in the wing didn't damage anything vital. Axon flew to the nest and dropped the lock and keys into it.

The Boy Scout had just bought the nickel-plated pocketknife and couldn't wait to use it. He was standing with the rest of his troop on the boardwalk getting a snack at the snack stand. The man standing next to the Boy Scout was ordering a coffee, burger and fries. The Boy Scout ordered a hot dog and wanted to use his new knife to cut it in half to give the other half to one of his troop mates. The scout pulled out his knife and opened it, as Axon fell from the sky. The boy cut the hot dog and gave half to his friend. The man ordering the coffee, burger and fries pulled his titanium ballpoint pen from his vest pocket to sign the credit card receipt. Axon arrived, and he grabbed and then swallowed the half hot dog the Boy Scout was still holding.

The man screamed and threw the hamburger and fries at Axon, which Axon caught in his beak-pouch and swallowed. The man threw his cup of coffee at Axon, missing. Axon didn't want the coffee anyway. The scout yelled at the pelican and stabbed at it with his knife, missing. Axon turned and grabbed the boy's knife. The man stabbed at Axon with his pen, also missing the pelican. Axon grabbed the man's pen. Axon also grabbed the man's gold tie clip. The man was so enraged that he threw his hat at Axon. Axon flew to the hat that landed on the boardwalk, took a large smelly poop on it and flew away. The Boy Scout cried. The man threw the ketchup and mustard bottles from the snack stand at the airborne Axon. The ketchup bottle hit a woman in the face who screamed. The mustard bottle landed on a muscular sunbathing man who took chase.

What Axon really wanted in his collection of shiny objects more than anything else was one of those titanium fishing reels used by the guys who fished out on the ocean. From his floating altitude above, Axon would watch the reels twinkling in the sun as the fishermen turned the handle. Axon sometimes flew back and forth all day observing, when he came upon a couple chartered fishing boats that were packed with men using those reels. Axon was so enamored by those reels and he didn't know why. All he knew was that he wanted one of those incredible sparkle machines. The only trouble was that the fishing reel was usually attached to a fishing rod, which was being held onto for dear life by a fisherman. The rod/reel assembly was a heavy ponderous object and would be difficult, if not impossible to fly away with, assuming he was even able to find one that was accessible. Axon spent his days acquiring food, picking up the random shiny object and always looking for the greatest prize of the fishing reel.

Many times Axon had observed rod/reel units on display at the marina for sale or rent, but never a pretty titanium reel alone. He had tried many times to lift and fly away with one of those cumbersome rod/reel assemblies, but was always unable to, due to the weight.

Once when Axon had located an unattended rod/reel on a fishing charter, he managed to grab onto the tip of the rod, and had started to fly off with it, but a deck hand had run to the scene in

time to grab the end of the long handle and yank it from the grip of the pelican. Axon had noticed that the rod/reel was excessively heavy and he pondered if he would have been able to escape with it and get it back to his nest. He would have tried.

Another time Axon was observing a family fishing with those heavy-duty rod/reel packages and when the mother of the family had gotten a large fish on, the fish had pulled the rod/reel from her hands. The rod/reel went flying out into the ocean and was dragged along the surface of the water at great speed. Axon had flown down to the water, grabbed onto the fishing line just ahead of the rod and tried to lift it out of the water. The fish that was on the line made a great surge, causing the line to snap. The rod/reel sank to the bottom of the sea. Axon was left with the broken line in his beak, which was then stripped out by the fish still on the line, causing a groove to be cut into his beak by the force of the line.

Axon watched a man repairing reels at a worktable on the boardwalk outside the Tackle Shack. Axon had waited and waited for the man to leave the reels unattended, but he didn't. From his perch, he could comfortably watch the man repairing reels for many hours, waiting for the right moment. The moment never came. The reel repairman guarded the reels closely, always bringing them back into the building. He never left them unattended. He probably didn't want passersby to help themselves to the reels, not realizing the real danger was actually a pelican with a penchant for shiny objects. Axon hoped for a chance to grab one of those reels, but had to give up on that possibility there at the marina. The opportunity for acquiring a stunning titanium reel would come someday, probably in some other location. Axon would never give up.

Axon headed out to sea one morning and spotted a cabin cruiser with a smaller boat tied to the back. The smaller boat had some fishing gear loaded into it, including rods and what looked like titanium reels. Axon thought he might be able to fly away with a rod/reel that had no line out into the water. It might be lighter that way. He flew down and landed in the smaller boat. A person was still loading the smaller boat with items from the cabin cruiser. The person was carrying a cooler to the smaller boat and noticed Axon tugging at one of the rod/reel combos. The person put the cooler down and started yelling at Axon. Axon struggled, but managed to pull the rod/reel out of the boat into the water. The person threw a life jacket at Axon, he ducked and it landed in the water. Axon tried to snap the rod where the reel was connected to it by violently lifting it up and down in the water. He heard the rod cracking; it was working!

The shark was attracted by the splashing water and the shadows it saw floating above. Axon continued slapping the rod in the water until it finally snapped. Axon had the reel! The shark rapidly ascended to the floating, splashing object. The person in the boat yelled, "Shark!" Axon got a good grip on the reel and began flapping his wings to take flight. The shark tasted the essence of bird in the water. Axon and the reel lifted from the surface of the water just as the shark's open mouth burst into view.

9. Alfonso's Fishing



9. Alfonso's Fishing

Alfonso awoke at 4:30 am on that Monday morning, and was heading out to sea, the Mediterranean Sea, to be exact. He had been waking up at 4:30 for as long as he could remember. In fact, he thinks he may have been born at 4:30 am; he would have to look at his birth certificate. It didn't matter. He was sailing out of the little inlet of his fishing village of Zica, Italy in the fishing boat that he inherited from his father, Rico. As far back as Alfonso could remember, all the men of his village had been fishermen. It was a smelly occupation, but it was a living. Not everyone was lucky enough to work in a flower shop.

Fishing is one of the few occupations in the world that is always in demand. People enjoy eating myriad varieties of fish, shellfish, crabs, mollusks, shrimp, eels, squid and lobster. Fishing is one of the most dangerous occupations of all, depending on the conditions in which the fishermen are fishing. The bold king crab fishermen who fish in the frigid waters off Alaska, in the Pacific Ocean, endure great peril, fighting the ice that accumulates on the huge crabbing cages and ship decks. Similarly, the fishermen of New England must endure the fierce cold waters of the North Atlantic.

The Atlantic Ocean has been known to generate seas as high as 25 to 30 feet on a regular basis, incredibly endangering the daring vessels and crews who chanced travel on the waters. Fishermen on the great oceans of the earth feel that the oceans only tolerate the fishermen who dare to traverse them. No mere man or group of men can control the seas, just as no mere human can control the clouds, rain, heat, cold or the extraordinary ice ages that the planet has endured over the centuries.

Alfonso had a good feeling about that day, that it would be a lucky day. Most days out of the 7 days a week that Alfonso worked, he felt the same way when he woke up. It was just another day at the salt mines. Of course, he meant just another day at the salty sea. On that particular day though, Alfonso had a feeling that he was going to hit it big somehow. Alfonso's style of fishing was to lay out long heavy duty nets within a stretch of water that he and his crew would prepare by chumming the water. It was one of many ways to fish; the fishing style chosen was determined by the size of the boat used. Depending on the boat used, fishing could have an initial huge investment. Some fishermen fished on boats owned by someone else and they received a portion of the take. By Alfonso owning his own boat, he was able to keep all the money from the sale of the fish. He then divvied out the money to his crew according to their status. The issue with owning a boat was the obvious one of maintaining the complex vessel's many systems. Salt water was brutal on those systems.

Alfonso had a crew of 6 guys in addition to himself, making a lucky number of 7 men, always battling nature for their very existence. Alfonso was 27 years old at the time that his father Rico died, at which time Alfonso inherited the great fishing vessel, christened Mary Excelsior by

Alfonso's grandfather Ezekiel.

Ezekiel was a religious man and cherished all the earth and sea, and that was why he gave the fishing vessel a religious name. Alfonso called the fishing boat Mary X, because he had trouble pronouncing the word Excelsior, due to his slight lisp. Ezekiel would have scorned Alfonso for referring to Mary Excelsior as Mary X. He likely would have slapped Alfonso's face as well.

Alfonso's crew of 6 had the names Zeppi, Criti, Zak, Sigi, Luigi and Marcus. Zeppi was the engineer who kept the engines running and ice machines producing ice. Criti was Alfonso's first mate, essentially the second in charge, in case Alfonso became incapacitated on the voyage. Zak, Sigi, Luigi and Marcus were the main fishermen of the fishing vessel. Zak and Sigi would chum the waters on the way out, while Luigi and Marcus would run out the mile-long fishing net. All of this took place when they reached their designated fishing location.

The thing about fishing in the Mediterranean Sea is that as massive as the sea is, the fishermen still had to register with their home countries to get approval for the area they intended to fish. The fishing areas were designated by the four corners of a rectangle, each corner indicated by latitude and longitude. Ezekiel established the fishing grounds a long time before, and it had taken many months to register the location with the fisheries division of Italy. The village of Zica was the oldest and most respected fishing village in all the world, located on the southernmost tip of Italy. The fishing grounds were legally bounded and had to be respected under penalty of law. No one was allowed to fish in any grounds unless they owned them or had permission to fish in them. The permission had to be accompanied by a temporary certificate that was issued by the fisheries division.

Zica was known to possess the best fishermen in the world, their combined fishing wisdom being passed down through the generations, cherished and applied without question. Alfonso saw no reason to change the way he did things with his fishing practice, a practice proven to be efficient and productive for a long time. Alfonso did everything by rote as taught to him by Rico and never intended to waver from the way he did things.

Criti occasionally suggested to Alfonso that they should try using different varieties of fish for their chum, instead of the usual squid and sardine rejects that they got from the Atlas fish-processing factory in the village. Alfonso categorically refused to change anything.

The fish factories of Zica processed all the fish brought in by the fishermen each day and rejected certain fish and parts that didn't meet the respective factory's standards. The factories gave the rejected fish and parts to the fishermen who used the fish and parts for chumming in their fishing practices.

Ezekiel had established his relationship with the Atlas Company in Zica in 1910, when the

advanced fish processing industry was still in its infancy in Italy.

Seafood had been consumed in Italy for many centuries, since the dawn of fishing boats. The seafood had been processed by vastly inefficient means, limiting the overall amount of fish that could be handled. The businesslike wisdom of Kayko Grenopolis is what made the fish-processing business more efficient. Kayko introduced the assembly line to fish processing, whereby the seafood would be handled in a more specific fashion, to more quickly get the product out the other end of the building. The old ways employed more people in the factory, but hurt the profits.

The Atlas Company was known for maintaining the highest level of quality in the Italian province of Trania. The village of Zica was a part of Trania and provided the most expensive and freshest seafood to the area. The process by which the chum parts that the Atlas Company made available to the fishermen was required by local law, as a means of recycling the fish parts and fish by-products back into the sea. Italy was surrounded by sea and the people believed that they were of the sea. Anything the Italians removed from the sea and didn't use was returned to the sea for nature to reuse it.

Alfonso insisted to Criti that they never even consider changing the way they do things in any way. There was no reason to mess with the standards. It was because Criti didn't know his birth father - Criti being an orphan - that Criti had no concept of tradition being passed down from father to son. Criti was unable to have the respect for tradition that Alfonso had. Alfonso sympathized with Criti and felt that there was nothing as essential to life as the pure family unit of father, mother and children. However, Alfonso would never break traditions for anyone.

Criti didn't know who his real father was and didn't care about traditions. This made him rebellious and challenging of local mores and established practices. Criti couldn't accept the concept of doing something just because it was the way that it had always been done. Alfonso only knew one way of doing things, the way they had always been done. Criti had been working on Alfonso's boat for 3 years, with the rest of the crew working for 2 years. Criti was 20 years old, a little bit full of himself and enjoyed arguing with people for no reason.

Alfonso was a large man, tremendously strong from doing hard labor his entire life and grabbed Criti by the shoulders on 3 occasions during arguments. Each time, Alfonso threw Criti over the railing of the boat into the bristling waters of the sea. The other crew members of the boat knew better than to rush to Criti's aid, because the captain of the ship was the undisputed leader, never to be questioned or challenged. Alfonso could beat down any 2 of the members of his crew if necessary.

Becoming a member of a crew of a fishing vessel was difficult, only being possible by word of mouth and knowing somebody. When a man is born in a fishing village, typically the only thing

he can do is become a fisherman. There are always many more men looking for jobs on boats, than there are jobs available. When a guy gets a job on a fishing boat, he cherishes that job, since the pay is actually pretty good. The only other option is to become an apprentice mason, working for a master mason, doing all the lower paying masonry jobs of the village. Since every building, street, wall and sidewalk was made of stone in the village, there was continuous work in the masonry industry. The masonry industry however, was not as glorious as the fishing industry. There was far less risk of dying while installing paving blocks for a sidewalk, compared to braving the sometimes insanely violent waters of the Mediterranean Sea. Some of the men preferred the glory of risky fishing. Most young boys growing up in Zica, hoped to get jobs on fishing boats, intending to own boats of their own someday, to grab the master share of the booty.

In the Mediterranean Sea, between Tunisia and Libya, were the fishing waters of Alfonso's family. It took approximately 3 hours to motor out to the location, so that by 7:30 am, the chumming crew started chumming and the net laying crew started laying out the net. At about 10:30 am, the one mile of netting was finally laid. The boat then turned around to go back to the beginning of the net line, to begin hauling in the net and reaping the amazing harvest. At 11:30 am Criti, Zak, Sigi, Luigi and Marcus worked simultaneously when they started to reel in the fishing net. Alfonso guided the vessel as they hauled in the net. Zeppi was on deck and operated the massive motor, essentially a large fishing reel that reeled in the net.

Occasionally Zeppi had to stop the fishing net motor retrieval operation to go below to ensure that the old engines were properly greased and oiled and that the ice machines were making ice at full capacity. The engines were old, but reliable. Unfortunately, their older design required a lot of close order maintenance and lubrication. The engines could potentially last forever, but could seize quickly if they ran dry. As the crew reeled the net onto the vessel, the fish would be removed from the vast net and if desirable, the fish was tossed into the hold below, which had different rooms with ice in them. If the fish was undesirable, it was tossed over the side of the boat to the waiting seabirds.

Various fish, shellfish, crabs, mollusks, shrimp, eels and squid were all the products that Alfonso kept from the nets and chucked down into the icy hold. Occasionally something interesting would be caught in the net. Alfonso had an itchy feeling that something interesting was about to happen. Sure enough, at about 1:30 pm, or about 2 hours into the net retrieval process, a great thrashing was detected in the net. Criti shrieked, "Stop the boat!" Alfonso stopped the fishing boat. Zeppi stopped the motor that was hauling in the great net. Zak cried, "Shark!" Sigi yelled, "Shark!" Zeppi ran to the cabinet next to the net motor that contained the shotgun for the occasions that something dangerous was in the net that needed to be dispatched.

Alfonso yelled, "Get the gun!" Zeppi said, "I got it!" Marcus shouted, "Shoot!" Zeppi shot the 11-foot long mako shark twice with the double barrel shotgun, slaying it almost instantly. Sigi

gaffed the shark to pull it out of the net, and Luigi had to help Sigi, because the shark seemed to be stuck in the net. Marcus grabbed another gaff and latched onto the shark to pull it out of the net. Zak had to grab another gaff to hook the shark to pull it out of the net. As they pulled the shark almost clear of the net, the gaffers realized the shark's tail was tangled in a long length of chain.

The chain on the shark's tail continued out into the water. Zeppi disconnected the chain from the shark's tail and hooked the end of the chain to the net motor, which had a small secondary pulley on it that could be operated independently from the larger main net pulley. Zeppi operated the net motor and slowly reeled in the chain. The motor began to get a little sluggish. Alfonso ran down to the deck from the wheelhouse to supervise the operation. "I knew it!" exclaimed Alfonso. "I had a feeling today! Be careful Zeppi!" "I'm careful, I'm careful!" said Zeppi. "Be careful!" said Criti. Soon an object appeared at the surface of the water as they hauled in the chain. The motor began to whine and smoke. "Easy, Zeppi!" said Alfonso. What appeared to be an ancient trunk was pulled from the water, wrapped in the chain that had been tangled in the tail of the mako shark. "Yeah! It's a treasure chest!" yelled Alfonso. "Now we're talking!" screamed Criti. "I can't believe it!" howled Zeppi. Zeppi operated the crane to position the trunk.

As Zeppi adjusted the crane to maneuver the trunk over the deck away from the holes for the holds, the chain broke. The heavy trunk crashed down through the deck into the hold below. Alfonso ran down to the hold and reattached the chain to the trunk. He instructed the crew to place extra boards on the deck to support the weight of the trunk when they raised it and placed it down. Alfonso instructed Zeppi to operate the whining motor to slowly raise the trunk. When the trunk was lifted through the hole, the men positioned it over the boards. Zeppi reversed the motor and lowered the trunk onto the boards, which creaked from the weight of the heavy trunk.

Alfonso ran up to the deck with an enormous crowbar and applied it to the tarnished, barnacle covered lock on the trunk. The huge old lock, though rusty, was stronger than it looked, being a great iron and bronze contraption, probably built in the 1600's. It required more torque to break than even the bullish Alfonso could muster. Criti assisted Alfonso with the crowbar and they tugged with all their might. The lock wouldn't budge. They tried and tried, but couldn't break the lock. Alfonso guessed that the trunk was so heavy because it was completely full of gold. Alfonso drooled. Alfonso was at a loss what to do with the trunk and asked the crew for suggestions. Criti suggested that they raise the trunk as high as the crane could lift it, and then drop it onto a thick stack of boards to break the trunk into pieces.

Alfonso liked the idea. That would minimize damage to the contents. They made a thick stack of boards and raised the trunk. When they pulled the release on the chain, the heavy trunk plunged to the stack of boards, smashed through the boards into the hold and fell through the bottom of the boat. The Mediterranean Sea rushed in.

10. Donte's Era



10. Donte's Era

Donte had been happily feeding on the apples from the tree for 5 hours with no hassles until he heard the pack of riptors approaching. Riptors were particularly aggressive dinosaurs that hunted in packs of usually 3 or 4. Riptors were only about as big as a dairy cow standing vertically on its back feet, but they overcame their relatively smaller size with intense ferocity. The fact that they hunted in packs was also in their favor. Riptors possessed an incredibly savage growl that added intimidation to their mode of operation. Sometimes riptors were able to scare their prey into passing out, presenting them with an easy kill. Most of the time, they attacked their prey together by surrounding the animal and then all moving in simultaneously. Riptors didn't have large mouths or long teeth. It was the combined effort of multiple riptors attacking together that enabled quick kills. On many occasions, the riptors were either too hungry and mistake-prone or too confident and they were killed by the animal that they were trying to kill.

Donte wasn't worried about the riptors, since he was much larger than they were, being a rexosaurus. In Donte's 157 years, he had killed and eaten hundreds of riptors that had foolishly tried to attack him. It was just that he had been peacefully eating apples from a choice tree that no other dinosaurs had discovered. It was a rare thing where Donte lived to find such a tree. It had taken him 3 days of walking around the valley before he came upon the apple tree, which was concealed by a large pile of fractured boulders. That is probably how Donte found the tree. He was more persistent than the average dinosaur. Donte preferred to eat the best of the bounty of nature whatever it happened to be. Donte loved all the fresh fruit when it was in season and almost always managed to find untouched trees from which to eat. It was important to him to locate the virgin trees, because when most dinosaurs eat from a tree, they usually destroy the tree in the process. The tree is then almost useless to the next dinosaur, being picked over with little edible fruit remaining on the branches.

The only dinosaur that Donte was concerned with was the bonosaurus, which was a bit larger than he was. Donte had killed many a bonosaurus in his day, but in the large dinosaur world, it depended on which dinosaur was the hungrier of the 2 doing battle, that usually won the fight. Since Donte was always hungry due to his immense size of 140 tons, he always won his fights. The bonosaurus was taller than Donte, but not heavier, only weighing in at about 125 tons. Donte was an unusually stocky rexosaurus, larger than all the others in the valley, due no doubt to his always eating the best fruit he could find. Most of the dinosaurs in Donte's size range were omnivorous, eating meat and plant matter, but Donte's insistence on eating the best gave him the edge. Donte never contracted odd viruses as the other dinosaurs did, likely from his intake of vitamin C from fruit that few, if any, of the other dinosaurs had in their diet. In those days, when dinosaurs caught a cold or flu, they were usually goners. Donte's meticulous diet was probably responsible for his incredibly long life. The average dinosaur only lived 43 years, making Donte a true rarity among his species.

Donte stopped eating the apples and emerged from behind the boulders to face the riptors. The riptors must have combined several flocks for a short while, to guarantee their victory. Normally riptors limit their pack sizes to maximize the amount of meat that each riptor got to eat from their victims. The riptors approaching Donte numbered 11, likely a combination of 3 separate packs. Donte feared nothing, and had concluded that it was time to pause from eating plant matter and get some meat into his belly. The riptors ran at Donte at full speed, about 20 miles per hour, all growling their loudest fiercest growls. They knew they were attacking a gigantic animal, but they were hungry and had hoped that by being 11 in number, they would have a chance of winning the battle.

Donte grabbed the first riptor that arrived, tore it in half, swallowing half and dropping the other half on the ground. The 2nd, 3rd and 4th riptors jumped up on Donte's back. The remaining 7 hoped to attack Donte's tough belly. Donte shook off the 3 that were on his back and stomped them to death. He grabbed one of the dead ones, using its carcass as a weapon and smashed 2 others to death. The remaining 5 had their front legs bitten off by Donte, to make them less aggressive as he ate the remains of their flailing bodies. After eating 10 1/2 riptors, Donte had had enough of their funny tasting meat. Donte decided to leave behind the bottom half of the first one that he ate. Some crowasaurus could eat it later. As Donte left the bloody scene, a taradictal flew down and began eating that half riptor left behind by Donte. As the taradictal feasted, a trisaraplots attacked and killed it. The trisaraplots then ate the taradictal and the remnants of the riptor.

Nature was hard on most of the dinosaurs in Donte's era. Life was easy for Donte. Luckily, he was born such a gigantic dinosaur with no real worries other than getting enough to eat every day. On an average day, Donte ate approximately 2 tons of fruits, vegetables, various foliage and meat. He spent every hour of the day in search of food. It was all he did. He actually preferred killing and eating other dinosaurs to finding and eating the choicest fruit in the valley, because it took so long to find the good fruit. Dinosaurs were all over the place, available for Donte to kill and eat. Dinosaurs walked right up to Donte everyday, challenging him and losing their lives to his invincibility. All Donte had to do is blow a fart, and another dinosaur would smell it and come a running to its imminent demise. Being so old made Donte so wise, that he felt himself superior to every other dinosaur. Some days he would wake up and start yelling, "Come and get it!" at the top of his lungs. The dinosaurs would then come to him and he would eat them. It was a much more efficient system for the dinosaurs to go to Donte, than vice versa.

Donte burned thousands of calories just by walking around. He really needed the food to come to him. He loved his premium fruits though. It was worth it to him to use a lot of energy finding the untouched trees, because that fruit tasted so amazingly good. The dinosaur meat he ate was always tough and sometimes strange tasting. He wondered what some of those dinosaurs ate that made them taste so bad, especially the riptors. Once, Donte killed a family of wily maymouths.

He was only able to eat the 2 small ones and the mother before he had to stop, because the meat tasted so disgusting. Earlier that day, Donte had eaten a large quantity of peaches, so he was somewhat full already, when he started eating the maymouths. He went back the next day to eat the large male of the maymouth family that he had left behind. As Donte approached the dead maymouth, a jockasaurus that was feeding on the carcass ran away, no doubt avoiding being killed by Donte. Donte reluctantly ate the remains of the large male maymouth, foul tasting as it was, because he was hungry. Donte had eaten many a jockasaurus in his day and found them to be rank tasting as well.

Donte really liked the flavor of the rare turtlosaurus dinosaurs. Those dinosaurs habitually frequented the swampy areas and ate the bright green grasses that grew there. Donte reckoned that it was the diet of the grass that gave the turtlosaurus its succulent flavor. The reason that the turtlosaurus is such an uncommon dinosaur is probably because their tasty flesh is in such high demand, that their population is low. They aren't a large or aggressive dinosaur and are easily killed, due to their slowness. Similar in appearance to the turtlosaurus was the tortosaurus. However, the tortosaurus had a different diet, eating snails and slugs, which gave its flesh a muddy flavor that the carnivores would tolerate, but not prefer eating. As a result, there were many more tortosauruses crawling around than turtlosauruses.

Another dinosaur of Donte's era was the kangarosaurus, which had a large pouch in which it would place the fruits and vegetables that it was unable to eat while food gathering. The kangarosaurus was another favorite of Donte's because it had a very similar flavor to the chickasaurus, which Donte absolutely loved to eat. The only problem with the kangarosaurus was its incredible speed, making it difficult to capture. In addition to speed, the kangarosaurus also hopped when it traveled. Even though the kangarosaurus had great flavor, its meat was very tough, due to the tight muscular nature of its body. Donte found that the only way to catch a kangarosaurus was to hide in the thick trees and make a sound like a wounded kangarosaurus, which Donte did to a tee. Donte had observed countless animals during his many years and had learned a lot about their habits. The kangosauruses would hear Donte's call and would cautiously wander to the edge of the thick trees, where Donte would spring out and eat them. The chickosauruses were tasty and tender, but they were so small that Donte would have to eat 400 or 500 of them to even begin to fill his tummy.

The snakosaurus was a particularly easy to eat dinosaur, because it was so long and skinny that it was easy to swallow. Sometimes eating the snakosauruses gave Donte diarrhea, probably due to the poison they possessed. Donte didn't like it when he got diarrhea, because along with the diarrhea, he always got severe intestinal cramps and intense flatulence. Ordinarily Donte didn't mind farting, since he did it all day long, but the farts that accompanied his diarrhea were annoyingly bad smelling. Donte didn't like to give away his location by stinking up an area, especially when he was trying to hide somewhere to ambush some food, such as the

kangarosauruses. Donte rarely ate snakosauruses, typically only when he was desperately hungry.

Donte enjoyed eating the giant eggs of the ostrichosaurus. The ostrichosaurus rarely sat on its nest after laying the eggs, instinctively relying on the hot temperature of the ambient air to hatch the eggs. Donte would perform his ostrichosaurus call until he would hear them respond and then he would go to their location and eat all their eggs. The ostrichosauruses laid roughly 25 eggs per nest at about a gallon each. The ostrichosaurus village that Donte had invaded had 400 nests full of eggs, making a total of 10,000 eggs for Donte's feast. That meal took 13 hours to eat and had filled Donte's belly to the point that he didn't have to eat for another 2 days. He almost barfed from feeling too full, but after waiting 20 minutes for the feeling to pass, he was able to finish the eggs.

One of the bonosauruses that Donte killed 33 years before had presented Donte with an interesting situation. Donte had been without food for a week, due to the extreme drought, which prevented the fruit trees from bearing and had caused the watering holes to dry up, killing many of the dinosaurs that Donte would have normally eaten. Donte came upon a bonosaurus that was feasting on the rexosaurus that it had just killed after a daylong battle. The bonosaurus was weak from hunger and the long battle with the rexosaurus. Donte was weak from hunger. As Donte approached, he figured he would be able to kill the approaching rexosaurus as easily as it had killed the one it was about to eat. As Donte got closer, the bonosaurus realized that it was no ordinary rexosaurus approaching. The one he was looking at was much stouter and more solid looking.

Donte started making his version of the riptor call, to throw some confusion at the bonosaurus. The bonosaurus had a perplexed look on its face as Donte lunged at its throat. The bonosaurus quickly recovered, twisting his head to break the grip Donte had on it. The bonosaurus head-butted Donte, dazing him slightly. Donte then head-butted the bonosaurus, dazing him back. The bonosaurus bit Donte's face, scratching Donte's eye. Donte bit the bonosaurus in the left ear, tearing it from the head. The bonosaurus slapped and clawed Donte's face. Donte head-butted the bonosaurus 3 more times and bit off its other ear. The bonosaurus punched Donte in the stomach. Donte boxed what was left of the bonosaurus' ears. The bonosaurus screamed from the pain and kicked Donte in the balls. Donte boxed the bonosaurus' ear area again and head-butted the bonosaurus 3 more times. The bonosaurus was starting to get dizzy from all the head-butting and its legs began to get shaky. Donte stomped on the bonosaurus' right foot, and then its left foot. The bonosaurus kicked Donte in the balls again. The fight went on for another 4 hours when finally Donte tore a tree from the ground and stabbed the bonosaurus in the neck until it was dead.

Donte kicked the bonosaurus in the head a few times to make sure the dinosaur was dead, and

then he lay down next to it for a while to rest and heal. When Donte awoke, he felt rested and very hungry. Donte began eating the bonosaurus, starting with the brain, which was obtained by cracking the skull open with a large boulder. Donte proceeded down the body to the neck that he shredded open and gorged upon it. Donte found a really sharp splinter of a rock and used it to split open the chest and abdomen of the bonosaurus, gaining access to the internal organs and intestines. Donte found that he was unable to stop eating from the innards of the once great bonosaurus. Before Donte lay 100+ tons of meat at his disposal. He could keep eating or stop and walk away. He had been so hungry when he first saw that bonosaurus, that he had vowed he would never be hungry again. Donte kept eating and eating until he was full. He rested for an hour and ate again until he was full. He began farting uncontrollably, which released some internal pressure, enabling to eat still more. He rested for 2 hours and ate again. He took a huge 350-pound poop, which cleared some space, enabling him to eat more and more. Donte was unable to stop eating. He kept farting and pooping and eating more and more. Donte burped, which cleared some space and he ate more. He had to tell himself to stop eating, but he couldn't. He had never before experienced the hunger that he felt leading up to the feast in which he was partaking. He had to stop eating! Suddenly, he retched all the contents of his stomach, all 3 tons of it, onto the bonosaurus that he was eating. The smell of his own barf was overwhelming and he barfed again, only juice that time. He was empty. He started crying. Luckily, there was the rexosaurus lying there that the bonosaurus had killed. Donte proceeded to eat the rexosaurus very slowly. Luckily, Donte was a cannibal, as were all dinosaurs, which enabled him to eat the rexosaurus, a dinosaur of his own species.

A lesson that Donte had learned early on, was the interesting concept of the tar pits. Many a dinosaur had perished in the tar pits, trapped in the molten black goo, until they starved to death or were savagely eaten by predators. His first crucial encounter was back when he was 101 years old and had been sneaking up on a pack of riptors that happened to be sneaking up on a pack of chickosauruses. The chickosauruses were grazing at the edge of what appeared to be a watering hole from the distance at which Donte was watching. The 50 or so chickosauruses were mindlessly pecking and scratching at the ground the way they do, as the riptors moved in for the kill. The typical riptor attack involved a final high-speed movement, maximizing any element of surprise. The riptors kicked it into high gear, running full speed at the chickosauruses, growling their terrible growl, when one of the chickosauruses squawked, alerting the others. The chickosauruses turned to the approaching riptors, stepping aside just enough for the riptors to run past them into the tar pit. The 3 riptors landed in the black muck and became stuck. The chickosauruses ran from the scene unharmed.

Donte had watched the riptors run into the watering hole. He was curious why the riptors were just standing there in the watering hole. He approached the watering hole, realizing it wasn't water after all, but some dark, wet muddy stuff. The riptors tried to escape the tar pit, but were unable. Donte was able to reach his long neck over the tar pit and pick out the riptors one at a

time, eating them. He first had to shake off as much as the black substance as he could. Donte didn't like the taste of the tar, but ate the riptors anyway, because it was food. He then stepped his left front foot into the tar pit to see what it was and became stuck in it. Luckily, his other 3 feet were still standing on the dry ground and he was able to unstuck his stuck foot. He thought that tar was an interesting substance. After that day, he had staked out the tar pit on many occasions, eating the dinosaurs that became trapped in it.

Near that tar pit was a swamp that was full to the brim with alligatauruses. Alligatauruses were a tasty treat for Donte, tasting like a mix between fishosauruses and chickosauruses. Alligatauruses were always at the swamp, crawling along the bottom, floating on the surface or sunning themselves on fallen logs next to the swamp. Alligatauruses primarily ate the duckosauruses, turtlosauruses and tortosauruses that inhabited the wet and swampy regions of the valley. Alligatauruses also ate snailosauruses when they found them on the bottom of the swamp with the catfishosauruses. Donte paid a visit to the swamp to eat a few alligatauruses, but not too many because like the snakosauruses, the alligatauruses gave Donte diarrhea and really foul smelling farts.

One evening, after Donte had eaten several alligatauruses, he lay down next to the swamp for a nap. The alligatauruses saw that as an opportunity to get even with Donte for eating all their relatives and as a possible chance to get something to eat, if they could kill Donte. Donte had been asleep for 45 minutes and was snoring and farting loudly. The alligatauruses gathered and sneaked up on Donte. Little did the alligatauruses know, but Donte always slept with 1 eye open, to prevent being attacked while he was sleeping. It was a trick that Donte had learned years before. It would appear to passersby that Donte was sound asleep because of the snoring, but he wasn't. Predators always considered his 1 open eye as merely a fluke, not something with which to be concerned. Donte waited until he was covered from head to toe with 327 alligatauruses and then he attacked and killed all of them. He didn't eat any of them, since he had already eaten his limit of them for diarrhea prevention. After Donte left the swamp, the local riptors had a celebration, eating all those dead alligatauruses for weeks.

Donte lived in a large cave that he had found some 74 years before, while he was searching for his beloved untouched fruit trees. It was a beautiful cave, obviously cavernous enough to fit his huge bulk, with a river running through it. Donte liked the fact that it had a stream in it because it provided him with fresh water and occasional fishosauruses. Additionally, when he would piss or poop in the stream in the middle of the night, it was like a toilet that automatically flushed itself, a great convenience for an big old dinosaur. The only thing Donte disliked about the cave was the millions of bats that lived there. When Donte woke up each morning, he was covered with a thick paste of bat guano. He always started his day with a swim in the river to wash off the filth. The bat poop made the cave really stinky, in addition to the bat piss that was in puddles everywhere.

Aside from the bats, Donte liked the cave for its warmth and protection from the elements. The cave had saved Donte from all the major storms that had occurred in the valley over his many years. Countless dinosaurs had been blown to pieces by hurricane winds or carried away by tornadoes or drowned by storm surges and river floods. The cave was located up a slight grade in the side of a mountain, providing the utmost in flood protection. Donte couldn't count the number of times when he had been out looking for food and the winds and storms started whipping up. He was always able to get back to his cave in time, where he safely rode out the weather events. In the early days of living in the cave, while Donte slept, snakosauruses sometimes tried to slither into his butt hole. He always woke up in time to prevent the intrusion and killed all the snakosauruses that were living in the cave. There hadn't been a snakosaurus encounter in the cave in a long time.

One day while on his way to one of his favorite orchards, Donte felt the ground rumbling. He stopped walking and the rumbling stopped. He started walking again and the rumbling returned. He wondered what was causing that strange sensation. Out of the blue, the ground started moving beneath his feet. A crack formed in the ground between his legs and the earth began to open. Donte saw the enlarging opening and couldn't react in time. The crack became an enormous chasm and he fell into it.

11. Nanko's Dogsled



11. Nanko's Dogsled

When Nanko started out that morning on his way to Kakuk, guiding his dogsled team, it seemed like just another day in frigid Alaska. Nanko's dogsled team consisted of only 6 dogs. Depending on the size and weight of the cargo being transported, some dogsled teams had as many as 12 dogs. Nanko's cargo was bulky, but light enough for 6 dogs to manage the load. The first 2 dogs were the male Flip, the lead dog on the left, and the female Jupiter. The next 2 were the male Bosko and the female Brutus. The remaining 2 dogs were the male Linus and the female Marie. The sled dogs averaged 3 years old, plus or minus, a typical average age for sled dogs for a fast moving dogsled team. The dogs were of mixed breeds, some Malamute mixes, some retriever mixes and others. As long as a dog had great endurance and a desire to run, it was suitable for a team.

Sled dog teams were a valuable commodity in Alaska. When the snows were falling, some areas had no paved roads clear. When no other form of transportation was possible, the sled would always be able to get through. Wind, ice and snow hampered aircraft. Extreme cold prevented the snowmobiles from starting and running. Walking anywhere on foot was absolutely out of the question, by anyone but Eskimos. Since Nanko wasn't an Eskimo and didn't care to behave as one of those durable people, he chose the sled. Only the old-fashioned, non-motorized sled dogs were nearly 100% reliable. The dogs were occasionally quirky, but they could generally be expected to perform without too much fuss. As long as they were fed well, which they always were, they would do whatever was asked of them.

Nanko transported medical supplies between his Eskimo village of Bubuk to Kakuk 3 times per week, on Monday, Wednesday and Friday, year round, with no days off for holidays, sickness or any other reason. If it snowed, he ran the route. If it was during the summer and it rained, he ran the route. If he had a cold or other minor sickness, he ran the route. He had run the route with a twisted ankle, broken wrist and strained hamstring. No excuses would be accepted by the hospital, short of lost limbs or unconsciousness, with a doctor's note to verify the medical reason. Part of the contract with the hospital to transport its important medical supplies was that there would be no interruption in service. The hospital in Kakuk had to have those supplies without fail.

The hospital used several dogsled teams in addition to Nanko's to transport medical supplies from Bubuk to Kakuk. In order to have an overlap of delivery coverage, all the transport teams were considered absolutely necessary. Times were hard enough in Alaska when people were healthy. When people got sick, their very lives could be at risk for the most trivial reason. If someone contracted a lung illness, the cold air could be diabolical in preventing their wellness. Folks living in the other 49 states had life relatively easy compared to the Alaskans. The Alaskans had to do without many things that were taken for granted by the other states. Alaska

didn't have the year round supplies of fresh inexpensive produce, meats and other fresh goods that existed in abundance elsewhere. People who were born in Alaska didn't know any better. People who moved to Alaska from one of the other 49 states to live and work knew what they were getting into. They had to sacrifice a lot to live in the grand beauty.

Nanko had inherited his route from his uncle Reykjavik. Those hospital routes were not easy to come by. Anyone who had one held onto it for dear life. Reykjavik ran his route for 13 years and made a lot of money transporting medical supplies for the hospital. Everything cost more in Alaska and everyone made comparatively higher wages to afford to live there. People such as Reykjavik were rewarded handsomely for their efforts. The sled team owners made more money than Policemen, Firemen and Dentists. They were in high demand. Reykjavik would still be running the route, but for the illness that had struck him down. Reykjavik had come down with a tough cold that morphed into bronchitis and then pneumonia. He never took any Vitamin C or other common remedies that may have staved off the more advanced stages of the illness. He always proudly claimed that he had survived 1,000 colds and would live to tell about another 1,000. Nature had something else in mind for Reykjavik.

Reykjavik always enjoyed life and his mottoes were "Live life to the limit!" and "Love everybody!" Reykjavik was friendly to all people, men and women alike, and had dozens of friends. At the wake for Reykjavik, 350 people attended. Reykjavik was buried in a specially carved ice coffin. Nanko missed Reykjavik, but life had to go on. Nanko had a job to do and he was going to do it, making relatively vast sums of money along the way. Nanko didn't have the zest for life that Reykjavik had, but he was content for a while, gradually carrying out his scheme for the future.

Nanko's financial goal was to run the route for only as long as it would take to save up enough money to leave the cold and crappy weather of Alaska and move down to the Caribbean island of Antigua. Nanko had been on the internet at the Corner Store/Internet Cafe, researching his favorite musical artist, Eric Clapton, when Nanko discovered that Eric had purchased property in Antigua and had built a recording studio there. Nanko loved everything about Eric Clapton, his music, mysticism, arrogance, and most importantly, Eric's raw artistic aura. Nanko felt that Eric Clapton possessed a similar intensity as Jimi Hendrix, Nanko's second favorite musical artist. Nanko further researched the climate and employment possibilities in Antigua. At the store, he had encountered some Alaskans who were travelers. The people had visited Antigua while on a cruise and related how much they loved the island. Nanko was convinced; he was Antigua bound.

Nanko had been running the medical supply transport route for 4 years and had approximately \$150,000 saved in dividend stocks, making 4% yield annually. Nanko figured he needed \$200,000 to be able to move down to Antigua and purchase a nice little house and still have

enough extra money to survive for a while. He hoped to establish himself in his new career in the tourism industry. Tourism is the main source of financial assets for the economy of Antigua, and it was possible to live comfortably on the income generated by working in the tourism industry. He hoped to become a tour guide or drive one of the tour buses. The tour guides made more money from tips than the drivers, because they had to memorize a spiel to narrate to the tourist passengers. Being a driver in Antigua would be a simple job, but he would have to battle traffic every day. He had been accustomed to the relatively light traffic in Alaska and driving in city traffic in Antigua would involve a transition. Nanko estimated he needed to run the dogsled route for 2 more years and he would be on his way south.

Nanko didn't mind at all the job he had of operating a dogsled team for transporting medical supplies. In fact, he actually felt somewhat important doing his job, since the stuff he was hauling was absolutely necessary for the day-to-day survival of the people of Alaska. In fact, sometimes Nanko felt like a Pony Express rider of the early United States, risking all for the greater good. He definitely filled an important niche with his job and people appreciated his efforts. However, Nanko disliked the cold; he preferred being able to be outside in comfortable clothes 365 days a year, which was impossible in Alaska.

When a dogsled owner created a dogsled team, the owner usually named his team, and kept that same name for the remainder of the operation of the team. Reykjavik had named his dog sled team Strange Groove, in honor of the song lyric that the musical group Cream produced with Eric Clapton. Reykjavik had liked Eric Clapton even more than Nanko. Per tradition, Nanko's sled dog team retained the name that Reykjavik had given it, which was fine with Nanko. The dogs of the dogsled team had no idea what their team was named. The dogs barely knew their own names. As long as the dogs were able to eat their huge amounts of energy-giving food each day, they didn't care about any names. If they were capable of understanding the concept of the way sled dog teams were named, they probably would think that their name of Strange Groove was a cool name. Maybe not. Maybe they would think it was stupid.

Strange Groove had been sledding along for 90 minutes without any real disturbance when suddenly, Flip the lead dog started growling and then barking, and then Jupiter started barking. The instant that Nanko heard Flip barking, Nanko knew trouble was afoot. Nanko had spotted a large walrus, approaching the dog sled team from the right.

When walruses were riled, they were more dangerous than polar bears. The tusks of a walrus could be as long as 18 inches and could split a man down the middle. Nanko had listened to some of the older Eskimos telling stories at the store about old gigantic rogue walruses that had obliterated entire Eskimo communities. Sometimes, the walruses formed into packs, steamrolled through towns, and wiped out dozens of men, women and children before being put down by the National Guard.

Nanko was intimately familiar with the potentially dangerous and savage behavior of walruses. He had personally been involved a couple of narrow escapes with walruses. The first encounter involved a walrus that had caught a whiff of the package of frozen beef that Nanko had just purchased at the Piggly Wiggly. The walrus was quite a distance away when it smelled the meat. Nanko heard the walrus running on the snow-pack, just in time to speed away with his friend on a snowmobile. All they could do was try to escape from the walrus. Neither he nor his friend had a weapon of any kind to defend themselves from the attacking beast. After Nanko's first narrow escape, he acquired a .300 Winchester magnum rifle with a powerful scope, to fend off any walruses that he might encounter during his travels. During the second narrow escape, Nanko had fired at the walrus and successfully scared it away.

The latest attacking walrus was approaching Nanko at full speed. Luckily, the dogs had detected the scent of the walrus and barked, signaling Nanko to reach for his loaded rifle, which was always close at hand. Nanko had never wanted to kill one of nature's creatures. If his life or livelihood were in peril, he would take appropriate action. He always tried to first scare away the animal and fatally shoot only as a last resort. Nanko rattled off 3 quick shots from the rifle. The shots that Nanko fired were intentionally aimed at the ground, to hopefully startle the walrus into retreating. Nanko focused the scope on the vitals of the walrus and prepared to squeeze the trigger a 4th time.

The walrus heeded Nanko's warning and slid to a stop, only 50 feet from Nanko. All 6 dogs of team Strange Groove were hoarse from barking at the top of their lungs. Their natural instincts gave the dogs their intense hatred of walruses. The walrus grunted loudly, hissed and ran away as fast as it could in the direction from which it came. The walrus wasn't crazed enough to continue the pursuit of the human with the loud stick. The dogs were still manically growling and barking. The dogs instinctively pulled the sled to the right, in the direction that the walrus was running away, trying to run toward the walrus to go after it and take care of it. The dogs followed their instincts.

Nanko barked out his commands "Ho" and "Lay" to Flip and Jupiter, "Ho" meaning stop and "Lay" meaning to turn to the left. The command "Reek" meant to turn to the right. The command "Mush," meant to go forward from a stopped position or run faster in the current direction, whatever that happened to be at the time. The dogs of the sled team were not capable of felling an adult walrus, even the 6 of them that comprised the team Strange Groove. Walruses were immensely powerful animals, capable of eliminating nearly any animal in Alaska, including a polar bear.

Dogs in a pack sometimes became possessed by an uncontrollable fierceness that made them feel that they could fight and beat any animal, if they set their minds to it. It was good to know for the owners of the dog sled teams that their dogs were potentially such fearless fighters. Of

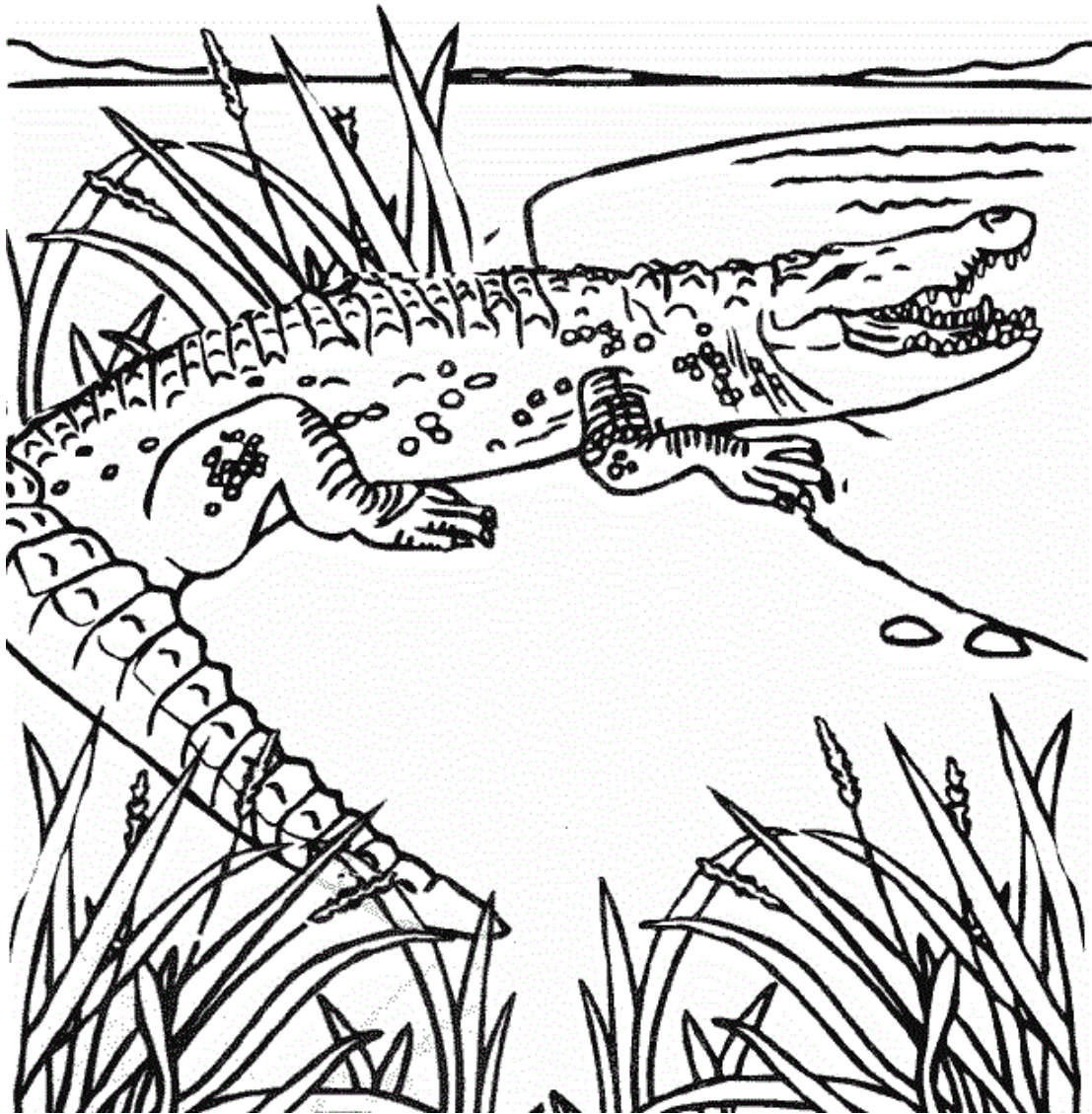
course, it would realistically take a dog sled team of probably 10 dogs to knock down a beast as menacing as a walrus. Nanko appreciated the attitude of the dogs to want to go after the walrus, but Strange Groove had its mission to accomplish. Nanko managed to get the dogs turned back onto the designated trail again, and they ran for another hour without incident.

Nanko thought back to some of the stories that Reykjavik had told. Decades before in Alaska, reindeer migrated in vast herds at a certain time of the year. It was impossible for Reykjavik to avoid those migrations, because he had to run his team year round. On some occasions, Reykjavik and his team had been completely engulfed by thousands of migrating reindeer and were unable to move for hours. The rare times that happened had severely damaged Reykjavik's reputation with the hospital. He had been late making his deliveries during crucial times of need. The hospital had withheld some of Reykjavik's payment as a penalty for his late deliveries. The hospital's contract with its sled dog teams explicitly stated that there were no acceptable excuses for tardiness. Reykjavik acknowledged that he had no choice in the matter and simply absorbed the loss. He still made good money with the hospital, even with the rare pay cuts. He was just glad that the hospital didn't cancel the contract. Nanko hadn't had any difficulties with reindeer while running his route, due to the drastic reduction in the reindeer numbers over the years.

Nanko had been born in Alaska and didn't know what it was like to live anywhere else. He had been more or less content for a great many of his years. He had never been truly happy though. He was tired of having to wear so many layers of clothing day in and day out. Summer weather was a little better, but probably a far cry from the weather in regions south of Alaska. The encounter with the travelers at the Corner Store had really solidified Nanko's determination to work as hard as he could for a little while longer and move to Antigua. The scenery in Alaska was fine, but he felt deep down that Antigua's warmer weather would be more suited to his temperament. The travelers told how everybody wore shorts down there and seemed more relaxed and easy-going. Life seemed slower and better somehow.

A polar bear had been hunting 2 miles downwind of the sled dogs, undetected by their noses. While Nanko concentrated on keeping the sled dogs on the trail, he reflected how grand his life would be in Antigua. The bear caught a whiff of a human and dogs. Nanko wondered if he would see Eric Clapton in Antigua; that would be something. The bear looked around, spotted Nanko's group in the distance and started trotting toward them. Nanko thought about the warm tropical breezes in Antigua. The bear accelerated its pace. Nanko wanted to be in Antigua now, not in 2 years time. The bear breathed in the strengthening scent of the human and dogs and became energized. The wind began to pick up. Nanko sensed a storm brewing. The hungry bear ran faster. Nanko noted that it never snowed in Antigua. The bear heard its own feet thundering on the ice, but didn't care. The bear smelled and saw food and planned to have it shortly. It started snowing. The bear was conscious of its loud breathing, but dismissed the thought. Now! Nanko inexplicably shuddered and turned to see the bear's glaring teeth.

12. Ceola's Hunger



12. Ceola's Hunger

Ceola knew he was a large alligator; he could just feel it. He was always hungry and at 29 feet long, and weighing 617 pounds, he had a large body to support. Ceola didn't know it, but he was the largest alligator in the history of humanity, living there in his hidden Florida swamp. He was still growing. The swamp where Ceola lived was never seen by human beings, being completely concealed, swampy, muddy and mosquito infested. Ceola was the result of the first egg to hatch from the pile of eggs that his mother had laid 43 years before. Since he was the first to hatch, he was the first to get to eat. As the other eggs in the pile hatched, Ceola killed and ate the baby alligators that emerged from the shells. There was no mother or father alligator present during the hatching of alligator eggs, so there was nothing stopping Ceola's savagery against what would have been his siblings, all 153 of them. Ceola must have looked funny with his belly full of so much food. Ceola solved the problem of having to eat all his brother and sister gators immediately after they hatched by simply killing them and dragging them into a pile next to the egg pile. He could then eat the dead baby alligators from the pile at his leisure.

That early nutritious sustenance supplied Ceola's growing body with everything it needed to make him into the true jumbo gator that he was to become. Ceola found himself constantly hungry. At 9 months old, he was already 10 feet long and weighed 300 pounds. He was able to kill any animal he saw that was stupid enough to get close to him. Early on, Ceola had devised his camouflage system. He covered himself with mud from the edge of the swamp by rolling around in it repeatedly, creating a thick crust. Then he swam under the seaweed that floated on the surface of the swamp, completely covering the top surface of his body. Ceola was absolutely invisible to any passing animal. He looked just like a log.

He was always a slow moving alligator when he walked along the bottom of the swamp eating snails, turtles, leeches, worms, snakes and catfish. He instinctively knew that he had to move slowly to conserve his energy for when he really needed it. He was capable of great speed at the moment of attack, able to jettison his body 20-26 feet out of the water to land on top of his victim. He rear legs were incredibly strong and ideally suited to the purpose of jumping. Most of the animals he ate above the water were ducks, geese, deer, wild boars, porcupines, alligators, bears and an occasional moose. The land animals wandered to the edge of the swamp to get a drink of water, where Ceola was waiting to leap. His greatest leap out of the water was the time he killed his first moose when he had launched himself 33 feet out of the water onto the bull moose, breaking its back on impact. Ceola had weighed 423 pounds at the time, so it was no wonder that he broke the animal's back. It was a quick kill after he grabbed the moose's neck while on its broken back, and gave the neck a quick twist. Ceola's enormously strong jaws were capable of biting logs in half, which he accidentally did on occasion, while going after prey.

The previous year a large alligator had invaded Ceola's territory, which was a large area, and

accidentally happened upon Ceola on its way to the swamp. Ceola had his usual camouflage on and was invisible to the trespassing gator. Ceola was in the swamp with only his nostrils above the surface of the water, to be able to breathe. Ceola had been observing the other gator as it stomped its way through the woods to his swamp. Ceola had heard the other gator when it was about 2 miles away, because it was making so much noise. Ceola was always listening for anything that sounded like food coming. "A little closer," Ceola thought to himself. As the other gator neared the edge of the water, Ceola accidentally farted in the water, probably out of the anticipation of attack. Normally, Ceola didn't fart in the water at the moment of attack. The approaching gator had riled him and he had become unusually excited to kill and eat that invader.

The other gator saw Ceola's fart bubbles at the surface of the water. At first, the other gator dismissed the bubbles as likely coming from a turtle walking around on the bottom of the swamp. All the other gator saw floating there was a huge log. Since the other gator had been downwind, he caught a whiff of the fart that produced those bubbles. "A little closer," Ceola thought again to himself. A moment passed and the other gator realized that he had recognized the smell. It smelled like just his own farts smelled. That meant there had to be another alligator nearby. As the other gator pondered the smell, he gradually backed away from the edge of the swamp. "Now!" Ceola screamed aloud. The other gator said, "Huh?" Ceola hurdled from the water landing on the ground, face to face with the other gator. The other gator hesitated and gasped at the size of the beast before him. Ceola grabbed the other gator by the head and threw the gator into a tree 19 feet away, splitting the gator in half. Ceola casually ambled over to the split gator and had himself a leisurely feast, eating every last scrap of the dead gator, bones and all. Alligators had digestive systems such that the gators were capable of eating animals whole and their stomach acid would do the rest.

Earlier that year, a boa constrictor had figured out Ceola's camouflage system, being an expert itself at concealment. The snake had to be 40 feet long, longer than Ceola, probably the largest boa constrictor around. The snake had slithered into Ceola's swamp area during the night, while Ceola was sleeping in the swamp after eating a rotten deer that he had found. The snake noticed Ceola sleeping in the swamp and knew it wasn't just a log floating there. The snake slinked into the swamp and cautiously wrapped its length around Ceola. The snake knew Ceola wasn't a log the instant it made contact with Ceola's torso. The snake managed to encircle almost the entire body of Ceola. The snake started to constrict. Ceola awoke to the snake trying to crush him. As hard as the snake tried, it could only apply so much force on Ceola's massive treelike body. Ceola laughed at the snake and knew the snake would be unable to kill him as it had planned.

First, Ceola exhaled all the air in his lungs, causing the boa constrictor to further tighten its grip. Ceola then quickly inhaled as much air as he could, inflating his lungs to their maximum. The snake exploded into a thousand hunks, raining down all around Ceola. Ceola didn't eat many of the snake chunks, since snakes of that size gave him diarrhea and excessive flatulence. He didn't

feel like having to hold in his farts so often when he was hunting for food. Ceola allowed the crows to eat the snake remnants.

When Ceola was 11 years old, he had encountered his mother, killed and ate her. At the age of 22, Ceola ran into his father, killed and ate him as well. It didn't matter to Ceola which animals became his food. All he knew was he instinctively had to survive any way he could. If he had to eat his relatives along the way, so be it.

One fall, Ceola ate a family of 5 wild boars that had visited his swamp for a drink of water. Unbeknownst to Ceola, the boars must have gotten into some poisonous patch of some kind of berries at some point before he ate them. On the morning that he ate the boars, Ceola felt fine, his usual "happy to be feeling full." Later in the afternoon, he began getting dizzy, similar, but different from the feeling he gets after overindulging on an exceptionally large meal. He started to feel sweaty and felt his body temperature began rising. His eyes became blurry. He felt tingles running up and down his back like little needles. It felt to him as if his toenails were growing. His long tail began to twitch and tremor. He was babbling incoherent thoughts to himself. He tried to exit the swamp and take a walk to clear his head, but couldn't get out of the water.

Birds in the area had sensed Ceola's infirmity and began dive-bombing him. He tried snapping at them, but couldn't lift his head. Ducks were swimming up to him, quacking and taunting him, but he was unable to smack them with his twitching tail. Ceola started drooling uncontrollably, literally gallons of drool. He felt queasy to the point of barfing out the smallest boar's whole, partially digested body. He wanted to eat the barfed-out boar body, but wasn't hungry. He began to cry. He tried to stop himself from crying, but couldn't. He hated wasting food, especially food that he had just eaten. Crows swarmed to eat the partially digested boar that Ceola had barfed out. He could only watch them gorge on his food. That dizzy feeling increased in intensity through the afternoon, and into the evening. That night Ceola actually passed out and became unconscious.

Ceola was unconscious for 15 days. He lost 92 pounds of body weight. When he awoke, he was really hungry. He realized that those boars had eaten something that had poisoned him. He vowed to not eat boars for a while, which he actually never did again, no matter how hungry he was. Ceola was content with killing all the boars he captured and letting the crows eat them. Ceola never ate crows, because he felt they were so scavengery that it disgusted him. He had watched crows eat a rotten catfish that he had rejected and it made him angry and their disgustingness. Ceola made it through his unconsciousness fine except for 2 things. His left eye had developed a slight continuous twitch. It didn't hamper his food catching enterprise, because when he lay in ambush in the water of the swamp, his eyes were unseen below the surface of the water. Even with his eye twitching, it was unnoticed by his prey. The other thing that happened

to him in his unconscious state was that he bit his tongue, leaving it a little tender.

Ceola made up for his weight loss by going on an eating rampage. He took his eating show on the road and left his swamp to actively seek out, destroy and eat large quantities of land animals. He applied a fresh layer of mud from the swamp edge, added the seaweed layer and started walking. Due to his immense size, he knew he needed to progress slowly. The sight of a log moving along through the woods too quickly would guarantee that he would be detected by his prey. It took a couple hours before Ceola spotted his first victims, herd of wayward goats. Ceola inched along toward the grazing goats. Inch by inch he dragged himself. Closer and closer, he got to them. Finally, he leaped into the middle of the herd and thrashed his tail and head from side to side with lightning speed. The goats didn't know what hit them. In 3 seconds, the 7 goats were all dead. Ceola swallowed each of them whole and moved on.

Ceola heard a thunder of hoof beats approaching. He stopped moving and waited. He saw the brush moving to and fro in front of him, with saplings being snapped by whatever was running. Then he saw the huge moose. It was bigger than the first one that he had killed before with his great leap. The moose ran directly toward Ceola and the alligator waited for the click. Now! With all his might, Ceola jumped straight up in the air with his jaws gaping. The moose ran directly into Ceola's open mouth and was instantly killed by the great gator's crushing force. Ceola ate the huge moose over a number of hours, savoring the flavor. After finishing the moose, he went to sleep until the next day. When he awoke, Ceola was feeling his old self again, full and happy, but still hungry for more.

A flock of turkeys had been clucking and clacking and gobbling, giving themselves away to any animal that could hear them, including Ceola. Turkeys didn't care if other animals heard them, since turkeys had such great eyesight and hearing. The instant that a turkey spotted or heard imminent danger, the entire flock flew up into the trees, safe from almost any potential predator. That is, they would be safe from any predator except for Ceola. Ceola sneaked along in the direction of the sound of the turkeys. He slithered snakelike for about an hour, when he at last spotted the flock, scratching around on the ground, eating nuts and insects, making a lot of racket. The turkeys were oblivious to Ceola's approach.

He inched closer. He was about 60 feet from them when he crawled over a branch on the ground and it made a muffled cracking sound. The turkeys stopped what they were doing and all looked in Ceola's direction. Ceola stopped. Ceola held his breath, afraid the branch would crack again. The turkeys all held their breath as well. The leader of the flock, the big tom turkey, gobbled. Sometimes when turkeys sense danger, they make a noise to test if there is a predator in the area or not. If an undetected predator hears the turkey's test call, the predator immediately shows itself, signaling the turkeys to take to the trees. Ceola didn't respond to the gobble. He kept holding his breath. Satisfied that there was no imminent danger, the turkeys resumed their

riotous activity.

Ceola inched faster. Another hour of inching and he was 23 feet from the flock, within his leaping range. Ceola crawled over another branch, making the muffled cracking sound again. The turkeys didn't hear the crack. Ceola leaped at the flock. He landed on top of the tom turkey, killing it, and then swung his mighty tail, killing 9 more. Ceola snapped at the remaining turkeys as quickly as he could, killing another 4. Ceola swallowed the turkeys whole in the span of time of 7 minutes.

Back when Ceola was 20 years old, before he killed a certain alligator, the gator had told him about the sweetest meat of all, that of a human being. The gator related tales of eating many humans - men, women and children. Apparently, human meat was so tender and delicious, that it tasted like butter. Ceola had never heard of human beings, being so isolated in his swamp. Ceola had never heard of butter either. The gator had traveled many miles before he unfortunately encountered Ceola on that day. The gator had been from northern Florida, far north of Ceola's swamp. Ceola grew jealous of the human-eating gator, wishing that he (Ceola) had also eaten humans. The gator told Ceola many intriguing tales. Ceola killed and ate that gator and became determined to find and eat humans.

In the 23 years since he met that gator, Ceola had never encountered a human. As interested as he was in the concept of eating one and tasting their "buttery" flesh, it didn't seem likely that it would ever happen. Whenever he encountered prey, he always hoped it would be a human, just once.

Ceola was in his swamp one morning when he heard an animal clumsily crashing through the woods, apparently indifferent to being detected. It sounded like a large animal, probably a moose. The animal was grunting something over and over. The grunting was unlike anything that Ceola had ever heard. As the animal came closer, a smell was detected by Ceola that he had never smelled before. "What was that animal?" Ceola said to himself. "Could it be a human?" The crashing and crunching of the animal got louder and louder. As the noisy animal came into view, Ceola found himself looking at what he thought was a bear walking upright on its back feet. The animal was covered from head to toe with fur like a bear, but was shaped differently than a bear. Its body was leaner and straighter. It must have been some kind of bear. It had to be. That human-eating gator had described human beings as being hairless and silky smooth. The animal in front of Ceola was not hairless. It had to be a bear with a non-bear smell that grunted a non-bear grunt.

Ceola had noticed that the bear had particularly large hairy back feet, without the long toenails that bears usually have. It probably lost the toenails during a fight with another animal. Its feet were larger than a bear's, probably because it always walked around on those feet. The bear had unusual paws on its long front legs. The paws had long toes on them, longer than the toes on its

back feet, also without the long toenails that bears usually have. It was definitely some type of bear that Ceola had never seen before. Maybe it had traveled a long distance as the human-eating alligator did. Maybe it came from the same area as that gator. The bear was carrying a long branch that it was somehow holding with the long toes on its right front paw. The toes holding the branch seemed to wrap around the branch. Ceola had never seen an animal holding a branch like that. Why was it holding the branch? What did it do with it?

Ceola's curiosity got the best of him. As the bear knelt down at the edge of the swamp to get a drink of water, Ceola slipped out a fart, which bubbled to the surface of the water. The bear saw the bubbles and grunted with a questioning tone. Then the bear smelled the fart and the jig was up. The bear instantly stood up on its back legs. Ceola knew he had to strike and prepared to leap from the water. The bear wrapped both front paws around the branch and raised it over its head. Now! Ceola launched from the water like a torpedo fired from a submarine. At the same time, the bear started to quickly bring the branch down. Ceola's body was 1/4 out of the water when the bear smashed the branch on Ceola's head. Ouch!

The bear hammered Ceola's head again with the branch. Ceola crashed down to the edge of the swamp. Before Ceola could leap up at the bear, the bear hit Ceola again. Ceola was surprised by the sudden attack of the bear using the branch in that manner. Ceola was seeing stars. He turned his great body hard to the right to head back into the swamp. In the same motion, he swung his immense tail and knocked the sneaky bear off its feet. The bear went flying, landing on the ground 16 feet from the edge of the swamp. Ceola was back in the water and had turned to look at the bear again from the middle of the swamp. The bear rose to its feet again, picked up the branch and proceeded back to the swamp.

When the bear reached the edge of the swamp, it stopped and stood there looking at Ceola in the water, who was looking back at him. The bear grunted. Ceola roared one of his loudest ever roars at the bear, expecting the bear to flee. The bear just stood there grunting. Ceola gingerly swam from the middle of the swamp toward the bear. The bear backed up a little. Ceola slowed and stopped. The bear stopped. The bear raised the branch high over its head, holding it in the right paw and grunted the same sound over and over, as if it were chanting something. Ceola had never seen a bear grunt in that manner. Ceola sneaked toward the bear and stopped. The bear backed up and stopped, maintaining about 12 feet separation between the gator and itself. Ceola swung his great tail sharply, lifted a large volume of muddy water from the swamp and splashed the bear from head to toe with the muck. The outraged bear began raising the branch up and down while continuing to chant its grunt. The bear then started jumping up and down while shaking the branch and grunting. Ceola couldn't believe that this strange bear appeared to be actually challenging him.

Ceola splashed the bear again. The bear put down the branch and searched around in the bushes

for something. The bear found an enormous rock, probably weighing 325 pounds and heaved it at Ceola. The shocked Ceola managed to jerk his immense body to the left as the rock splashed in the swamp next to him. Ceola splashed the bear again. The bear threw the branch at Ceola, hitting him in the forehead. The branch had only dealt Ceola a glancing blow and skimmed off into the water. Ceola turned to the floating branch and snapped it in half with his Herculean jaws. The bear had retrieved another even larger rock, probably weighing 450 pounds. Before Ceola had fully turned back to look at the bear, the bear had already let the rock fly. The huge rock hit Ceola in the forehead, in the same place that the branch had hit. Ceola's head momentarily went under the water from the force of the impact.

13. Rex's Ocean



13. Rex's Ocean

Water, water everywhere, as far as Rex's eyes could see. At first, Rex didn't know where he was, or what had happened to place him there floating in the cool water of probably an ocean.

After 7 minutes of floating there, with his head bobbing safely above the water, in the orange life jacket, Rex slowly recalled that he had been on his uncle Nicky's yacht, "Bayou Baby," when the yacht had accidentally rammed into a gigantic whale, sinking the yacht in 3 minutes, drowning everyone on board, except for Rex.

Rex remembered that he had been goofing around with his friend Tim, and had bet Tim that he, Rex could put on a life jacket faster than Tim could. Since Rex had been in the U.S. Navy for 4 years active duty, it was a requirement to be able to put on a life jacket as quickly as possible, in case of a maritime emergency, so that Rex had a lot of practice. Rex had bet Tim the sum of \$12,000.

Rex and Tim had removed a life jacket from the life jacket box on the deck, and Tim decided to try to put on the life jacket first, while the deck hand Gibby timed the event. Tim took the life jacket in his hands and Gibby said, "Ready, set, go!" Tim managed to put the life jacket on in 9 seconds.

Rex said, "Ha! I can beat that!" Tim took off the life jacket and handed it to Rex. Gibby said, "Ready, set, go!" Rex speedily put the jacket on in 7 seconds. "Ho, ho, ho!" said Rex to Tim. "You pay me!" Tim said, "Damn!"

Just as Rex was about to unclip the life jacket, Rex, Tim and Gibby heard a loud crash and a crunch. Gibby said, "Uh oh!" Screaming was heard below deck as the ocean water rushed into the hull of the yacht. The yacht began descending into the water.

Gibby had been on boats before that had rammed into floating objects, and he all was too familiar with that unearthly smashing sound. Gibby knew it wasn't a good sound. Gibby said, "We're going down boys!"

At the instant the yacht had rammed the unseen whale, Rex was launched through the air, hitting his head on the door of the control room, which knocked him unconscious. Tim was thrown into one of the masts of the sailing yacht, and was also knocked out.

The extent of the damage to the yacht was so catastrophic that that the luxury vessel had been split in two, causing it to fill with water and go down into the ocean. It was one of those things that happen so quickly, that whoever was in the wrong place at the wrong time, was a probably a goner, which was pretty much everybody on the boat. Luckily for Rex, he hadn't yet removed the life jacket after winning the bet.

Rex had been floating in the ocean for 17 hours, when he finally came back to consciousness, and he remembered what had happened. "Oh no!" said Rex. "I'm really in trouble!" Rex managed to slowly twirl around while floating, hoping to see something, anything that would indicate to him that he wasn't alone out there, something that would indicate to him that he would be saved. Rex saw nothing and nobody. It was then that Rex exclaimed in a crying voice, "I'm doomed!"

Rex's Navy years had left him a capable swimmer, where he was trained how to survive in the water by barely moving his arms and legs, to conserve energy, moving just enough to keep a little bit warm and to try to move himself in a particular direction. Part of Rex's training was being able to tell direction by the stars at night at the sun during the day.

Rex was only wearing a tee shirt and shorts at the time he went down with his yacht, and nothing on his feet. The time of day that Rex woke up in the water on that Thursday morning was about 10:00 am. The sky was really cloudy, enough that Rex was unable to discern where the sun was in the sky, so he was unable to tell in what direction he should try to float to progress in a direction that would lead toward land.

When they had embarked on their journey, Rex and his group had headed on a course to the Bahamas from Fort Lauderdale, Florida. They figured it would take 2 days to get there, the Bahamas being 100 miles from Fort Lauderdale. They sailed at a casual speed of 2-3 miles an hour, taking their time, enjoying the ride.

At the time of the sinking of the "Bayou Baby," the yacht had been located about halfway to the Bahamas, meaning that Rex was 50 miles from land in either direction! Rex floated for another 20 minutes, trying to get his bearings. What Rex didn't realize was that when his yacht sunk, even though he was halfway between Florida and the Bahamas, a storm had been moving from south to north, south of Rex's yacht, just before the yacht's sinking. The storm was probably the reason that the yacht hit the whale, because the whale was apparently trying to swim northward, to get away from the storm.

The storm had caught up to Rex, while he was floating unconscious for those 17 hours, and had carried him northward. The storm had placed Rex far north of where he thought he was. The storm had in fact moved Rex into the "Bermuda Triangle."

Rex decided to not get too upset about the cloudy skies, as long as it wasn't raining. Rex had noticed that he was really hungry and his stomach was starting to growl. The waves in the water were not too high, only about 2 to 3 feet, so the conditions weren't too bad.

The water in that area of the Atlantic ocean was about 66 degrees, not exactly bath water, but not cold enough to cause hypothermia, as would happen if Rex were in the north Atlantic, up near

Maine.

Rex thought that the only problem with his stomach growling, other than the fact that it reminded him that he was hungry, was that sharks are known to detect their prey by sensing the vibrations in the water. Normally, the vibrations created by a fish thrashing around in the water, for whatever reason, is what signal sharks. The gentle growling of Rex's stomach probably wasn't loud or rumbling enough to be detected by a nearby shark.

Rex hoped there wasn't a shark nearby just by coincidence, lurking in the water, waiting for something to eat. As Rex pondered what he was going to eat, the Gulf Stream currents continued to carry him farther and farther north of his previous east west line between Fort Lauderdale and the Bahamas. Rex soon found himself in a massive floating seaweed bed.

Rex had always heard that seaweed was a nutritious thing to eat, but had never eaten it himself. Rex knew from people who ate seaweed, that it had a kind of a sour, bitter, slightly off-taste. Rex guessed it must be based on the type of seaweed that it was that determined how it tasted, just like any other fruits and vegetables.

The seaweed bed that Rex drifted into had enormous leaves floating on the surface, leaves like giant lily pads, that frogs would sit on top of on a farm pond. The seaweed lily pads that Rex floated into were the size of a kitchen table. The seaweed had really long roots hanging down from the flat pad at the surface of the water.

Rex grabbed onto one of the giant seaweed pads, tore off a piece with his teeth and started eating it. "Hmm, not bad," said Rex.

As it turns out, seaweed is a highly nutritious vegetable, even though Rex felt like he was a rabbit eating the green stuff. Rex continued munching on the seaweed for an hour, on and off, until he was full of the seaweed. Rex thought that maybe he would be ok after all. He had found something to eat and he was alive, and he would eventually begin to energized by the seaweed calories.

The only problem with the seaweed was the long roots hanging down from the floating pads. Rex realized that he was trapped there in the seaweed bed, unable to make his way through it, his feet becoming tangled in the long hanging roots. He began thrashing about to try to get free.

"Damn!" yelled Rex. "I'm stuck! Now what?" As Rex yelled repeatedly, he found himself flying into a rage at the fix he was in. He began screaming, crying, swearing, spitting, burping, wildly laughing, farting and eventually pooping. Rex had found himself in a state of mind that he had never been in his life.

After he had pooped 3 times, Rex managed to calm himself, and he made himself think back to

his Navy survival training again. Rex recalled that the most important thing about water survival is not to panic. Any unnecessary thrashing around wasted energy and may attract unwanted attention to himself.

It was too late. Unfortunately, he had attracted the unwanted attention of a flock of frigate birds that had been flying across the Atlantic Ocean from Miami, Florida to Nassau, Bahamas. The flock had been diverted to the north by the storm, in the same way that Rex had been, and the frigates had been flying longer than they had originally intended to on their journey. The frigates were starving. Normally, frigate birds eat numerous times through the day, snacking on pretty much any seafood objects into which they can sink their razor sharp beaks.

The frigates had last eaten just off the coast of Miami, at which time they ate the rejected fish cleanings of a fishing boat. Depending on the type of fish that fishing boats caught, they sometimes brought the catch whole to the port, and other times they cleaned the guts from the fish out in the ocean, attracting thousands of birds of many varieties to eat the floating food.

Rex had heard the squawking birds approaching from a distance, and had managed to tear off a 3-foot piece of the root of the seaweed pad of which he hadn't eaten half. As the frigates swooped in for the kill, Rex started swinging like a madman. The first bird that Rex made contact with was knocked down, then the second, then the third, and so on.

Rex swung the seaweed root like Babe Ruth, in the season that "The Babe" had hit his record of 60 home runs. The frigates fell like bowling pins. As the frigates fell, the other frigates started eating the dead ones that started piling up on the giant seaweed pads.

Rex was surprised that those frigates were such sick cannibals. They really went to town on those dead and dying birds. Some of the birds were still alive while the other birds started tearing them apart. Rex thought that nature was very efficient the way it turned those birds on each other.

Rex kept swinging and kept killing and injuring the birds, a process that continued for 10 minutes, until all the birds were dead, dying or had flown away. "Take that!" yelled Rex. "That's what you get for messing with me!" After Rex survived the frigate bird attack, the experience had somehow energized him. Rex reckoned that if he could somehow pull himself up on top of the giant seaweed pads, he might be able to slither across the top of the pads, and possibly make his way to the edge of the seaweed bed, and to the open water, where he would determine the path that he would go.

There was something about being trapped in that seaweed bed that bothered Rex, because he had no control of the situation. Rex had spent his entire life of 31 years always being in charge of what was going on around him. Even in the Navy, he was an officer, giving orders to his

subordinates, never being told what to do.

Rex tried to pull himself up onto the giant pad, but couldn't do it. Simply pulling himself onto the pad was impossible, because he kept pushing the edge of the pad down into the water. He then kicked his feet while trying to pull himself up. He had to get far enough onto the pad, so that the pad would be able to support his body weight of 170 pounds.

It seemed to be working. Rex tried 14 times before he finally did it! He was up on the pad! Hurray! Rex then began carefully slithering along from pad to pad. It seemed to work, until Rex started slipping down into the water, as he tried to get onto the next pad. "Oh no!" Rex shrieked. "No, no, no!"

Rex had slipped down into the water, sliding under the next pad, instead of on top of it. "Damn!" cried Rex.

Rex was determined to get out of that seaweed trap. He tried again to get on top of the next pad, this time getting on top of it in only 10 tries. "Yes!" Rex tried slithering again to the next pad. Again, he slipped off into the water, under the pad. Rex tried again and again, finally getting on top of two pads that had overlapped each other.

Rex then reckoned that all he had to do was overlap the pads to make a continuous layer, like the slip and slide he used to slide on as a kid. Rex estimated that there were about 200 giant seaweed pads that he would have to slither across to get to the edge of the floating seaweed bed.

Rex managed to cross 6 pads when suddenly between the edges of the floating pads burst the head of a shark! "What the?" yelled Rex. As Rex's luck would have it, the frigate guts and blood and body parts that had resulted from the frigate bird slaughter, had oozed off the giant seaweed pads, like maple syrup oozing over pancakes, down into the water, attracting the evil sharks to the scene.

Another shark head poked through the pads, and then another. The sharks kept poking their heads through, but were unable to determine Rex's location on top of the seaweed pads. Rex decided to remain motionless where he was on the pad, to hopefully avoid the sharks' discovering him.

The sharks kept poking their pointy heads up through the pads, in the hopes of making contact with Rex. Rex realized what the sharks were trying to do. Luckily, before Rex had finally mastered the process of getting onto the pads, he had broken off a new 3-foot piece of seaweed root.

Rex had remained where he was, biding his time, hoping against hope that the sharks would leave, after they realized that there was no more food available to them there, other than the

scraps of frigate bird left over from the frigate bird slaughter.

Rex waited and waited and waited and waited, seemingly for hours, but in reality, it was only for 13 minutes. Just then, a shark's sandpapery nose poked up through the seaweed bed, barely grazing Rex's left elbow. It caused a brush burn, removing the outermost layer of skin, like the injury you get when you fall on a wooden basketball court.

Rex winced from the pain of the injury, but stayed frozen in place. Rex was hoping that the shark wasn't smart enough to realize that it had just made contact with a human being, and that the shark wouldn't correct itself and adjust its next nose thrust through the seaweed pad on top of which Rex was lying. Unfortunately, the shark was smarter than Rex had feared and had poked its pointy nose through again, and had speared through the seaweed pad, tearing through the giant pad, impacting with Rex's chest. "Oof!" said Rex.

Rex had to react quickly at that instant of life and death and slid just enough to his left to allow the shark to pop up through the torn pad. The shark stayed above the water, like a dolphin at Sea World, holding itself above the water with its flipping tail, so that it could look around. Rex batted the shark's face with the root as hard and fast as he could, and then poked the shark's eye with the root, popping the shark's eye, causing sickly black goo to ooze out.

The one-eyed shark did not return, disappearing into the water. Another shark poked up through the hole in the pad and Rex scratched its nose with the stainless steel whistle that was attached to the life jacket. The shark's blood trickled from its nose into the water, creating a cloud of blood in the water, attracting other sharks to the scene.

Rex hastily slithered to the next pad, then the next, to get as far away from the bleeding shark as he could. As nature took over again, the other sharks moved in and shredded the shark that Rex's steel whistle had injured. Rex kept retreating from the shark feeding frenzy site as fast as he safely could.

Just as Rex thought he saw the edge of the giant seaweed pad area, the clouds began to clear. When Rex first started his quest across the seaweed bed, he had been hoping that he was heading in the direction of east. Rex was trying to go east, because he wanted to keep heading in the direction of the Bahamas, which the day before was his destination.

The clouds clearing had in fact revealed that Rex had been heading in a southerly direction. Of course, unbeknownst to Rex, due to the storm that had moved Rex in a ridiculously northerly direction, he was actually nowhere near where he thought he was. Rex had to go with what he had before him. At least, he had the sun to guide him.

Rex's course was taking him on a path that would lead him north of the Bahamas, missing it, in a

direction that would go for a long way until he would eventually hit land, at Morocco, Africa.

The psychology of water survival is an interesting concept. As long as the person trying to survive in the water can maintain a positive attitude, they can endure. With positivity, they can sanely survive the deprived existence of floating alone on a great ocean, during their minute-by-minute, hour-by-hour, day-by-day struggle.

Rex was on his way, wherever that way was taking him. Rex thought he was doing the right thing by heading east, which he was. It was just that he was so far from where he thought he was, that it seemed a lost cause. The only way that Rex would ever see land again would be if he were rescued by a passing vessel of some sort that somehow had managed to see him.

Luckily, the life jacket that was keeping Rex afloat had that whistle on it, to be able to signal a passing vessel, if indeed there ever were a passing vessel. Rex continued toward the edge of the seaweed bed, in the same incorrect direction that he had been going before, just to get to the edge. Rex determined that he wanted to get out of the bed as soon as he could, and then would concern himself with the correct direction.

Rex made it to the edge, as the savage sharks finished slaughtering their own kind, just as the savage frigate birds had eaten their own kind. Nature was a crazy thing, thought Rex. Then nature stepped in again. Nature said, "Take that Rex!" when the thunderstorm rolled in on top of Rex, as he innocently floated there, in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean.

The rains thundered down onto Rex, in a manner that Rex didn't think was possible. The average person has witnessed a tremendous thunderstorm or two in their lives, but there really is nothing that equals the intensity of a thunderstorm over the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean. The ocean provides an unlimited source of moisture for the storm to feed on and rain down.

Rex was blinded by the rains, deciding to keep his eyes closed for the duration of the storm. The temperature of the ocean water had dropped a couple degrees due to the storm. Rex started to feel a bit chilly. As the thunderstorm continued to rage, a passing school of flying fish began flying into Rex's face.

Flying fish in an ocean tended to get a little bit jerky and fired up by a thunderstorm. The fish spastically launched themselves out of the water, more than they usually do. The fish were relentless in their crazed flying. Rex's face was battered again and again by the fish. Rex's face began to get cuts, bruises and abrasions.

There was nothing Rex could do. The fish kept coming. Rex screamed, "Stop, stop!" "What have I done to deserve this? What have I done to deserve this?" Rex cried the phrase again and again.

Rex could only blindly slap away at the fish projectiles with his 3-foot piece of seaweed root, not really having any effect on the marauders, since their small bodies were slippery and unhittable. Rex swatted and thrashed until he eventually made his way out of the fish storm.

The thunderstorm had continued, however, and the rains actually increased in intensity. "How can it rain so much?" yelled Rex. The storm yelled back to Rex with a violence that Rex feared.

During his years in the Navy, Rex had been at sea on a number of missions, sometimes encountering storms, but not like this thing. It rained and rained and thundered and lightnined. Rex wondered if he would be struck by lightning. The storm raged so heavily at one point, that Rex thought he might be killed by the lightning. "What have I done to deserve this?" Rex cried again.

The life jacket proved to be very effective in keeping Rex's head safely above the water, so he wasn't particularly worried about drowning. At least he didn't have to worry about that. Rex had to stop yelling, because the rain was pouring down into his mouth whenever he opened it. Rex had to be satisfied with only thinking his cries of fear.

The rains kept falling. The storm raged for what seemed like 3 days to Rex, but was really only for 5 hours. Whatever the length of time that the storm raged, it was too long, thought Rex. "Please stop!" yelled Rex, getting rain in his mouth.

As the great storm finally ended, Rex became hysterically happy and laughed until he farted. Then he laughed even harder because it was funny that laughing made him fart. Then, Rex laughed so hard that he pooped.

Seagulls approached Rex from the east, seeing Rex's poop floating in the water behind him as he continued drifting easterly. The seagulls landed in the water and ate Rex's floating poop as he drifted.

By that point, the only thing remaining in Rex's body to eventually become poop was the huge amount of seaweed that he had filled his belly with earlier. Rex thought it would be funny to see what his poop would look like after eating all that seaweed, and it made him laugh and fart again. Rex was unable to poop that time from the excessive laughter, because he had no poop left. Rex was wondering when he would poop out that seaweed, because he really wanted to see what it would look like. He was starting to get silly.

Rex figured the poop resulting from the seaweed would probably be a brilliant green, since the seaweed itself was green. Rex never really knew what color his poop was going to be, based on what he ate. One time Rex ate a huge bowl of red cherries and his poop came out green. He just never knew.

As the seagulls feasted on Rex's floating poop, Rex swung his great 3-foot long seaweed weapon at two of the poop-eating gulls, killing them. Rex's hunger for meat took over him, as he grabbed one of the gulls and tore it open with his sharp whistle. Rex pulled open the feathery skin of the gull, revealing its gull breast and bit into it.

Rex rarely ate raw animal protein, only eating steak tartar once and sushi twice. Rex had never eaten raw bird meat of any kind, much less the freshly killed gull that he had before him. The warm gull breast meat actually tasted pretty good. Rex finished the first one, then tore open and ate the second one, then killed and ate 3 more of the gulls.

Rex was starting to feel a little better with his situation. Rex had spoken too soon. There was something about the raw seagull meat, or the way that Rex had eaten the raw seagull meat too quickly, that didn't agree with him. Whatever the reason was, Rex started to feel nauseous.

"No, no!" cried Rex. Rex barfed the entire contents of his stomach, which included the seaweed that had been in there for a while and the recently added seagull meat. Some of the seagulls that were still there eating Rex's floating poop started eating Rex's floating barf. The sight of the gulls eating his barf so upset Rex that he barfed again, this time only barfing that little bit of liquid that you barf after you barf the out the main stuff in your stomach.

Those crazy seagulls even ate the little bit of Rex's stomach liquid that was floating. With his root weapon, Rex rained down blows upon the seagulls that were eating his barf and killed 6 of them. Rex then ate only two of the 6 dead gulls, deciding to limit his intake of the birds. Rex killed 3 more of the gulls and tucked the 7 dead gulls that he didn't eat into his life jacket where he could find space for them.

At least now he had some meat in his belly, with some saved for later. "Maybe things were looking up!" said Rex. Rex was back to speaking aloud to himself, since the storm had passed and the rain had stopped falling into his mouth.

In 2 hours, the dolphins that had followed the sharks that had tried to attack Rex, caught up with Rex. Dolphins are incredibly powerful animals, capable of swimming at great speed, and are fearless of sharks. Dolphins have been known to kill a shark just to have the fun of watching the other members of the shark school savagely tear to pieces the shark that the dolphins killed.

When dolphins played, they were unable to know their own strength, as the expression goes. Simple play to dolphins often resulted in the killing of the animal, fish or human that the dolphins were playing with.

The dolphins moved in to play with Rex and the fun for the dolphins had begun. At first, Rex didn't mind being battered between the dolphins like a football. The dolphins were laughing the

whole time. Rex had had enough, when one of the dolphins had bumped into his balls.

Rex swatted the dolphin as hard as he could with his root weapon and the dolphins relented with their torture. Rex breathed a sigh of relief.

Rex continued navigating his way to the east, according to the reading from the sun, hoping for the best. Hours passed as night fell. Rex continued navigating to the east based on what he could read from the stars in the clear sky. Through the night, Rex phased in and out of sleep. He tried to keep heading east as best he could.

In the morning, Rex woke up to a beautiful sunny morning, starting to feel the effects of the sun burning his face. Rex tore open 2 of the gulls, eating them and spreading the blood on his face to create a coating to protect his face from the sun. At first, the blood on his face was red and then as it dried, it turned brown. Rex thought he must be a sight floating there in the ocean with brown seagull blood on his face. "Too bad!" he yelled.

The whale swimming below Rex didn't know or care what was above it as it emerged from the great depths. The whale impacted with Rex directly over its blowhole. The whale blew out its blowhole with Rex on top of it, as the whale launched upward through the water.

Rex went flying through the air, landing 160 feet away with a great splash. Rex managed to hold onto his seaweed root weapon for dear life, knowing he needed to have it for his very survival.

A second whale ascended through the ocean, as did the first, coincidentally impacting with Rex, as did the first whale, right on its blowhole. The second whale did the same thing that the first one did, but this time, as the whale emerged from the water with Rex on its blowhole, Rex stabbed his root weapon down into the whale's blowhole and slid off the top of the whale, into the water.

Rex tried to get away from that area as fast as he could. He swam as fast as he could, limited by the life jacket. Rex got about 175 feet away from the whale when the sharks moved in. Then the seagulls moved in. Then the frigates moved in.

That whale was shredded to pieces by the sharks, gulls and frigates within an hour. The only thing left of the whale was its giant skeleton, which floated to the bottom of the Atlantic, where unseen bottom-dwelling sea creatures would feast on it for a long time.

Rex wouldn't eat again for a while, until he felt thirsty. The problem with the oceans of the world was that they were all too salty for humans to drink. The only way for Rex to get moisture in his body was from the raw seagulls that he had tucked in his vest. He knew he had to ration that precious food for as long as he could.

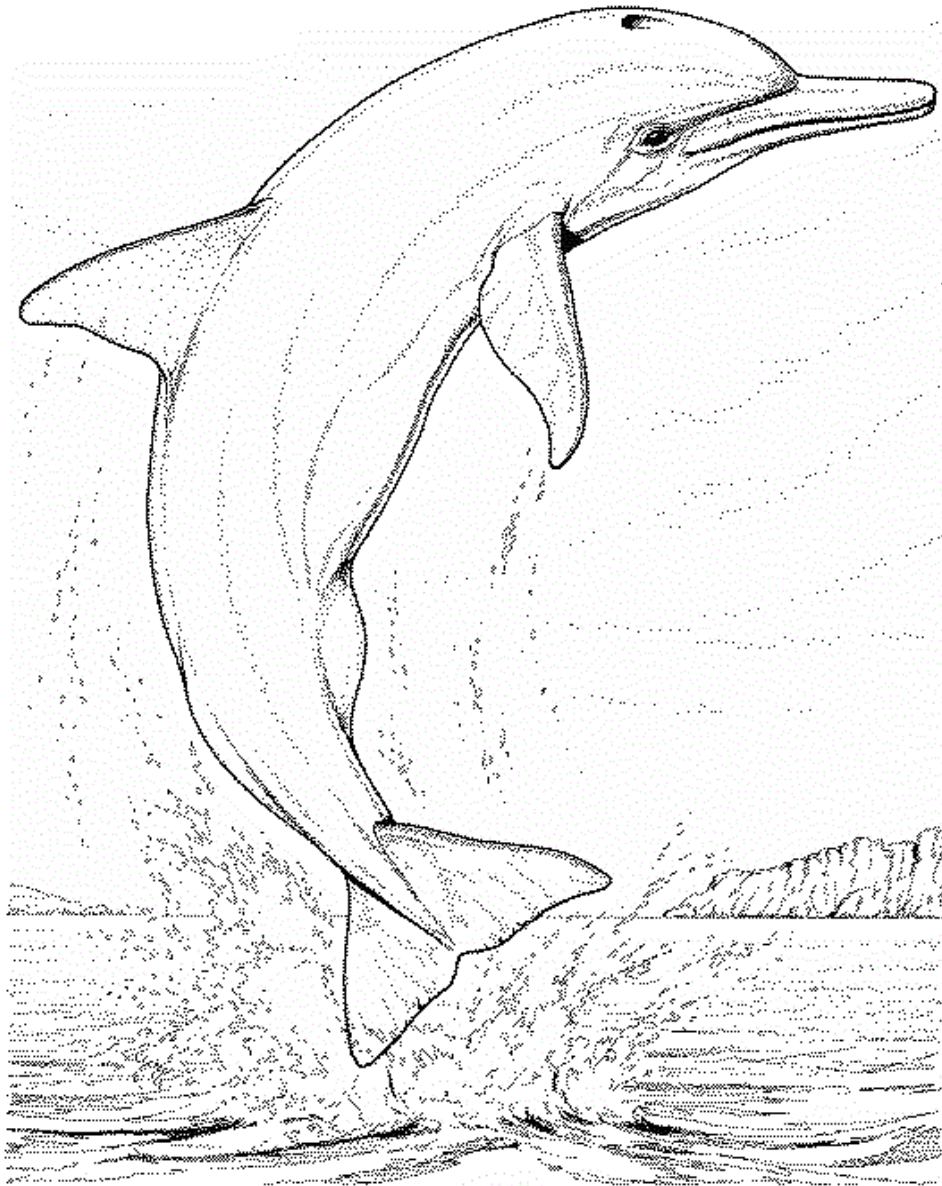
What he needed was a way of obtaining more meat and/or fish to keep with him for survival, to eat when he felt the need. Rex took the end of his 3-foot piece of root and started to chisel the end with the sharp edge of his steel whistle. After a while, Rex managed to get a nice sharp point on one end of the root. Then Rex proceeded to sharpen the other end of the root.

In 3 hours, Rex was able to poop again and attracted a school of brilliantly colored fish that ate his poop. Rex speared as many of the fish as he could, collecting about 30 of them. Rex ran the long pieces of the stringlike life jacket webbing through the holes in the fish he had just speared, retaining them on a kind of a fish stringer.

Rex had a nice bounty of food that would sustain him for a number of days. Apparently, there always seemed to be fish swimming in the area beneath him. All Rex had to do was take a poop in the water to entice the fish below to swim up and eat his poop. He could then spear the fish, add them to the life jacket stringer and eat the fish at his leisure.

Rex was set for a while. Wait! What was that? A fin! Another fin! Oh no, the sharks were back!

14. Echo's Guidance



14. Echo's Guidance

Until the moment that Echo had become trapped in the net, it had been a good day. He had been swimming around, catching and eating fish. He had just swallowed a sardine that he had followed into the net. Dolphins love eating sardines. The sardine had been swimming in a school of other sardines that the school of tuna had been feeding on. The tuna were really savage fish when they were eating. The way tuna ate was they swam together until they spotted a school of fish that they wanted to eat, such as sardines. The tuna then started swimming in a circle around the sardines until the sardines were trapped. The tuna then attacked, biting, eating and swallowing everything in sight. As Echo ate his sardine, the tuna were in the process of being netted by professional fishermen. Echo was accidentally caught in the net with the other tuna.

Echo felt very crowded in the net together with the hundreds of tuna, some of his friend dolphins and many other varieties of small fish. The fishermen put out the giant nets and caught whatever fish happened to be swimming in the water at the time that the net came by. Echo was packed in the net, face to face with a large tuna that had started burping, probably because it was being squished in the net and the tuna was full of sardines, having just gorged on many of them with the other members of its tuna school. The tuna kept burping to the point that it started burping out sardines. Echo didn't mind that the tuna was burping out sardines. Echo simply ate them. In fact, Echo ending up getting a nice meal out of his captivity in that net, eating 98 sardines burped out by the giant tuna.

When the fishing net was hauled onto the fishing trawler, it was opened and the contents spilled out onto the deck. The fishermen stood there with their hooked sticks pulling the choice fish aside. That particular trawler only wanted the tuna and threw all the other fish back into the Atlantic Ocean. The boat was operating just south of The Bahamas. There were laws in place that governed the fishing industry, which fishermen were expected to follow to the letter. However, due to the intense competition and low profits, no fishermen ever followed any laws to the letter.

Fishermen had to be careful to modify their fishing practice so that a minimum number of dolphins were captured along with the tuna. Since the dolphins tended to swim and eat with tuna in the wild, it proved to be difficult to prevent capturing dolphins. There were always 1 or 2 caught in each net. As long as the dolphins weren't harmed by the catching process, they could be released back into the ocean, to continue living their long happy dolphin lives. Once in a while though, they were injured and had to be put to sleep.

As Echo spilled out of the net, he overheard one of the fishermen say something to another fisherman. The one, Yuko called the other one's name, Zona. The instant Echo heard the word Zona, he started repeating it over and over with his squeaky dolphin voice. "Zona, Zona, Zona!" squeaked Echo. Yuko said, "Hey Zona! Did you hear that? The dolphin said your name!"

"Yeah, I can't believe it!" said Zona. Yuko called the captain. The captain ran over and saw the dolphin calling his crewmember's name and an idea came to his head. The captain's nephew operated a dolphin encounter park at Nassau, Bahamas. The park was always looking for new dolphins to add to its program. The captain would put Echo into the special tank in the hold, reserved for the rare times that they catch something unusual in the net. The special tank was aerated, so that Echo would be able to breathe comfortably. Yuko, Zona and the captain carefully dragged Echo over to the special tank and poured him into it. Echo continued squeaking Zona's name all the way back to the port.

At the port, the captain called his nephew, who quickly drove over with the special dolphin transport truck and some park staff. They removed Echo from the fishing trawler's special tank via a tunnel and placed him directly into the transport truck. The captain's nephew paid the captain the sum of \$3,500, which was a typical amount for a fresh dolphin. Back at the dolphin encounter park, Echo was introduced to everyone. The captain's nephew, Woodie told the staff how Echo was able to speak. Woodie said to Echo, while pointing to himself, "Woodie!" Echo replied, "Woodie! Woodie! Woodie!" Woodie said to staff member Viv, "Did you see that, Viv!" "Yeah!" said Viv. Una said, "It's unbelievable!" Viv said to Echo, while pointing to herself, "Viv!" Echo squeaked "Viv! Viv! Viv!" Una repeated what Viv had done and Echo said, "Una! Una! Una!"

Woodie saw the potential that Echo could bring to the park. It was amazing enough the way dolphins were able to peacefully interact with humans. The fact that Echo could speak would add greatly to the dolphin encounter by personalizing it. Echo would be able to say the names of the dolphin encounter participants, making the people feel special.

Echo lived and worked at the park for a year, becoming the star attraction. People came from great distances to see and hear the amazing talking dolphin. Eventually a billionaire widower by the name of Cassius Cosgrove had heard about Echo. Cassius' only son Travis had been an avid surfer his entire life where they lived in southern California. Three years before, Travis was surfing when he accidentally encountered a school of jellyfish that had ganged up on him and repeatedly stung his eyes. Travis was blinded by the jellyfish poison. Travis was devastated. Surfing had been his life. He had hoped to turn professional. Travis became severely depressed and started to convey suicidal messages to his father. Cassius had traveled the world, searching for blindness cures for his beloved son, to no avail. Cassius had heard a lot about the intelligence of dolphins and their ability to be trained to do almost anything. When Cassius heard about Echo, he flew from his California estate to the dolphin encounter park to see for himself.

When Cassius heard Echo repeat his name back to him, he was as amazed as everyone else was. Cassius talked to Woodie about his son's blindness and wondered if somehow Echo would be able to be trained to help Travis in the water. Travis hadn't been in the water since he had been

blinded. Everyone knew how Travis had practically lived in the water since the age of 3, when he first started surfing. Cassius hoped that if he could somehow get Travis back into the water, maybe he would come back to the world again. Woodie explained to Cassius the benefits of animal-human interaction and how the contact can heal many psychological wounds that people may have. Woodie also explained Echo's seemingly higher than normal dolphin intelligence. Cassius sensed the value of Echo to the dolphin encounter park and knew that it would be difficult for Woodie to part with Echo. Woodie emphasized that he would gladly permit Cassius to bring Travis to the park for customized encounter sessions with Echo. Woodie never imagined that Cassius wanted to purchase Echo from him.

Upon Cassius' offer to buy Echo, Woodie outright refused to sell Echo. Woodie realized that Cassius was wealthy, but didn't know he was a billionaire. Cassius would not give up. Cassius had rented a hotel room for a week, and had intended to stay in Nassau until he had Echo in his possession. Cassius wined and dined Woodie and the entire park staff for the next 3 days. It wasn't until Cassius had offered \$1,500,000 for Echo, that Woodie finally accepted. In addition, Cassius would help to fund the new addition to the park. The welfare of Travis was all that Cassius could think about, and he hoped the dolphin would help.

Woodie assisted in the transport of Echo back to California, locating a special tank and aerating equipment that could be loaded into an airplane for faster travel. Woodie flew with Echo and Cassius. Woodie helped to construct the water pen that Echo would live in when he played in the ocean and worked with Travis. Additionally, the special indoor facility was also designed by Woodie. All told, Echo cost Cassius \$3,000,000 to obtain and accommodate.

Over the following months, Woodie flew back and forth to Cassius' estate to help acquire and train aquatic assistants for Echo and Travis to work with in their encounter sessions. Summer and Rikki were the assistants who had previously worked with Woodie in Nassau, but had relocated to California. Woodie had devised a program for Travis to hopefully help him. Initially, Travis refused to leave his bedroom, which had become his habit as of late. Travis said he didn't want to play with some stupid fish. Summer explained to Travis that dolphins were much more than fish, being extremely intelligent. Travis argued that he knew all about dolphins, having watched reruns of Flipper on TV as a kid. Rikki tried to get Travis to go outside to Echo's pen, but he wouldn't go. Travis was stubbornly resisting all forms of help. Cassius had explained to Summer and Rikki the fragile state of mind that his son was in. The girls claimed that they had helped many unfortunate people in their years of experience. They just had to get Travis out of his bedroom.

Summer had taught Travis' name to Echo and got him going squeaking the name one morning. Echo squeaked as loud as he could "Travis! Travis! Travis! Travis! Travis! Travis!" Travis heard Echo squeaking his name and yelled out his bedroom window, "What the hell is that?" Rikki

yelled to Travis, "It's Echo!" "Echo? You're kidding!" said Travis. Cassius said, "I told you son. It's a special dolphin!" As Echo kept repeating Travis' name, Travis finally became interested. Travis yelled, "Bring me over!" Rikki ran to the house and guided Travis out of his old sweat and fart-smelling bedroom outside to the dolphin pen to be with Echo. Summer was in the water with Echo, as Rikki approached with Travis. Cassius had been standing there drinking lemonade, watching Summer and Echo. Summer gently coaxed Echo to the edge of the pen where Rikki had Travis kneeling on the edge. Rikki took Travis' hand and placed it on Echo's back, and said, "It's ok. Pet him." Travis started stroking Echo's back and tears came to Cassius' eyes. "He's so smooth!" said Travis. Echo quietly squeaked, "Travis!"

Rikki saw Cassius crying and started crying herself. Summer started crying as she voiced instructions to Travis. Travis detected the tears in Summer's voice and asked her, "Are you crying?" Summer said, "Yes." "Why?" said Travis. "Because he's so beautiful!" Summer said. "He is beautiful." said Travis. "What's his name?" "Echo!" cried Rikki. "Echo!" said Travis. "That's a cool name!" Echo gently squeaking Travis' name. Travis started crying, the first tears that he had been able to cry in 3 years. "He's yours, son!" said the sobbing Cassius. "He's ours!" said Travis. Travis then started bawling. The anxiety had been building up in Travis for so long, that he found himself uncontrollably hysterical lying on boardwalk at the pen's edge. Cassius knelt down next to Travis and stroked his hair. "You're back, son! You're back!" sobbed Cassius. "I thought I lost you!" "I was always here, Dad!" sobbed Travis. "I didn't know what to do, until now!"

The next day, Travis entered the pen with Echo, to begin the therapy sessions. Each day, Summer and Rikki would work with Travis and Echo, to build up Travis' confidence. They gradually increased the level of activity, eventually leading to Travis being towed by Echo through the water. Travis would hold onto Echo's main back fin and be dragged through the water. The key to Travis' recovery was to get him to enjoy being in the water again, his only love.

The thing about real surfers, as Travis was, is that once they start surfing in life, it is all they think about every day. Whenever they are away from the waves, they are thinking about them. Some always waited for the perfect wave, but all agreed that all waves are perfect, as created by nature for them. Losing his sight was catastrophic to Travis, because it took away his ability to ride his waves. He had lost all desire to have any contact with water. He gave up taking showers, having to be sponge bathed daily by a visiting nurse. He physically let himself go, becoming soft and squishy, whereas before he was athletically built.

Perhaps Echo had saved Travis' life. Everyone around him thought so. At least Travis had started to come out of his bedroom again where he had lived almost entirely for 3 years. Even though Travis was starting to feel better about himself, and had started swimming again in the

big pool, he still missed surfing his waves. If only he could get back out into the ocean again and ride. To Travis, there was nothing like the sensation of floating on a surfboard on a gnarly wave on the ever-changing surface of the ocean. He felt that it was like flying through space. There was never any pure control when surfing, only managing the outcome. The ocean handed the rider a wave to ride, and the rider did the best they could with it. If the ocean wanted to let you have a nice ride to the end, you did. If the ocean wanted to break your neck at the end of the ride, it could do that as well. There was no control, only managing the end. It was such an indescribable thrill. No surfer could ever put into words the feeling of surfing, only saying that people have to experience it to believe it and feel it. Travis craved to surf again. He would never be able to see the water, but if he could only get up on top of a wave somehow, maybe that would be enough. He needed to surf again. He was back in the water again, with the amazing Echo, but he wanted more.

Travis had always heard of those parks that had killer whales, dolphins and sea lions doing tricks and goofing around in the water with the trainers. He seemed to remember seeing someone riding or standing on the back of a dolphin while the dolphin swam. If somehow he could ride or stand on Echo's back while Echo swam around, it would be the next best thing to actually surfing. Travis had already been working with Echo where he was pulled by the dolphin through the water. Travis was still in the water, holding onto the back fin. The next step was to ride on top of Echo's back as Echo swam. Summer and Rikki soon trained Echo to accept Travis on his back. At first Echo was reluctant, but in a short time allowed the activity. Echo swam faster and faster with Travis having to get strong enough to hold onto the speeding dolphin. Echo began jumping out of the water and hurtling through the air with Travis tightly clinging. Travis felt himself getting stronger and more fit and he liked it. He was actually starting to feel happy again.

After 6 months of training with Echo, Travis asked to be able to stand on Echo's back. Marine parks have special harnesses that attach to dolphins, enabling someone to stand on the back of a dolphin and steer the animal. It would be difficult for someone who is blind to accomplish the feat, since they would have to be able to see where they were steering. Summer and Rikki felt that it would be possible for Echo and Travis to work something out. Echo was such a unique dolphin that it was very likely that he would be trainable to act as the eyes for Travis. They ordered a special harness for Echo, which had to be custom fit for his enormous size of 12 feet long and 1100 pounds of bulk. Echo didn't like the harness at all, hating the constrictive feeling that it gave him. The dolphin almost smashed Rikki into the side of the pen when she tried to put it on him. Travis was shattered. The trainers assured him that it would be ok. Echo just needed a little time to get used to it.

Summer and Rikki decided to slowly introduce the concept of an object being attached to Echo a little at a time. At first, they tied soft rubber bands around him. Then they added more and more straps over a period of 2 months. The day they finally attached the special harness to Echo, he

actually swam into it as soon as Summer placed it into the water. He must have figured out the ultimate purpose of the harness and had finally accepted it. Travis couldn't wait to try it out. Summer insisted that Echo get fully adapted to swimming with the harness on him for a while. Echo swam with the harness for a month, and then the trainers felt it was safe to try it with Travis. Echo waited in the pen with Summer and Rikki in the water at either side, steadying him. Cassius had one of the gardeners assist Travis as he stepped onto Echo's back wearing special socks. Travis thought it would be just like stepping onto a surfboard again, but he was wrong. After 3 years of being away from surfing, Travis had lost the balance that he had acquired from years of surfing.

No sooner than he had both feet on Echo's back, Travis wobbled and fell into the water. Travis tried again and again, falling into the water each time. The trainers realized that Travis would need balance exercises in the gym first before he could try standing on Echo's back again. Travis was getting frustrated. Another month passed as Travis worked on his balance in the gym, practicing standing on a surfboard that was attached to saw horses. When he felt he was ready, they tried to stand on Echo again. It worked! Travis could stand on Echo's back without falling in the water. As Summer and Rikki released their holds, Echo instinctively swam slowly as Travis spoke to him. They were actually doing it! Travis started crying. Echo swam to the end of the pen and slowly stopped, then turned around to head back to the beginning again. They continued the procedure, going faster each time. In a few days, Echo was swimming at full speed with Travis confidently holding on.

Travis wanted to go out into the ocean with Echo. Cassius feared that as soon as Echo got into ocean waters, the dolphin would escape. Summer and Rikki told Cassius that Echo might want to escape or he might feel at home with its captors and never want to leave. It was a chance they had to take. Cassius knew that Travis would never be truly happy only riding the dolphin around in the pen. Cassius knew Travis needed the ocean or he would lapse into his sad depression again. One day, they decided to open the pen and let Echo swim out into the ocean with Travis on board. Echo stopped at the gate of the pen and looked back at Cassius, saying his name. Cassius told Echo it was ok. Travis said to Echo, "Come on, boy! It's ok!" Echo squeaked, "Travis! Travis! Travis!" Travis started crying as Echo swam out into the beautiful blue ocean. Echo stayed close to the shore and swam up and down the coastline. After an hour, Summer whistled and Echo swam back into the pen. Travis was still crying. Cassius started crying. Summer and Rikki started crying. They took the harness off Echo's back and went into the house to talk about what had just taken place.

Travis was so impressed by his ride with Echo that he couldn't stop talking about it. The thing Travis really wanted though, was to surf again. Would it be possible he asked, to ride Echo the way he just did, while Echo was on top of a great wave. Could they get Echo to swim out into the ocean, wait for a wave and then ride the wave with Travis aboard? Summer and Rikki

thought Travis might be pushing things a little too far. If something went wrong, it could be a disaster for Echo and Travis. Travis insisted that he didn't care about the risks. He had nothing to lose. He was blind after all. What is the worst that could happen? Summer and Rikki were looking out for the welfare of Echo. They felt it would be unfair to expect Echo to perform such a feat. It would probably violate PETA regulations. Cassius emphasized that Echo was his possession, to do with what he chose. Summer responded that Echo was more like a pet than a possession. Travis thought if he could at least get out into the ocean with Echo and get a feel for the waves, maybe they could pull it off. What would it hurt to try?

Travis was obviously appearing to everyone to be selfish, not caring about Echo. In reality, Travis cared about and loved Echo and would never do anything to hurt the dolphin. Travis was so confident in Echo's abilities that he felt they could do it. Cassius gave his approval.

The next day Travis and Echo went surfing. It took a number of waves, but with Cassius calling out from the beach, a surfable wave finally came and Echo mounted it with Travis on board the dolphin's back. They seemed to be doing it! Echo was on top of the wave surfing toward shore with Travis safely steering where he felt they should be aiming. Travis was surfing again! From all his years of surfing on a board, he had developed a feel for being on top of a wave. Even though he was standing on top of Echo, it was a similar feel. Echo transmitted the feel from the wave to Travis. Travis started crying. They made it into the shallows ok where Summer and Rikki helped Travis down.

They tried it again and again. Echo was happy. Travis was happy, but wanted to surf on a bigger wave. He had surfed 25-foot waves in Hawaii and wanted to do it again. Cassius was nervous about the idea. Travis wanted the big waves. Cassius reluctantly said ok.

The following week, they all went to Hawaii with Echo's equipment. The waves were 20-25 feet in height and all the pro surfers were surfing them. The waves were treacherous. The coral was sticking up everywhere in the shallows. The undertow was horrendous. It wasn't the type of surf ever attempted by amateurs. When Echo and Travis arrived, the pro surfers questioned what was going on. Everybody recognized Travis, but no one could believe he was in the water again, with a dolphin no less. Cassius, Summer, Rikki and Travis explained to everyone what they were attempting to do. The other surfers thought Travis had gone insane, but cleared the water for Travis and Echo to try it alone out there. The very first wave was surfable and they mounted it. It was a beautiful site to behold. One of the pros forgot to bring in his board in all the confusion and as Travis and Echo came off the 22-foot wave, they collided hard with the board and lost all control.

15. Rafi's Cave



15. Rafi's Cave

The boy, Rafi, was only 8 years old, but as all were the children of his village, Rafi was thoroughly educated in all the important things of surviving in the world. Rafi had been in the cornfield that Friday morning before school, with his younger sister Seefa and his older sister Barta, harvesting ears of corn from that season's crop, when they heard a mild rumbling sound.

Living in the village of Daya, within such a relatively close distance to the volcano, death by volcano was perpetually on the minds of the villagers. The chief of the village, Hafo had important information passed down to him from the previous village chief. It was that the volcano was nothing to be taken lightly. The village called the volcano Jabu Jabu, which in their language meant, great fire. The volcano continuously oozed lava, which the villagers hoped would keep the volcano from ever erupting, because the continuous lava flow was like a pressure relief valve.

Many stories had been told to the villagers by Hafo, stories of volcanic eruptions, horror, death and destruction. Hafo had an 24-hour alarm system in place in the village where each adult male villager took turns in shifts for 4 hours each, waiting at a giant tortoise shell with a large hammer in each hand. If the person on alarm duty heard rumbling sounds from Jabu Jabu, sounds that were louder than the usual continuous rumbling that accompanied the lava oozing, the person at the alarm would begin to feverishly hammer at the giant tortoise shell.

The volcano hadn't erupted in 41 years, and that eruption had only caused some minor damage, with minor injuries. The eruption before that one occurred 72 years ago, killed 16 people and burned the village to the ground. Hafo knew of much fiercer eruptions in the past that killed almost all the villagers, in addition to destroying the entire village and farm fields.

The reason the villagers remained in that location so relatively close to the volcano was due to the super rich volcanic soil, in which their crops grew beautifully. There was also a stream right there, which produced fish, crabs and eels.

On that morning, the person on watch was Addallo, Rafi's grandfather on his mother's side. Addallo heard something. Addallo wasn't positive if what he was hearing was in fact an increase in Jabu Jabu's usual rumbling, because it was windy that day. Addallo didn't want to set off a false alarm, because any volcano alarms always caused a panic in the village indicating they were all about to die. Addallo listened as hard as he could to the rumbling, which had increased, just as the wind increased, somewhat muffling the rumbling, so Addallo neglected to beat the tortoise shell alarm.

Rafi and his sisters had heard the rumbling better than Addallo, because the cornfield had trees around it that muffled the wind a little.

Addallo was up on a platform between the village and the volcano, where it was windier than down on the ground, and he was unable to distinguish the increased rumbling sounds that Rafi and his sisters had detected.

Rafi said to Seefa and Barta, "Is Jabu Jabu awake?" Barta said, "No, it couldn't be! Addallo would be playing the alarm." Rafi said, "Yeah, you're right." Seefa said, "Yeah."

Suddenly, the rumbling increased so quickly that at the moment that Addallo finally decided to hammer the alarm, as he raised his right hammer to bring it down on the giant tortoise shell, the top of the volcano exploded. A deafening roar was heard by the villagers at the instant of the eruption, and in seconds, nothing was heard by anyone, because they were all destroyed by the explosion.

The super-heated rock, molten lava, acidic ash and choking smoke poured from the volcano in such quantities that a circular area around the volcano the length of a football field was covered, burying everything. Everyone and everything in that area around the volcano was gone. Where there was a moment before a beautiful little village, a moment later there was nothing.

Rafi hadn't trusted Addallo to do the right thing that Friday morning, instead trusting his own instincts. Rafi knew Jabu Jabu was angry and against the screaming wishes of Seefa and Barta, Rafi had run as fast as he could to his cave.

The cave was Rafi's secret place that no one knew about. Rafi had discovered that underground cave a year ago while he was looking around for flint for arrowheads. Rafi had wandered outside the village boundary, which was enclosed by a fence, a practice forbidden by Hafo. The village had a distinct boundary around it, which all the children had to stay inside of, for their own safety.

The whereabouts of the children had to be known at all times, to protect them from being eaten by the tigers and leopards outside the village. Rafi was a rebellious child and wanted to impress his mother and father by finding the most flint for arrowheads. It was the duty of the children to find the flint, in addition to their many other duties.

On that day, Rafi had to leap over the boundary fence, which he was able to do easily, with a good running start. When Rafi landed on the ground after leaping over the fence, his right foot went down into the ground up to his butt. As Rafi tried to free himself from the hole, his other leg went down in, and as he kept struggling, his entire body slipped down into the hole, which turned out to be a cave.

Rafi didn't know it at the time, but that Friday morning was the last time Rafi would ever see his sisters, mother, father or anyone else. At Rafi's age, he was unable to relate to the fact that when

he had run away from his sisters, he had been abandoning them. All Rafi knew at the time he ran away was that he felt he was instinctively running to his cave for his life. Rafi didn't think, he just ran, as his sisters screamed at him to come back. As Rafi ran to his cave, he cleared the boundary fence and had just 4 seconds to roll aside the old log that he used to cover the entrance to the cave, jump down into the cave, and roll the log back over the top up the cave, before the volcano erupted.

Actually, the volcano did more than erupt, since the top of the volcano was blown off. When a volcano erupts, it usually is still in one piece after the eruption. That time though, Jabu Jabu had literally blown its top.

Rafi was down in his cave, sitting on the stacked flat rocks on the floor, which was 6 feet below the roof, looking up at the sliver of daylight between the edge of the old log and the edge of the cave at the ground level above. Then Rafi heard the explosion, which hadn't deafened him, because he was somewhat protected from the extreme noise down there in his cave. Rafi's ears were still ringing from the racket though.

As Rafi looked up at the sliver of light, and Jabu Jabu exploded, Rafi saw the sliver of light disappear. "Oh no!" thought Rafi. "What happened up there?" Rafi wondered if Seefa and Barta were ok. He wondered if his parents were ok. He wondered about Hafo. As Rafi's cave darkened, he reached for one of the fat candles that he had stowed down there, and sparked it with flint to light it. That was a little better. At least he had some light down there.

"Why was it dark up there? What happened to the sun? What about mom, dad, Seefa and Barta? What about Hafo? Were they all still ok?"

When the major rumbling of Jabu Jabu finally stopped 3 hours later, Rafi began to have scary thoughts. Rafi munched on some tiger meat jerky that he had sneaked out of the village along with the candles, water and other supplies that he had stashed down there. Rafi had so many supplies down there in that huge cave that he reckoned he would be able to live for many months if he had to.

In the past, Rafi had fantasized, while he picked corn or whatever crops he had to pick before school, that he would sneak away to live down there in his cave. Rafi thought back to all those times when he was daydreaming about living alone down in his cave, but he never actually thought it would happen. It was just something to think about doing, just for fun.

Rafi had always been kind of a solitary boy, not really enjoying playing with his sisters, who Rafi considered weak. Rafi was in fact stronger than his older sister Barta was, and could beat her at wrestling. Rafi was so strong in fact, that he was tougher than some boys who were older than he was and he could beat them at wrestling.

Rafi felt alone down there in his cave and wondered what had really happened to his village. Rafi waited for another 2 hours, as Jabu Jabu's rumbling sound returned to its pre-explosion noise, thinking what to do next.

Rafi looked around his enormous secret cave, which was the size of a small house. Somehow, the rock-walled cave had formed over the centuries, probably from the slow seepage of underground water channels. The cave gradually opened up and got bigger and bigger, away from the opening where the entrance was.

Rafi stood up on the stacked flat rocks and tried to roll the log that was over the cave opening to get out of his cave to see what was going on up there. Rafi applied the usual amount of force to the log that he had in the past. The log didn't budge. Rafi tried harder. The log still didn't budge.

"Oh no! Am I trapped?" Rafi tried again and again, to no avail. Rafi found a hunk of an old fence post that he had stowed down there and began to smash at the log to try getting it moving. That didn't work either.

Rafi started to feel trapped. He realized when the sliver of light had disappeared, that it must be because Jabu Jabu had vomited whatever was in his belly. Jabu Jabu had covered Rafi's cave! Would he be able to get out of the cave to see his people again?

Rafi was unable to think of what to do. He was only 8 years old. Even though in Rafi's mind he felt like an adult, capable of acting like an adult, he was no adult.

What now?

Rafi looked around his cave and wondered how long he would be able to live down there if he couldn't get out. He knew he had a lot of dry food and gallons and gallons of water saved. There was even a small trickling stream down there, providing fresh spring water. What about the air though?

If Rafi couldn't see the trickle of light anymore in the roof of the cave entrance, was the air sealed off as well? He seemed to be able to breathe ok. The enormous volume of the cave had a large amount of air still in it, which would probably last as long as he needed, he hoped. As Rafi pondered his fate, he ate some dried papaya and drank some water.

He went to take a piss at the far corner of the cave, all the way down at the lowest part of the floor, where the stream trickled down, and disappeared. Rafi had a kind of a toilet there at that corner, which the tiny stream managed to rinse clean as it trickled down into the floor, taking the piss and poop with it. As Rafi pissed, he looked around the cave, trying to figure out how to get out of there. Rafi then squatted and took a poop, wiping his ass with a leaf he took from the

stack of banana leaves that he had stored there.

The poop really stunk and then Rafi quickly thought that if there were no way for air to get into his cave, then any stink that he would create would stay in the cave.

Rafi then grabbed another piece of tiger jerky, and while he chomped it, thought that maybe he shouldn't be eating his food and drinking his water the way he was. What if he couldn't find a way out? Would he starve down there or die of thirst? Rafi decided not to worry about eating less of his supplies or drinking less of his water. Rafi felt he needed to keep doing things the way he was doing them, to be able to think clearly.

Rafi was a very industrious boy, and he was confident that he would figure a way out of his secret cave. Rafi sat there for hours on the floor under the cave entrance with the candle burning, until he became drowsy and fell asleep.

On the next day, Rafi woke up to total darkness, because the candle had died. Rafi panicked, as he looked around, wondering where he was, and why was it so dark? The cave! He was still trapped in the cave! "Oh no!"

Just before Rafi woke up, he had been dreaming that he was in the cornfield, picking corn with his sisters. Suddenly Rafi missed them, as he never had in his life, because they were always there every day. Would he ever see his sisters again? Rafi felt tears coming to his eyes and was alarmed that he felt that he was about to start crying, something that he had never done in his whole happy life.

Rafi had seen other people in his village cry when one of the elders had fallen into the big sleep, which Rafi's parents had explained was the creator's way of taken people to the sky, where they would be happy forever with all their ancestors. Rafi told himself that he would not cry, and stopped the tears flowing. No one was going to the sky, so no tears were necessary.

Rafi missed his sisters, even though he had just seen them yesterday.

A week went by down there in that cave, and it really started to stink, with the stench of piss and poop trapped down there. Luckily, Rafi's nose had begun to dull the smell, so to Rafi it wasn't that bad smelling down there.

Rafi continued to eat and drink his supplies as much as he wanted, still not worrying about running out. He hoped to be out of there soon. His supply of candles was dwindling, so he was careful to put the candle out before he went to sleep at night, so it didn't burn as he slept.

One of those candles, though large, only lasted for 2 days of continuous usage while he was awake for 17 hours each day, sleeping for 7 hours.

Rafi started to hear things down there in the cave at night, after he blew out the candle, and tried to sleep. He started to hear a kind of scratching sound, as if some kind of creature were clawing at the rock somewhere in the cave, unseen to Rafi. "What was that?" thought Rafi.

Was it a snake, a worm, a mole, a mouse, a badger, a weasel, some kind of burrowing bird, like an owl?

Those were all animals that Rafi had seen and eaten while he lived above ground, in the days before he became trapped there in his secret cave. Even though Rafi had food and water down there that would last for what he thought was many months, how long would the air supply last? Rafi could only hope for the best.

The candles that he burned each day, probably used up some of his air down there, and smoked a little, not too bad, but he had to put up with the smoke of the candle to be able to see with the precious light that the candle provided. Rafi was starting to think that the candles were more valuable than the food and water down there in his secret cave. He needed to be able to see.

Rafi wondered what it would be like down there if he couldn't see at all while he was awake. The thought scared Rafi. What if his candles run out? He would be trapped down there in the cave in total darkness!

Another week went by down there in the cave and Rafi thought the scratching sound he was hearing at night before he fell asleep was getting a little louder each night, but he couldn't be positive.

Rafi counted his remaining candles. In the 2 weeks that he had been trapped down there in the cave, Rafi had used 7 candles, one every 2 days. Rafi had 47 candles left, which was enough for 94 days, plus or minus, depending on the actual size of the candle and actual hours used. Rafi decided to put the candles out sooner than previously, to preserve them. He would only burn the candles for 14 hours each day, sitting in the darkness for 3 hours before he fell asleep, not an easy thing to do for an 8-year-old boy with an active imagination.

Rafi was gradually starting to go into a survival frame of mind, eating and drinking less and less each day, to preserve his supplies. Even though Rafi reduced his caloric and water intake, he found that he wasn't hungry, because all he did was walk around the cave occasionally and sit a lot, not really burning many calories, due to his low activity level.

Those extra hours of sitting in the darkness before going to sleep at night began to wear on Rafi's psyche. As soon Rafi blew out the candle each day, the scratching sound started, whatever it was. Those extra hours of darkness down there in the cave meant extra hours that Rafi would hear the scratching, which Rafi felt had been getting louder and louder as the days went by.

Maybe his ears were playing tricks on him.

Rafi wasn't positive, but he thought that the air down there, as big as the cave was, was starting to get a little bit harder to breathe. He couldn't be sure though. He may have only been imagining. He was imagining more and more things down there in his jail cell, his secret cave, his prison.

Without knowing it, Rafi was slowly suffocating in the cave. Rafi thought his most precious thing down there was light, and then food and water, but realistically, the most important thing to his survival was air.

When Rafi had run from his sisters to his cave 2 weeks before, and he had thought he was attempting to save his own life, it was starting to seem to Rafi that he had actually unwittingly sentenced himself to death.

Another 2 weeks went by for Rafi, food and water dwindling, air dwindling, candles dwindling. Rafi began to feel his sanity dwindling.

Rafi still felt his most important commodity down there was his candles and had continued to attempt to preserve them by blowing them out sooner and sooner. After a month down in the cave, Rafi had reduced the amount of candle burn time to only 10 hours a day, so that he was sitting in the darkness for 7 hours before he eventually went to sleep for 7 hours. He began singing spiritual songs.

The mysterious scratching sound that started when he blew out the candle each day was getting louder and louder each day. During the 10 hours of light that Rafi had limited himself, he looked around the cave for the possible location where the scratching might be coming from. When Rafi had light, there was no scratching and when he had no light, he heard the scratching, but was unable to determine where the scratching was coming from.

On the 36th night, as Rafi sat in the darkness for 7 hours, he tried to think really hard what could be making the scratching sound. In the darkness, Rafi stumbled around, trying to get a feel where the scratching was coming from. Whatever was making the sound, the creature must have had some kind of sensory ability to feel Rafi's vibrations. The creature would stop scratching whenever Rafi would take a step in the darkness.

There was no way for Rafi to determine where the scratching was coming from. Rafi finally gave up trying to find the location where the scratching sound was coming from. In Rafi's gradually increasing insanity, he started to wonder if there in fact was a creature making a scratching sound at all. "Poor me!" thought Rafi. Was he imagining the scratching?

On the 62nd day, when Rafi woke up, he had just been dreaming about the time when he was fishing with his father and uncle, in the long boat. On that day, the men had reaped a great

harvest of fish for the village of Daya, everyone was happy, and they had a great celebration. Rafi loved fish. He missed the taste. There were no fish in the cave.

Rafi realized that he must have been crying at some point while he was asleep, because there were tears in his eyes. Then Rafi began actually crying and then bawling and after 5 minutes, he stopped. Rafi then realized that he had needed to cry. He actually felt a lot better. Crying relieved the pent up stress of being trapped down there alone in the increasing darkness with that mysterious, unidentifiable, gradually getting louder, scratching sound.

Rafi had reduced burning the candles to 8 hours per day, then sitting in the dark for 9 hours while waiting to fall asleep, as he listened to that scratching sound.

Rafi concluded that the air in the cave was definitely decreasing at that point and out of desperation, finally decided to try the drastic step of digging his way out of his subterranean prison. Rafi started to ram the piece of fence post into the ceiling of the cave next to the log that covered the entrance. Rafi had refrained from the idea before, hoping that his village people would find him there, not realizing that his entire village was killed by the volcano exploding. Rafi also was afraid to mess around with the ceiling of the cave, thinking that it would collapse and bury him with dirt and rock.

Rafi felt that he had nothing to lose, and began hammering away. With the very first impact of the fence post on the ceiling, a huge amount of dirt had collapsed onto Rafi, burying him up to his waist. Rafi knew there was a reason that he didn't want to mess with that ceiling before, and that moment proved it to him. Rafi gave up trying to dig his way out of his secret cave almost as soon as he had started. He would have to wait. He sang some songs.

Rafi felt he was a quitter for not trying harder to get out of the cave, but he was gradually getting weaker and weaker from the reduced rations and from the reduced air supply.

As long as Rafi could retain his sanity, he felt he could survive anything. Rafi had been brought up in a spiritual environment in which people believed that if they lived a good clean life, loved their neighbors, and always did everything to the best of their abilities, then the creator would always take care of them.

Rafi down in his cave had begun to slip away from his teachings and beliefs and felt that he was beginning to lose his mind. Rafi ate less and less and tried to limit his activities, to limit the amount of energy that his body needed to survive each day. Rafi kept singing.

On the 77th day, Rafi awakened to tears. He had been waking up every day crying. Rafi was sad and disillusioned, and was beginning to give up hope. The dark sessions were resulting in longer and longer times of louder and louder scratching. What was making that scratching sound? Why

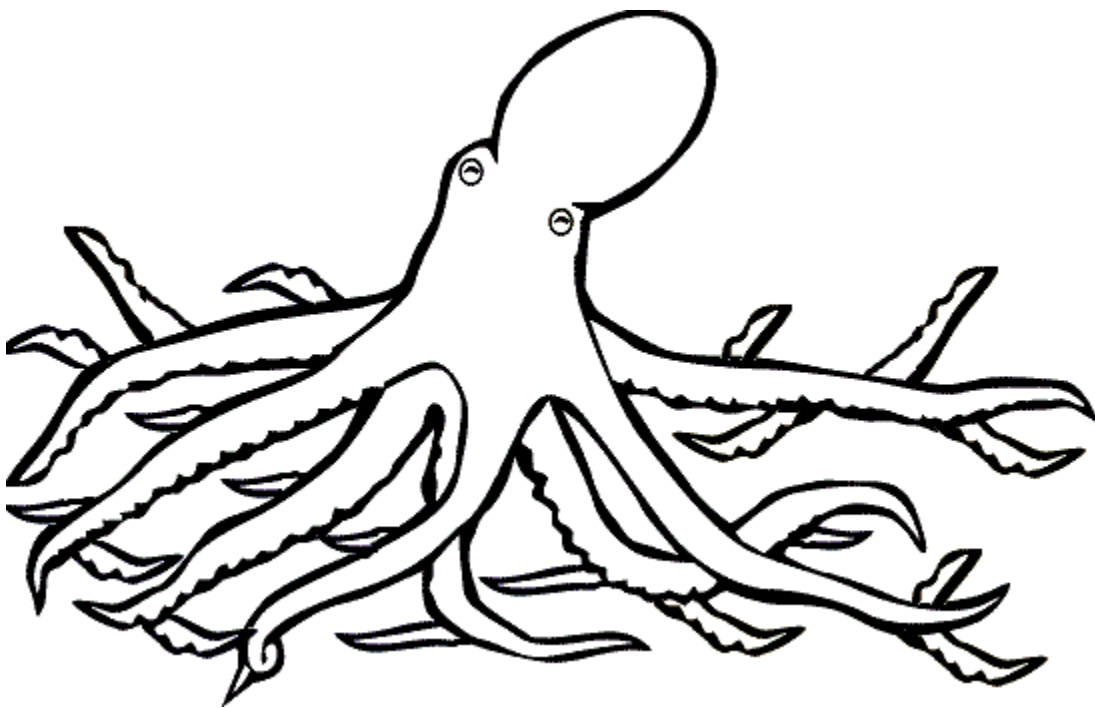
doesn't it stop? Rafi stopped singing the spiritual songs.

Rafi wished more than anything that he could cease that nighttime scratching sound that was making him insane, more than anything else down there in his stupid secret cave.

Rafi fell asleep and found himself drifting in the water peacefully. He was alone in the water, but oddly happy. He had forgotten what it was like to be happy. He was warm and not hungry. He was just floating in the sunshine. The air was mildly breezy and fragrant. Where was he? He was floating on the water, but he wasn't in a boat. How was it possible to float on water like that?

Rafi was awakened from his dream by something falling on his forehead. Bits of dirt and sand were trickling down on him from the ceiling. He opened his eyes and some of the dirt from the ceiling fell into them. He rubbed his eyes and squinted. He saw a circle of the brightest light he had ever seen. Light! It was light from outside! There was a hole in the roof of the cave! Fresh clean air poured in through the hole. Some animal had dug a tunnel!

16. Fausto's Nook



16. Fausto's Nook

As Fausto emerged from his nook, really just a small cave in the coral reef there in Bonaire, he felt hungry. It was like any other day for the 810-pound octopus. He was always hungry. For the past 69 years, Fausto had lived there gradually enlarging his nook to accommodate his ever-increasing size. Fausto was much larger than the average octopus, probably due to his old age. Since he had such a great hiding space, he was able to live many years, unharassed. The octopus is one of many animals in the world that no one knows how long they live or how large they can get. Most people think that when an octopus loses one of its tentacles, another one grows back. That fact was true with most octopi, but not with Fausto. In Fausto's case, every time he lost a section of tentacle, 2 new tentacles grew back. In addition, each of the grown back tentacles would generate 2 more, if those tentacles were severed. He still had his original 8 thick tentacle trunks that he was born with, at the connection points to his body. Fausto stopped counting, but at his last count, he had 177 tentacle tips emanating from his immense body. It was a combination of different lengths and thicknesses. Fausto looked like the mythological Medusa.

Fausto found that the extra tentacles gave him an incredible advantage when grabbing onto food. Approximately 300,000 suction cups populated the tentacles, with tiny teeth on each cup, providing unparalleled grip. He could wade into a school of fish and wreak havoc on it, with his limbs flying and grabbing in all directions. Fausto was so powerful and knowledgeable of battle, that there was no animal in the sea that could kill Fausto, and his hundreds of encounters had proven it. He had won out over stingrays, manta rays, barracudas, giant squid and giant sea turtles. Many sharks had come and gone, trying to make Fausto their meal, but it always ended up with Fausto eating them. Sharks weren't Fausto's favorite meal, because he found them a little stringy. He never initiated the attacks on them; it was the foolhardy sharks that always came after him.

One Wednesday Fausto headed out into the deeper ocean to find something new to feast upon. He located a large manta ray and set his sights on it. As he swam toward the ray, a large whale had the same idea. The whale got to the manta ray just before Fausto and gobbled the ray down. Fausto was infuriated. Did that whale know whom he was stealing food from? The whale began to leave the scene and Fausto latched onto its massive whale body with his tentacles. Fausto was on the whale's back right behind its head, with his tentacles completely wrapped around the whale, overlapping when they came up over the top of the whale. That ensnaring process was only possible because of the lengths of the various tentacles. Fausto began applying a constricting pressure on the whale, like a boa constrictor. The whale laughed. Fausto became even madder. How could that whale be laughing at him? The whale should be in pain. Fausto realized that the pressure he was putting on the whale did nothing to it. Whales were just too big and solid to do any damage to them. Fausto hung on anyway.

The whale swam with Fausto in tow. Riding on the whale's back was actually fun! Fausto had never traveled through the water at such great speed before. The whale took him to places he had never seen. When the whale needed to get air, it swam up to the surface and propelled its huge body out of the water, sucking in air. Fausto found that to be amazing. Those whales really seemed to have a good time. He wished he could swim as fast as a whale, but he was simply too clumsy. With all his tentacles constantly squirming around, he didn't have the best aerodynamics. Fausto had observed whales many times from a distance, never considering eating one. He always wondered about them. Whales typically lived in super deep water, whereas Fausto frequented the shallower water of his main food sources. Fausto never knew how the whales lived. He only spotted them when they swam up from the deep, got air, and then swam back down again.

Fausto's whale swam through a school of tuna to eat and Fausto took advantage. While still holding onto the whale with most of his tentacles, Fausto spared some of them to grab tuna fish for his own consumption. Fausto was impressed by how many tuna the whale could eat. The whale swam back and forth through the huge school of fish, eating and eating. Fausto was able to eat 64 tuna for himself, which filled his belly. The whale had eaten thousands. It seemed like a pretty good situation for Fausto. There he was clinging to the back of that whale, while the whale brought him to the food. Fausto didn't have to waste energy swimming around looking for food. The whale couldn't do anything about Fausto on its back, but seemed content as long as it could still go about its business.

Days went by with Fausto on the back of the whale, seemingly in peaceful coexistence. Then another whale came along. The other whale, larger than the one Fausto was riding didn't seem to like the presence of Fausto. It seemed to want to get near Fausto's whale. The bigger whale was probably a male, trying to mate with Fausto's whale, which was probably a female. Whales mate by one getting close to the other one's back. Fausto was in the way of the mating process. Since whales only mate during one week of the year, it was important to the bigger whale to accomplish the act soon. For 3 days, the bigger whale tried to push Fausto from the back of the smaller whale. Each time the bigger whale got close, Fausto smacked the whale's face with a number of his tentacles. The suckers on Fausto tentacles had numerous small teeth, which enabled the gripping ability. Each time Fausto smacked the whale's face, it scratched it. The bigger whale was getting angry. The bigger whale didn't want to hurt the smaller whale in the process of ramming Fausto. It tried to give Fausto the chance to get off the smaller whale's back, with minimal fuss. The bigger whale sensed that it only had a couple days remaining to mate.

The bigger whale started blowing high-pressure water from its great spout into Fausto's face. That proved to be very irritating to Fausto, but not enough for him to relinquish his grip. The bigger whale tried to carefully bite Fausto, without biting the smaller whale, but Fausto was too tough. The bigger whale smacked Fausto's face with its humongous tail, but it didn't work. The

bigger whale tried to bite the Fausto's tentacles to pry them loose, but Fausto held on tighter.

Fausto liked his situation and didn't care about what the whales were trying to accomplish. Fausto continued to cling as tightly as he could. After a week passed, the bigger whale swam away, apparently giving up trying to mate with Fausto's whale. Fausto laughed at the bigger whale when it left. Fausto stayed on his whale for a month, riding and eating. He wondered why he didn't think of riding whales before. One of the times his whale surfaced for air, Fausto noticed a ship approaching. Fausto had seen all matter of boats and ships in his days, unconcerned by all of them. To him they were similar to whales that swam on the surface all the time. Ships didn't bother Fausto and he didn't bother them. Fausto couldn't kill and eat a ship, so he ignored them, usually hiding when he spotted one.

Fausto's whale surfaced again right next to the ship that had sneaked up on them. The ship seemed to know where his whale was going to come up again. Somebody on the ship threw something at Fausto and his whale. It looked like some kind of stick with a rope attached to it. Fausto thought nothing of it, until the stick stabbed him in the back. He didn't feel any pain from the stick, only that it was pulling on him. The people on the ship had been trying to stab the whale for some reason, but had stabbed him instead. The guy on the ship continued pulling on the rope. The guy was yelling something to another guy. The stick was stuck in Fausto's back and he started to feel himself being pulled off his whale. Fausto increased his grip to maintain his place. Fausto held tight. The people on the ship yelled more and more. Three more guys threw sticks and started pulling. Fausto couldn't hold on any longer and to his disgust, was pulled off his whale. Fausto couldn't believe they somehow got him off his whale.

Fausto's whale quickly swam away laughing as Fausto was pulled onto the ship. Everyone on the ship was yelling and screaming. They were really carrying on. It was as if they had never seen an octopus before. They certainly had never seen an octopus like Fausto. When on the ship's deck, Fausto got angry. He began thrashing his many tentacles in every direction, grabbing onto the men. The men were shrieking at each other. Fausto crushed and ate some of them. Others he threw overboard. Some he slithered on top of and suffocated. The men continued to stab him with sticks, to no avail. Fausto was unkillable.

Two of the men poured some kind of liquid on Fausto and ignited it, but burned to death some of their own men. Fausto laughed. Some men were beating Fausto with sticks, accidentally hitting their own men. The men on the ship had soon realized their error in bringing the massive octopus onto the ship. They had to do something quickly or they all would perish. They dropped a large net on top of Fausto. Fausto couldn't escape from the net as hard as he tried. His tentacles tangled in it as he tried to remove the net from his body. The net was attached to a strong rope. The net closed around Fausto and lifted him up off the ship's deck. Fausto was unable to do anything as the net moved out over the water. The net opened and Fausto spilled

out into the water. He was free! The ship sped away with its few remaining injured crewmembers.

Fausto's whale was gone and he was left out in the middle of the ocean with no free ride. Fausto was hungry. He slowly swam in the direction that he thought led back to his nook. He was a long way from his home. He swam for 2 days, getting tired and even more hungry. He managed to eat some sardines and squid, but they didn't satisfy. He wasn't used to swimming for extended periods. An octopus' body isn't conducive to swimming, being designed for slithering in the nooks and crannies of coral reefs. Fausto floated and fell asleep for a while, waking up inside of some kind of net again. The net was moving along through the ocean. He was completely packed in there along with seemingly millions of fish. He thought he must have been dreaming. Fausto began eating the fish around him. He ate as fast as he could. He ate tuna, dolphins, sharks, squid, crabs, sardines and many other small fish. It seemed to be an even better situation than riding the whale had been. He ate for hours.

Fausto felt the net getting higher in the water as it moved along. It began to get brighter. It seemed the net was being lifted out of the water. Fausto saw a ship. He thought that the men from the ship from before hadn't learned their lesson and had picked him up in the net again. He was in a different kind of net though. Then he noticed it was a different ship. The net was being pulled into the back of the ship. It was a very long net. He heard men yelling on the ship. Fausto continued eating everything around him. Fausto didn't want to deal with men on another ship. He decided he had enough food for a while and slipped out of the net just as it loosened at the back of the ship. There was a lot of screaming going on as he entered the water. Fausto's belly was full again and he was happy.

He resumed swimming in the direction of his nook. Three days passed. Fausto was exhausted from so much exertion. He didn't know how much longer he would be able to keep swimming. He thought that he would have to do more floating. Suddenly an airplane splashed into the water in front of him. The plane didn't go under the surface all the way and just floated there. Fausto swam up to the plane. The water tasted like oil, gasoline and blood. Five dead bodies were hanging out of the plane's smashed windows and doors. Fausto ate the bodies. Inside the plane was some kind of bird in a metal cage. The bird was still alive! Fausto carefully reached into the plane, dragged the cage out and put it on top of the plane. The bird was very colorful and seemed to be saying something. The bird chanted, "Fausto!" Fausto wondered how the bird knew his name. Maybe it had been taught to the bird. Fausto liked the cheerful creature. Fausto moved the caged squawking bird toward the back of the plane on the tail, where it could stay, while he climbed on top. He was near total exhaustion. Fausto was glad to be able to rest again and fell asleep for 35 hours. The bird seemed to sense Fausto's tiredness and had remained quiet as Fausto slept.

Fausto woke to the happy bird chirping some melody. It was beautiful. He had never heard a bird sing like that, being under water for most of his life. Fausto was glad he didn't hurt the bird when they first met. He had eaten the bird's owners, but they were already dead when he got there. He noticed the bird had plenty of food and water in the large cage, so he wasn't worried about its welfare. The bird and Fausto floated along on the airplane for a while. Fausto's stomach was full of human meat, so he was content. After 6 days, Fausto noticed the bird was running out of food. The water bottle in the cage was still 3/4 full. Fausto pried the cage door open to let the bird out. The bird flew into the airplane and found a cooler full of food, the contents of which were still cold. The bird ate 2 packs of all-beef wieners, 1 dozen raw hamburger patties, a 1/2 gallon of coleslaw and drank a quart of milk. The bloated bird flew back into the cage and drank some water from the bottle. The bird then flew out of the cage and landed on Fausto's head.

The bird seemed unafraid of the giant octopus. Fausto had watched the bird as it ate and was impressed by its appetite. Fausto became fond of the bird as it kept him company and sang to him as they drifted. The dead bodies that Fausto ate had kept him full for a while, but he was getting hungry again. Fausto felt that the food in the airplane was fine for his feathered friend to survive on, but he didn't want any of it. The airplane that they were floating on created a shaded area under it that was ideal for fish to hang out. At first, there were no fish, but as the airplane floated, fish started to find the shelter and stayed under it. Fausto noticed the fish and grabbed and ate a few every couple of hours, being careful not to eat all of them. The fish that remained attracted other ones. The bird still had a large amount of food and bottled water inside the plane to feast upon. He found a bag of his bird food in there as well. Fausto occasionally tossed a fish to the bird for some fresh protein.

The bird ate the flies that tried to eat the skin on the top of Fausto's head and Fausto appreciated it. Every 6 hours Fausto slipped into the water to get wet, since the beating sun was drying out his leathery skin. The bird flew back into plane while Fausto performed the act. When Fausto slithered back onto the plane again, the bird happily flew back to Fausto's head and sang a greeting. They seemed to have everything they needed until the search plane flew overhead. The plane passed by and passed by again. In 7 hours, a ship approached, probably looking for the airplane's passengers. As the ship neared, Fausto made his move. He didn't want to have anything to do with a ship again. Fausto slipped down into the water and swam away, leaving the bird behind. Fausto didn't want to leave the bird behind, but it couldn't survive in his world. He figured the bird probably wanted to get back to humans anyway.

Fausto resumed swimming back home toward his nook. A week passed, leaving Fausto tired and hungry. He began floating to save his strength. He sensed something beneath him rising from the deep. Was it a whale? It was similar to a whale, except it was really hard and solid feeling. A submarine had surfaced and Fausto found himself lying on top of it. As with his previous

whale, he wrapped his tentacles around it to hold on. The teeth on his suction cups were unable to get a grip, but he overlapped the tentacles enough to compensate. The sub stayed at the surface for a while and Fausto felt it vibrating and making different sounds. A shaded area under the sub had attracted fish and Fausto was able to gorge again. He was content as long as he was eating and resting. He didn't need anything but food and sleep to survive. Fausto took a nap as the sub remained at the surface.

The submarine descended below the surface waking Fausto and began moving. Fausto found that as the submarine sailed along under the water, it swam just like a whale. The sub swam through schools of fish from which Fausto was able to partake. Fausto held onto the sub, ate when he could and was content again. Fausto felt like he was back on his whale again. The sub smashed into a shark and Fausto grabbed it as they sailed by and ate it. The sub hit a small whale, splitting it in half. Fausto grabbed onto the smaller half and held onto it, eating it over a 2-day period. The sub navigated into a school of tuna, providing much succulent eating for Fausto. The sub swam through a cloud of jellyfish, which Fausto slurped into his mouth like gravy. When the sub drove through the millions of shrimp, it slowed for some reason, enabling Fausto to gorge heavily on them. Fausto ate 13 dolphins as the sub moved along. He liked eating dolphins, because then went down easy. Numerous sea lions, walruses and tarpon were devoured as well.

Some days passed and the sub ascended and stayed on the surface. Men came out of a door on the top and noticed Fausto sitting there and started screaming and carrying on. Once again, Fausto was in a situation of dealing with screaming nervous humans. Just when things were going along so smoothly, those humans had to ruin it. They brought out a fire hose and blasted it at Fausto face, trying to get him off the sub. Fausto tore the fire hose from the men, whipped it at them and knocked them into the water. Fausto fished the men from the water and ate them. He also leisurely ate fish from the shade under the sub. They tried to throw things at Fausto, which he threw back at them, knocking the men into the water. Fausto ate those men as well. They got as close as they could to Fausto and tried to shock him with large cattle prods. He grabbed the prods from the men, shocked them to death and ate them.

The men tried whipping him with long whips, which he latched onto, whipped them, killed them and ate them. Fausto laughed at the men. The men screamed back. The men ran at Fausto with pots of boiling water, probably from the kitchen. Fausto knocked them off their feet and they were scalded by the spilled hot water. He ate their scalded bodies. The men were unable to fire the machine gun at Fausto, because he was between the gun and door where the men came out of the sub. Nothing seemed to work. It looked as if Fausto were there to stay. He was content going along for the ride. He was saving his energy by riding on the sub, until he was back home again. The men gave up harassing him, went under water again and resumed sailing the sub.

Fausto stayed where he was. He hoped the sub was taking him in the direction he had to go, but as long as he was getting a free ride, it was ok. The sub submerged to a greater depth than Fausto was used to, stayed at that depth and he began to get dizzy. When he was riding the whale, it had gone to great depths as well, but only for a short time. He was able to recover from those dives. He felt his grip getting weaker. He wondered how long he would be able to hang on. He grew dizzier. He made sure his long tentacles were overlapped and the suction cups were biting into the other tentacles. He drifted to sleep. He dreamed about that happy bird that knew his name and sang to him. He really liked that bird. Fausto woke up at the surface of the ocean. He must have released his grip while sleeping. He was back to floating on the ocean again.

The big whale had vowed to take revenge on the mutant octopus. The octopus had interfered with the big whale's mating ritual. The whale searched and searched for the octopus and had found it! The whale slowly swam toward the surface, stopped beneath Fausto and looked up at the many-legged octopus. Fausto felt himself lift up in the water from the wake created by the whale. Fausto turned his head to look down into the water as the whale opened its gaping maw to inhale the octopus.

17. Aldo's Lockbox



17. Aldo's Lockbox

Aldo was driving down the highway at about 85 mph, listening to one of his favorite songs on the radio, "Cherish" by "The Association" on an oldies station. The condition of his car, a 1969 Dodge Charger was the limitation on how fast he could go. The car was a little loose in the suspension and the tires/wheels could definitely be better balanced. He closed his eyes for a second, enjoying the amazing harmonies only capable of being produced by "The Association" or "The Beach Boys," when he instinctively opened them just in time to see an animal scurrying in front of him.

It was of those instantaneous reactions, where you have no control, but you just flex. He jerked the steering wheel ever so slightly to the right, since the animal was passing his view from right to left, and was in front of his side of the car. As the song on the radio neared the end, Aldo and his Charger launched off the road, through the cable guide rail, into a ravine, ending up in a stream. The stream was flowing quite heavily, due to the recent rains and started pouring into the car through the open windows. A raccoon that had been searching for crayfish in the stream ended up in Aldo's face and began to savagely scratch and bite at Aldo's eyes and cheeks. Aldo grabbed the critter and chucked it out the passenger window. The raccoon went flying through the air and landed in a pine tree. The animal snarled at Aldo and ran away.

Then a crayfish, probably one that the raccoon was trying to catch, clamped a claw onto the tip of Aldo's nose, causing him to shriek in pain. Aldo ripped the crayfish from his nose and threw it out the same window that he threw the raccoon. The crayfish's claw tore his nose when he pulled it off. The crayfish landed on the back of the running raccoon. The raccoon squealed in delight and ate the crayfish, then continued running away. The water kept pouring into Aldo's car and he started to get nervous. He had to get out of that car! The car was wedged between two trees that were growing on the edges of the stream and Aldo was unable to open the doors to get out. He unbuckled his seatbelt and slithered like a snake out the window on his left. Just as Aldo reached the bank of the stream, the water had filled the car to the roof and washed it down the stream, unwedging it from the trees in the process.

Aldo was lying on the bank of the stream watching his car float downstream. He could still hear the car's radio playing the Beatles song, "She loves you, Yeah, Yeah, Yeah!" Aldo yelled at his car, "Hey, come back here!" He started running down the stream bank, next to his floating car, keeping up with it as it floated along. As he ran, he was focusing his attention on the car and not totally paying attention to what was in front of him on the ground. He stumbled on a branch and fell face first in mud. Aldo wiped the mud from his face so he could see, and looked downstream to watch his car, when he felt a pain in his right foot. "Ow!" Aldo howled. A snapping turtle had a solid grip on Aldo's right sneaker and was clamping down on his foot! Aldo grabbed a stick from the ground and started whacking on the shell of the turtle. "Let go!" Aldo screamed. "Let go!" After 90 seconds of whacking at the turtle, the turtle let go of Aldo's sneaker and crawled

into the rushing stream, disappearing from view. "Whew!" Aldo said.

Aldo looked down at his right sneaker, which was partially ripped. He wiggled his sore toes. He assumed they were all there. Aldo started down the stream bank again after his car, catching up to it in about 30 seconds. He jumped onto the roof of the car and got down on his hands and knees for more stability. Aldo was calm again, now that he was back with his car, even though the rushing stream actually owned his car for the moment. The current of the stream was rapidly increasing. Aldo heard something that sounded like a waterfall, but thought there was no way that a waterfall could be there in the woods. He squinted to look ahead to where the stream was flowing, when he was hit in the face by a fish! Apparently, when the stream was as flooded as it was at the time, the fish got really energetic and jerky, jumping out of the water and splashing about. A nice trout had bounced off Aldo's face, landing in the water behind the car, where it kept splashing around, seemingly laughing at Aldo as it swam away.

Aldo wiped the fish slime off his face and spat out the slime that was in his mouth, and then he spat again to make sure he got it all. Aldo squinted again downstream when he spotted what appeared to be a drop off in the stream. A waterfall! He couldn't believe what he was seeing. There was nothing he could do about it. The stream's current grew faster. The stream was taking him and his car for a ride, whether he wanted it to or not. Aldo was too afraid to jump from the car in the fast moving current. Aldo braced for the journey over the waterfall by grabbing onto the top rim of the front windshield, so he wouldn't go flying off the car. Aldo tightly closed his eyes and took a deep breath in case he went under water. Here we go! The stream took the car and Aldo over the falls! The waterfall was only about a height of a one-story house, but it seemed to Aldo like a tall building! He felt himself starting to slip off the slippery roof from the force of the water. Man, the water was cold!

Aldo and the car both went under the surface of the water, down into a deep pool at the bottom of the roaring waterfall. Aldo opened his eyes to see a huge black snake at the bottom of the pool with a large green bullfrog in its mouth. Aldo continued holding his breath as he and his car exited the pool, heading downstream. The stream's intensity increased as they progressed. Aldo was listening to a song on the radio that was still somehow working, even though the car had just been completely under water. The radio somehow switched itself to a station that played current music and was playing a "Taylor Swift" song. Aldo liked the song, one of the few "Taylor Swift" songs that he liked. He couldn't believe the radio was still functioning.

Aldo and the car floated along for about a minute until the stream curved and on the left bank of the stream was a sandy area. The car eased onto the sandy area and stopped, enabling Aldo to hop off the roof onto the shore. Aldo opened the doors of the car to let the water out and noticed that the car was still running! Luckily, the stream was located in the woods in a relatively flat area and Aldo was able to drive the car from the sandy area through the woods, back to the road. Aldo was soaking wet and he was sitting on a soaking wet car seat that was making squishing

noises whenever he moved on the seat, like the sound of a wet sponge. It was a warm summer day, so the wind blowing into the car through the open windows helped to dry off Aldo and the inside of the car.

Aldo wondered what kind of animal it was that had scurried across the road in front of him and he figured it was probably a woodchuck. He thought it didn't really matter at that point in time anyway, but he wondered just the same. After about 2 hours of speeding down the road at 85 mph, Aldo's hair and clothes had dried except for the seat of his pants, which was still squishing and squashing on the wet car seat. He decided to pull over at the campgrounds coming up on the right. The camping was open to everyone, whether or not you had a trailer, so he paid the guy 4 dollars for one night and found a nice spot where there wasn't anybody else around, so he could have some privacy. He started a fire and hung his clothes on sticks stuck in the ground next to the fire to dry his clothes. Sitting there naked on the log next to the fire, Aldo felt somewhat funny, but no one was around, so it didn't matter.

He thought back to the days when he was a Boy Scout and had learned how to catch fish and cook them on a fire. His campsite was right next to the pond, so he had easy access to fishing. He went to the car, opened the car doors wide to dry out the inside and got his fishing rod from the trunk. Everything in the trunk was still wet, so he left the trunk lid open to let the warm breezes dry out the trunk's contents. The rod's fishing line still had the Mepps spinner tied on from the last time he was fishing in the lake by the volcano. Aldo found that he could catch a large variety of fish using that spinner, because it had a size zero treble hook, so even sunfish, perch and small bass could hit on it and be caught.

It was getting towards late afternoon/early evening, so the fish were probably going to start biting. Sure enough, on the first cast he got a bite and a fish, a nice 6-inch bluegill sunfish. After a half-hour of fishing, he caught 9 more bluegills, enough for a decent meal. He kept rotating his clothes on the sticks by the fire until they were dry and put them back on, because he was starting to get a little chilly. Aldo scaled and filleted the fish, putting the fillets on sticks to cook over the coals of the fire. He seasoned the fish with some of the nacho cheese Doritos that he got from cooler in the trunk. Fortunately, when he left on the trip the day before, he put those chips in the cooler to keep them from being damaged by the steel lockbox filled with the money that he planned to bury out in the middle of nowhere.

The fish was perfectly cooked and tasty and Aldo washed down the meal with some Gatorade from the cooler. After Aldo ate his supper, he started whittling the figure of a bear from a soft piece of wood he found while gathering kindling for the fire. Aldo loved to carve stuff from wood. He had many wooden things that he had carved, hanging from his rear view mirror. He usually attached the carved objects to a leather lanyard to be able to wear the carvings as pendants. People always commented favorably on his carvings, because he employed such workmanship and detail. One thing he had noticed from the incident with the stream flooding

the car was that he lost his favorite carved giraffe that was hanging from the mirror. It was his oldest carving. The leather string had likely weakened after 7 years of wear and tear, and had finally snapped when the car became flooded.

He would need to carve a new giraffe after he finished the bear. Aldo had a photographic memory for seeing things and then being able to whittle them from memory. He can't remember from where the bear image had come, maybe from a TV commercial. Aldo was carving a polar bear, because it was his first attempt at carving a bear and he liked polar bears. He admired the way they were able to survive in such cold climates. He respected that. As Aldo started to carve the back feet of the polar bear, he burped a fishy-tasting burp and thought it tasted pretty good.

Then he started farting wet squeaky farts. He figured it was because of the beans he had eaten with breakfast earlier. Aldo loved beans. Then he burped again. Then he heard a sound that sounded like a burp, but wasn't a burp, like a low growling sound. It didn't sound as if the growl were coming from his own body. What was that sound? As Aldo finished the back feet of the polar bear, he heard the growling again. Aldo thought that if it wasn't him making the sound that sounded like a burp, what was it then?

As Aldo got up to go to the car to get a piece of leather string for the polar bear, he farted another wet squeaky fart, except this time, as he was farting, his eyes came face to face with a black bear! The fear that Aldo felt at that moment made his wet squeaky fart become poop in his pants! He couldn't believe he was seeing a bear in front of him and he couldn't believe he was pooping in his pants! To the best of Aldo's memory, he hadn't pooped in his pants since he was a little kid. More importantly though, was what he was going to do about the bear he was facing. It was very likely that the bear was drawn out of the woods by the smell of the fish cooking, since bears love fish. Or it was simply the smell of Aldo that had enticed the beast. Whatever the case, the bear was there and it meant business!

The bear rose up on its back feet and became a lot taller in the process. Aldo was now looking up at towering monster! The bear growled, and then roared a loud smelly roar that could only have come from a bear, a bear that had just been eating some rotten animal that it had found in the woods. Wow! The breath of that bear was so foul and stenching! When the bear roared, its flapping lips spewed drool onto Aldo's face. The bear roared again and as it started to lunge at Aldo, Aldo stabbed the nose of the bear 3 times with his whittling knife. The bear screamed in pain at the top of its lungs, another even fouler smelling roar than before, and Aldo seized the moment. Aldo crouched down on the ground, grabbed a handful of dirt and threw the dirt into the bear's eyes! The bear roared again.

Aldo ran to the left of the bear while it was busy using both of its front paws to get the dirt out of its eyes and the knife out of the top of its nose. Aldo made it to his car and jumped in on the

driver's side. He hastily started the car and sped out of there, while both doors and trunk were still open. Aldo yelled a loud, "YEE HA!" as they did on the "Dukes of Hazard" TV show, when the Duke Brothers were speeding away from Boss Hog.

Aldo drove to the check-in office where he stopped the car, got out and shut the doors and trunk. Aldo ran into the office and told the guy behind the counter that a crazed black bear was running loose and was injured, thanks to Aldo knifing its nose and throwing dirt in its eyes. Everyone knew there was nothing more dangerous on earth than an injured bear. The guy behind the counter reached for a rifle, thanked Aldo for the warning, and quickly called the game warden. The safety of the campground was paramount. Aldo bolted out of the office back to his car and sped out of there as fast as he could, in case the bear was following him. Once again, Aldo bellowed a loud, "YEE HA!"

On the way down the campground's drive to the highway, Aldo spotted none other than the black bear in the middle of the road! The bear reared up on its back legs, roared and then started running at the car at full speed, which was pretty fast, because bears can run a lot faster than people think.

Aldo floored the Charger and it accelerated rapidly, since it was a fast old muscle car. The bear cared not. It still came a charging. Aldo was determined to teach this bear a lesson. Just as Aldo's car got to the bear, Aldo jerked the steering wheel to the right, just barely grazing the side of the bear with the front bumper. It was enough of a contact to knock the bear over onto the ground. Aldo slammed on the car's brakes and threw the console gearshift into reverse. He rammed the car into the back of the bear, tossing it into a mud-filled ditch on the side of the road. The bear screeched its displeasure at being completely covered from head to toe with mud.

Aldo drove the car to the side of the road, with one of the back tires sliding into the muddy ditch in which the bear was slopping around. Then Aldo floored the engine, spinning the tire that was in the ditch, spraying the bear with even more mud! Aldo shrieked a "YEE HA!" beeped his horn and drove out of there laughing all the way. Aldo exited the campground road and pulled onto the highway.

Aldo thought about the stupid bear for a while and laughed. Aldo then thought about the steel lockbox in the trunk as he drove down the highway. Where could he bury it so nobody could find it in a million years? It would have to be some place where no one drives or walks by. He would have to bury it during the night so nobody flying by in an airplane or helicopter would see him from above. How would he get to the burial spot if it had to be in a place where nobody went? It had to be a perfect place, wherever it was, because he had to hide the money in the lockbox for a few years, while things cooled off and people forgot about the money and gave up looking for it. Yeah. Then, he could go get the money and do whatever he wanted with it. He could buy another faster bigger car. He always wanted a big old Ford LTD with a big powerful

engine. Those cars were big enough to sleep on the back seat, because the car was so wide.

Where could he bury the box? Was someone following him as he drove, possibly way behind him, unnoticed? Was someone following him, waiting for him to hide the money to steal it away from him? No, there was no one following him. He was starting to think crazy. Aldo absolutely could not allow anybody to get his money! It was his money and would always be his money. Nobody was going to get that money! He found that money and it was his.

He thought back to elementary school when he had read a cool story about how pirates would get treasure from somewhere and put the money in a chest, a really solid chest made out of thick wood and metal. Then the pirates would sail their ship to a deserted island somewhere out in the middle of the ocean and bury the treasure chest on the island and make a map that told where they buried it. Then somehow, years later they would dig the treasure up again using the map they made.

That's it! Aldo decided he would have to drive to the coast of the United States somewhere and then get a boat and navigate the boat to an island and bury his lockbox on the island! He would then make a map that told exactly where he buried the box so he would be able to find it in the future. He knew a guy years ago who used to talk about all the islands off the coast of South Carolina.

Since Aldo was in Georgia, he could be near those islands in no time. He still had to plan carefully, though. He couldn't let anyone around know what he was up to. He had to be sneaky, like the bear that sneaked up on him at the campsite. Aldo was on his way to South Carolina. How would he get to the island undetected? How would he find a good enough spot to bury the loot?

Aldo drove through the night until he reached the South Carolina coast, then he started driving up and down the coast to get a feel for the ports, boats, privacy, availability of docks, etc.

He would have to borrow somebody's boat during the night, take it out to the island and stash the box. He pulled into a gas station and bought gas, snacks and a map of the area that had islands on it. The guy behind the counter noticed the map and said it was hurricane season and stormy that night with a tropical storm coming in, possibly going to hit the area. He suggested to Aldo to be careful if he planned any fishing at daybreak. Aldo had no plans of doing any fishing at daybreak. He was on a night mission of tight secrecy. He wished the guy wouldn't have been so nosy by noticing the map, but it was too late at that point. Aldo thanked the guy for his concern and left.

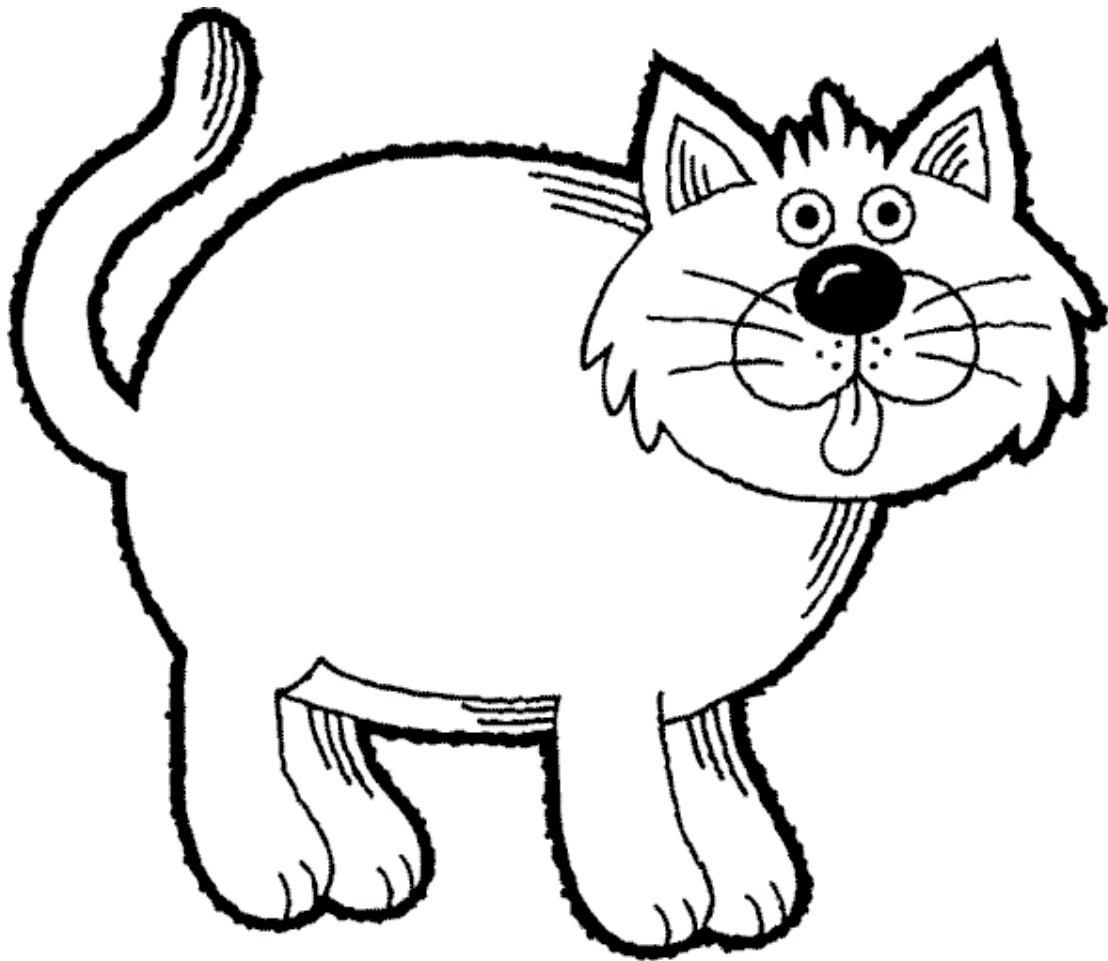
Aldo would have to drive north of that gas station about 30 minutes to put his plan into action far enough away from the nosy gas station guy, in case anybody asked any questions. Of course,

Aldo only planned to borrow the boat, do his mission and return the boat before anyone noticed. He didn't want any traces of his behavior for anybody to follow to his buried treasure chest. He could take no chances. He had to strike quickly though. He felt that time was short.

Aldo took a bite out of his beef jerky and headed north a piece. Approximately 20 miles north of the gas station, Aldo spied a little dock on the right with various sized boats, with not very good lighting and no one around. This was the place! Aldo drove a little further and parked the Charger behind a dumpster in an unlit parking lot. Then he got the steel lockbox from the trunk, put it in the old green army duffel bag and slung the bag over his back. Man, that bag was heavy! The lockbox was constructed of thick solid steel and iron, and thus was really heavy. Aldo slithered to the dock, constantly looking around, not seeing anyone. It started to get windy and started raining lightly. Oh, great, he thought, here comes that storm the gas station guy was talking about.

Aldo wasn't worried about the storm, because he figured it would only be an hour and he would be done. While on the drive there, he found on the map an undeveloped island on which to bury the money. Aldo hopped into the furthest boat out on the dock, so hopefully no one would see it missing and he rowed the boat out into the water. The boat sat low in the water from the weight of the lockbox. When he figured he was far enough out so no one would hear the noise, he started the motor and headed to the island. The wind whipped up, lightning flashed and the waves increased. It started pouring rain. Stupid storm! Halfway to the island, the boat sprung a leak, and then another leak.

18. Major's Mission



18. Major's Mission

Major was a rather large cat, perhaps bigger than a typical housecat can get, weighing 49 pounds. Since Major was the result of an experimental mix between a Maine Coon cat and a bobcat, a Maine-Bob, he ended up being a big kitty. The person responsible for Major's breeding was an 81-year old retired veterinarian who loved animals, but loved even more how nature can breed them into more amazing animals with a little help from man. The vet had been trying for years to breed a cat that had all the best attributes. He wanted a cat that had the temperament of a golden retriever and the fearlessness of a badger. Everyone knew how mild and loving retrievers were, making them very popular house pets and service animals. Not many people know of how fearless a badger can be. Badgers have been known to face off with bears, scaring the bears away. A fearless animal would be useful as a service animal, because it would be capable of handling any situation without forgetting its training. The most important thing for some service animals is protecting their person from harm.

Finally, the vet successfully bred Major. Major was super friendly and super fearless. The vet had hoped to donate Major to a senior facility for use as a therapy animal. The vet went to different places that all turned him down, thinking Major was too big of a cat. The vet assured all the facility administrators how gentle Major was, but they were too intimidated by Major's largeness. Eventually, the vet found a place that accepted Major for a trial period to see how the cat would work out. The vet dropped off the large cat and stayed for several hours to help Major get acclimated to his potential new home. The facility was initially concerned with the feeding bill for such a large cat, but the vet established a trust fund whereby the facility would receive annual sums of money to cover Major's food, supplies and veterinary needs. Major was greeted with open arms by the facility.

Major's first client was a 101-year old woman who loved to play checkers. The vet emphasized the superior intelligence Major possessed and the cat's ability to learn quickly. The 101-year old woman was pleased to discover that Major could be taught to play checkers. In only 3 hours, Major was pleasantly entertaining the woman by playing checkers with her. The facility's administrator was impressed by Major's game playing talent, but a more important trait of a therapy animal was its ability to tolerate being petted and caressed. The vet claimed that Major was as gentle as a lamb and loved attention. When it was time for the 101-year old woman's nap, they placed Major on the lap of a 74-year old man who just arrived at the facility the previous week and was still a little nervous and jerky. The man had to move to the facility out of his home, because he fell and broke his hip, making it difficult for him to do things living alone in his 2-story house. The man was surprised at the size of Major. At first, the man thought Major would be too heavy on his lap, but Major had a way of lying down where he would spread his weight out over a large area. Major rolled over on his back, allowing the man to pet his large furry belly. The moment Major started purring, tears came to the man's eyes. Major was just

what the man needed to help him transition from his old familiar life to his new strange one.

The facility administrator had many times seen the beautiful affect that animals can have on people. Major appeared to be a good fit so far. Eventually the man said it was ok to move Major to another person. The facility workers never wanted to upset the residents, by giving or taking things away too abruptly. The vet had been crying at the sight of the man petting Major. The vet knew he was doing a good thing by donating Major. The final test for Major was his ability to play on the floor with toys. A worker lifted Major up from the man's lap and put the cat on the floor. In the corner of the community room, there was an area on the floor where residents could roll balls and toys to each other to improve their dexterity, coordination and circulation. Major walked over to the corner and intercepted a ball that one resident was rolling to another. Major kicked the ball with his front right paw to the person the ball was rolling to. The person grabbed the ball and rolled it back to Major. Major stopped it and kicked it to another person. They went on for 10 minutes playing with the ball. The administrator felt satisfied with Major's initial observation and agreed to take the cat from the vet. The vet said goodbye to Major and went back to his laboratory to try to create another cat just like Major, sensing it would be difficult.

As soon as the vet left the building, some of the residents started wheeling over to the cat to get a closer look. The workers had to make sure Major wasn't overwhelmed by everybody trying to pet him at the same time. Because Major was so large and solid, he seemed to be able to handle any amount of physicality that the people could dish out. One of the more spry residents threw a ball across the room to another resident. The other resident seemed to be sleeping. It appeared that the ball was going to hit the sleeping resident square in the face. Major sprinted across the room toward the sleeping resident and leaped into the air like one of those Frisbee dogs. He intercepted the ball, grabbing it between its 2 large front paws. Just before Major hit the floor, he dropped the ball, landing on all 4 feet. Major kicked the ball over to the sleeping resident for whom the ball was intended, where it rolled to a stop at the resident's feet.

The residents in the community room all began cheering and clapping. The workers had to calm everybody down because all the racket woke up the residents who were sleeping. One awakened guy said, "What's all the fuss?" An awakened woman simply said, "What the?" The guy who had thrown the ball through the air yelled aloud to the residents who were awakened, "We have a new cat everybody, and he's a supercat!" Major sensed he was being talked about and trotted over to the end of the community room. He turned around and started running full speed. At the middle of the room, he flipped over on his back and slid the rest of the way across the large room. The residents erupted into cheering, clapping and whistling, louder than before. The administrator said to the senior worker, "Did you see that?" The worker wiped the tears from her eyes and said, "Yes!" Major was definitely a hit.

Major continued running and sliding on his back, to and fro across the room, until a worker

scurried over to him and picked up his bulky purring body. The worker kissed Major on the forehead and Major licked the worker's face. Major was clearly no ordinary cat. Major had a dog dish for food and a dog water bowl for water. Even though Major ate (2)-50 pound bags of Eukanuba dry cat food per week, per the vet's directions, he wasn't a fat cat at all. He was incredibly muscular and lean, due no doubt to the bobcat in his DNA. Major walked over to his food dish and ate all the food. He then emptied the water dish. Major was allowed to have a bisky for every task he performed. The workers gladly gave him the treats.

Per the vet, Major wasn't supposed to eat human food scraps, but in a senior facility, it was an impossible restriction to enforce. At breakfast, lunch and dinner times, Major found himself eating many scraps of all manner of the bland food that the residents would feed him. Major of course didn't mind helping the residents clean their plates. The residents loved to feed the cat scraps. The administrator and workers felt that it did everybody good to feed the big cat some scraps as long as its primary dry food was consumed. Everyone knew the cat was some kind of mixed breed and wanted to respect the vet's advice. However, some of the residents started sneaking Major snacks that they received on visits from their relatives and friends.

Zulma liked Snickers candy bars and each week on Mondays received an 8-pack from her niece. Zulma started sneaking Major a candy bar at each breakfast, which he hungrily devoured. Winston loved his Nacho Cheese Doritos, having packages of the snack size delivered to him by his volunteer visitor. Winston fed Major a snack bag at each lunch. Vonda was particularly fond of pepperoni, which she was allowed to eat, as long as her blood pressure was kept in check. At a supper meal, she gave Major a whole stick pepperoni and he loved it, even though it gave him diarrhea. Tyree gave Major those sausage shaped tubes of raw cookie dough that he was supposed to be giving to the facility bakers to make cookies for everyone. Major only ate the cookie dough to be nice. He didn't particularly like the consistency.

Major was really good at catching the biskies that the workers tossed to him. He could catch one in his mouth if it were tossed the full length of the community room, about 50 feet! They were curious to see how far he could catch a bisky. The workers took everyone outside and had a contest to see who could guess the longest distance Major could catch a bisky in his mouth. The winning distance was an incredible 153 feet. The bisky was thrown by a resident who was an ex-college football quarterback. Major was also good at catching Frisbees. On the warmer days, everyone was brought outside to watch the supercat catch every Frisbee that was thrown. They went on for hours taking turns throwing the discs. Major received dozens of biskies for his running and retrieving feats. The more Major played at catching Frisbees, the faster he was able to run. He could outrun any staff member and any visitors to the facility.

Major was allowed to sleep with the residents who requested it. Normally, facilities didn't allow cats to sleep with the residents, for fear the residents may accidentally roll over onto the cat and

injure it. Due to Major's solidness, no one feared that could ever happen. As time went by, the facility had to create a schedule for the residents to take turns sleeping with Major, because eventually everyone wanted to. With 61 residents, it ended up becoming a 2-month rotation.

It was found that Major was able to give massage therapy to the residents. A resident would sit in a chair in the community room, with Major clinging to the back of the chair. Major would knead the neck and shoulders of the resident, being careful to keep his claws in. Most of the residents fell asleep within 15 minutes, since the massage felt so soothing. Major could massage the entire facility of residents and workers over 3 days. Major didn't seem to mind giving the massages, appearing to genuinely love people.

Major's favorite thing to do was to sit on people's laps and be caressed by them. He could stay all day on a resident's lap if they would allow it, but he had to be moved around for everyone's benefit. Vonda noticed Major's surprising vocal ability. When Major was on her lap, she would meow words to him and to everyone's amazement, he could repeat what she was saying. Eventually she was singing to him and he was singing back! Vonda had a beautiful singing voice, which she used for 40 years at her church. It was the most incredible sight to everyone in the facility. On Saturday Karaoke nights, Vonda and Major sang a duet, where she would sing and he would meow along. They stole the show. Other residents came up with singing ideas. Winston, Tyree and Sylvester formed a barbershop quartet with Major as the 4th member. It was the most hilarious thing that anyone had ever seen before. With a little practice, Major was actually able to harmonize with the 3 guys singing.

The old vet visited the facility from time to time to check up on Major's progress. The facility couldn't thank the vet enough for his generous donation of Major. Nobody had seen such a cat before. The vet had advised them of his progress toward breeding another cat. The facility was excited at the prospect of obtaining another Maine-Bob, similar to Major. The vet couldn't guarantee anything in the immediate future, but he was getting close. The vet promised to donate the next cat to the facility, because they were the only ones that would accept Major in the first place. The administrator told the vet that if they had known how magnificent a cat Major was, there would have been no initial hesitation on their part. The vet agreed that at first sight, Major is a bit of a beast, but once you get to know him, you love him. The administrator agreed.

The vet was astounded at the sight of Major "singing" in the barbershop quartet. He knew Major was an intelligent cat, but didn't think it was even possible for a cat to do that. The administrator filled the vet in on some of Major's other abilities that were equally impressive. The vet felt redeemed by all his years of hard work of trying to breed the perfect therapy cat. He felt that he definitely had done it. He had given to facilities all the other cats that he bred along the way, but none of them turned out the delightful way that Major did.

When winter came to the Wisconsin facility, Major continued to be impressive. As many people

get older, they think back to their simpler, younger days. The residents enjoyed playing outside in the snow. The people who were healthy enough to be in the cold air were pulled around on a sled by Major. The cat was so surprisingly strong, that it could pull 3 residents sitting on a toboggan. Major seem to have no limit to his entertainment value. Some workers cleared the snow from the pond so people could skate and play hockey. To no one's surprise, Major was able to learn how to ice skate! A worker bought 4 kids' skates from a Goodwill store and taped them to Major's legs, and off he went! Some of the workers and residents set up hockey nets to play minimal exertion hockey.

Once Major was skating, he saw someone standing in the goalie net and wanted to try for himself. He managed to stop shots that were on the ice with his skates. He was having trouble stopping higher wrist shots until a worker fixed him up with a pad to block those. They taped a breadboard from a goalie's hockey gear to his stomach. Major could then block wrist shots by jumping up in the air and deflecting the puck with his padded belly! Maybe it was his determination, or the 4 skates on his feet, but he became the fastest skater out there. There was no stopping Major. He was just as good at scoring as he was at playing goalie. He didn't use a hockey stick, but he could kick the puck down the ice. He managed to score a few "slapshots" but not many. They allowed him to pick up the puck in his mouth when he was at the goal and throw it in. He had a pretty good aim and scored several goals.

His skating ability quickly improved. He must have had some kind of exceptional balance. He was able to stand on one skate and spin around in a circle at great speed without getting dizzy. He could skate on either his front 2 or his back 2 skates just as easily as on all 4 skates. He really was a sight to behold. No one knew how he did it. Toward the end of the winter, in early March, the weather was warming up a little. They were all out there skating, when one of the workers fell through the ice. A call was immediately placed to the Fire Department. In the meantime, Major skated to the hole in the ice and the screaming worker in the icy water. No one wanted to get too close to the hole in the ice, because cracking was heard. Major fearlessly skated to the edge of the hole and instinctively got down on all fours to spread his weight out. While 1 worker held onto Major's robust tail, Major reached his head to the victim in the water. The victim reached up to Major and grabbed onto his thick collar. Major slowly inched backward, digging his claws into the ice, with the worker holding onto his tail. Soon the victim was out of the freezing water on the ice. They kept pulling until they were completely off the cracking ice. After that near catastrophic event, they made sure that in the future, they only used the ice from December to February, to avoid thin ice situations.

Major caught a few rabbits whenever he was outside and the culinary staff of the facility cooked them up for residents that had their doctor's approval. Some residents missed the things they were able to get on their own, before they were forced into the senior facility for one reason or another. It was important psychologically for the residents to be happy, and to enrich their lives

as much as possible within reason. Major also caught all the mice, moles, chipmunks and squirrels he could get his paws on. The landscapers were pleased, since no rodents on the premises meant they could grow whatever they wanted without pest damage. Major's rodent control also allowed for a pest-free garden to be planted in the spring out in the sunny backyard. Many residents loved to garden and grow their own fresh produce to eat at meals. Gardening was an important socializing factor as well. Major was able to prevent damage by crows as well as by rodents.

At the first sign of crows, the administrator sent Major out to the garden. The garden was always bothered in the past by crows eating various seedlings. Major was lying in the cabbage as low as he could get to the ground when a crow came in for a landing. Major jumped up as high as he could, snagging the crow with one of his long sharp claws. He ate the crow and waited for another. Another crow landed on the fence, wondering why its crow relative had just disappeared, seemingly into thin air. The crow on the fence was a little cautious and started squawking to get other crows to the scene. Three other crows flew into the garden and started pulling young carrots from the ground. Major sneaked along as low as he could get through the cabbage patch, which was next to the carrot patch. Major sneezed when some dirt got into his nostrils, alerting the wary crows. Before the crows could take to the air, Major leaped on top of the 3 of them and ate them. The crow on the fence flew away and never came back. No crows came back. The crow problem was solved.

Major was allowed many liberties in the facility, many of them food related. One day at a birthday party for Zulma, the facility had baked a bunch of pizzas, Zulma's favorite food. As long as pizza was approved by a resident's doctor, the resident could have some. Zulma liked to feed treats to Major and pizza was one of those treats. A facility baker brought out a fresh sheet pizza with cheese and mushrooms and put it on the table in front of Zulma. The pizza was already cut up and cool enough to eat. Zulma called Major over to where she was sitting with her pizza. Zulma started eating a slice, while Major patiently waited for a handout.

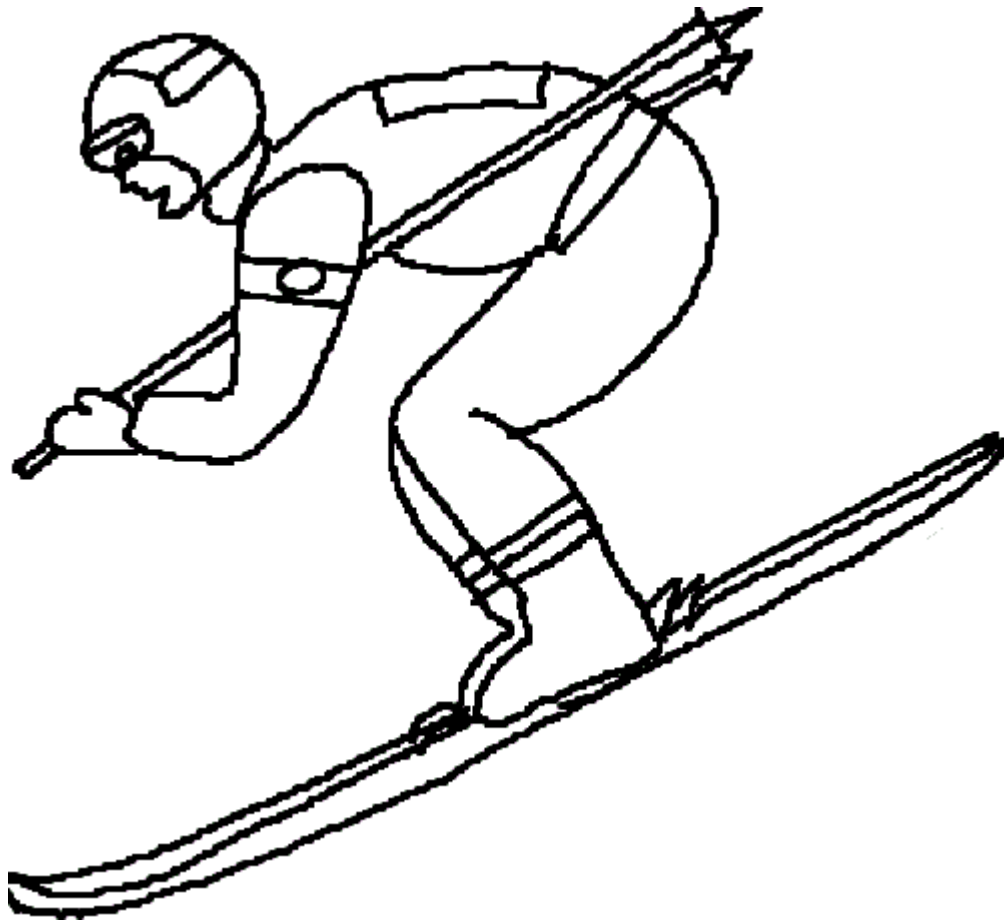
Zulma first gave Major a little piece of cheese, and then some crust, but he wanted more. Major jumped up onto the table and started eating the pizza in front of Zulma. Zulma started laughing, and then farting from the exertion of laughing. Before anyone could get close enough to take the pizza away, Major had eaten the entire sheet pizza, minus the slice that Zulma ate! Zulma's laughter became contagious and soon, everyone at Zulma's table was laughing, and farting from the exertion of laughing. Being old people, some of the residents laughed so hard that they pooped in their pants, including Zulma. Pooping in pants was a very common occurrence in senior facilities, so no one was alarmed. Major jumped down from the table, ran to his bed in the corner, burped, farted, drank a bowl full of water and had a nice long nap.

At a 91st birthday party for Laurice, Major jumped up onto the table and ate the entire sheet cake

and the 2 half gallons of ice cream on the table before any of the cake and ice cream were even plated! Major didn't like the candles and spat them out onto the floor. Laurice started crying from the confusion. Luckily, the bakers had another cake and ice cream in the kitchen. First, Major had to be put outside in the garden. He clawed at the window and meowed the whole time he was out there. Everyone thought he must have had his fill of cake and ice cream, but apparently not. After Laurice blew out the new set of candles and everyone was served, they let Major back in and he immediately ran to Laurice. Major jumped in her lap and lay on his back so she could pet him and feel better. He realized that he should have waited for her to eat first, and felt bad about it. Laurice forgave Major, as everybody always did and all was well again.

The vet who bred Major wondered if the cat would have any regression toward having bobcat tendencies of viciousness. The cat seemed ok so far. The facility hadn't reported any issues with Major. The following Monday morning, when Zulma received her 8-pack of Snickers from her niece's visit, she gave Major one of the candy bars in her room, after breakfast. Major ate it, but wanted another candy bar. Zulma refused to give him more than one. Major began growling at Zulma, who was sitting on her bed. She gave Major another candy bar and told him that was definitely all he was going to get. Major ate the 2nd bar, hissed, growled and jumped up onto Zulma's bed. Zulma began to get nervous. Major sensed her fear and slowly approached her on the bed, increasing the volume of his growling. Zulma screamed as Major leaped through the air at Zulma's throat.

19. Ignacio's Itch



19. Ignacio's Itch

Ignacio learned to walk at the age of 11 months, getting a few bruises and scrapes. He taught himself to ride a bike at 2 years old, breaking an ankle in the process. He taught himself to swim at 3, almost drowning in the undertow. He was roller-skating at 4, damaging his unprotected left elbow. At 5 years old, he started ice skating and fell through the thin ice. He started riding BMX bicycles at 6, suffering a concussion. At 8 years old, he broke his right arm the first time he started riding dirt bikes. When he was 9, he climbed over a junkyard fence with a steak tied around his neck, to tease run from the German shepherds. He did everything physically athletic and exciting before all the other kids.

Once when he was hang gliding in Texas, his glider tore apart and he crashed into some cacti. When he was skate boarding down a railing next to some stairs, he crashed into a sign, knocking himself unconscious. He became as known as the "Emperor of everything cool." There was nothing that he was afraid of trying. There was no dare that was untakeable. He once jumped off a high bridge into cold water and landed on a sunken log, impaling his left lung. In Spain, he ran with the bulls and was trampled, luckily only shattering his right wrist. He fell asleep on railroad tracks until the sound of the train woke him just in time to roll to the side.

Ignacio never smoked cigarettes, did drugs or drank alcohol, preferring to get high on life's pleasures. Ignacio thought anyone who smoked was an idiot. On one occasion, he was at the end of an airport runway hanging onto the fence as the jet blast lifted him into the air. His left eyeball was partially blown out of the socket, until he pushed it back in. He enjoyed parachuting from airplanes at low altitudes, until one time his chute failed to open and he crashed into a golf cart. He liked to feed great white sharks with sardines held in his teeth, until one of the sharks bit off the tip of his nose. He was fond of teasing bulls in their pens by running around wearing a red cape, until he was thrown over the fence into the manure spreader.

He played golf during thunderstorms, being struck by lightning 11 times. At a charity event, he was lowered into a tank filled with electric eels for as long as he could stand it. He earned \$100 for his charity for each minute he stayed in the tank. He managed to stay in the tank for 3 hours, until he passed out. Unfortunately, the event left him with no sense of taste. He patented a special bungee cord for bungee jumping, which earned him thousands of dollars to spend on his thrill seeking. Three amusement parks allowed him to sign a waiver to ride on the roller coaster by hanging onto the hood of the car, not sitting inside the car. At the 4th park, he fell off the car, landed in front of the roller coaster and was run over by it.

Ignacio successfully base-jumped from many NYC skyscrapers, including from the top of the Freedom Tower and the Empire State Building. He unsuccessfully jumped from Trump Tower, when his chute collapsed and he landed on the roof of a taxicab. When he went to air shows, he paid the pilots to allow him to ride on the outside of the jets, while he was strapped in his

specially designed harness. Eventually the air show organizers disallowed the practice, when he fell off a jet and landed on one of the french-fry food vendors. He splashed into the scalding oil, suffering 1st degree burns. At the Daytona 500, he once rode one lap on the hood of one of the cars. When the car pulled into the pits to let him jump off, the driver stopped too quickly and he flew off the hood into the crowd. In India, he learned how to charm cobras by playing a flute and made good tip money for a while, until he was bitten and had to spend a week in the hospital. He wrestled alligators in Florida for 1 1/2 months, until he had the pinky toe from his right foot chewed off. In the Mississippi River, he noodled for giant catfish, being mauled many times.

In Lake Placid, NY, Ignacio rode on the bobsled run while strapped to the bottom of the sled. He almost made it to the end of the run, but the straps broke in the last high-banked turn, and he went flying off the course into a tree. When he worked in a circus as a lion tamer, his left ear lobe was scraped off when he put his head into the lion's narrowly opened mouth. He worked at a zoo, cleaning out the exhibits and was attacked by an old gorilla. The ape bit Ignacio's torso repeatedly, causing spleen and liver damage. Ignacio survived with surgery and recovery. At the same zoo, he fell from the back of a giraffe that he had been riding around on a bet and landed on the concrete watering structure. Ignacio broke his collarbone and right kneecap.

In the Midwest, he went on rattlesnake roundups every year from high school graduation until the age of 22, when he was bitten in the face after collapsing from the heat onto a nest of snakes. He was advised by doctors to avoid snake and other animal poisons as much as possible, due to the high dose of rattlesnake venom that was injected into his body. The medical staff estimated that he would need 2 years to completely clear out the toxins from his body.

Ignacio's left forearm still had a cast on it from the break it sustained while crashing, during roller-skating backwards down the steep driveway of his father's mansion. The doctor allowed him to go skiing if he liked, but he had to be careful. Ignacio was going skiing whether the doctor said he could or not. Ignacio's favorite sport was extreme skiing. Since he had started skiing at the age of 7, he had been fascinated by the thrill of gliding on snow. He especially liked breaking the freshly fallen snow, to enjoy the fluffiness. His parents had allowed him to do anything he wanted, but he had to wait until he was 18, before he could start the extreme skiing. In the meantime, he had perfected his balance and strengthened his legs during the 11 years he had to wait. His parents paid for hours of lessons. He impressed his instructors with his skiing. The main advice his ski instructors gave him was to be careful. Everyone knew Ignacio was a daredevil and no one wanted to see him get hurt. Even though people enjoyed watching him do things, they always cautioned him. He of course, respected everyone's concern, but was incapable of being careful. To Ignacio, being careful was being boring. There was no thrill in being boring.

When he had finally started the extreme skiing, he was ready. His father owned a helicopter for

business travel and allowed Ignacio to borrow it. The helicopter was piloted by a professional. Ignacio's father didn't want to risk his son or the helicopter. Ignacio didn't mind being a passenger in the helicopter. The inactivity enabled him to envision his skiing. The helicopter carried Ignacio up to the untouched snow-covered mountains, where he would precariously ski down them. At the bottom, the helicopter waited to carry him back up to the top again. There was nothing like skiing down pure white slopes at an almost vertical angle. The skis barely make contact with the snow on the way down. Speeds of 110 mph were attained. The danger and thrill were incredible. One false move though, and the skier could be destroyed. Ignacio loved it. There weren't many people on earth who performed the act of extreme skiing. Those who did were all labeled "crazy."

Ignacio and the other extreme skiers didn't care what people said or thought. It was his life to do as he pleased. He wasn't married and didn't have any kids. He had nothing to lose and thrills to gain. Ignacio was a thrill junkie and there was nothing he could do about it. His parents knew from an early age, that he was always going to go for it, no matter what he did. If they forbade him to do something, he wanted to do it even more, and ended up doing it harder. They gave up grounding him to the house for being reckless, because he just climbed out the windows and jumped to the ground. There was no chaining Ignacio down. He was wild. Ignacio had something in him that drove him, something that he couldn't explain. His parents had him observed by various psyche types when he was younger and they all said he would grow out of it. He never did. Ignacio was just a big kid.

He heard about his latest extreme ski mountain from an acquaintance who had died skiing down it the previous year. The guy was going all right until at the halfway point, the binder on his right ski let go and he lost control. The guy landed crazily and broke his neck. The process of extreme skiing is basically being out of control the whole way down, but under just enough control to survive it. Ignacio couldn't wait to ski the mountain when Gil first told him about it, but after Gil died on it, Ignacio found himself skiing it with a little caution. Ignacio didn't like having to be cautious doing anything, because it scared him. He had survived his entire life, doing whatever he wanted, by not being cautious in the least. He feared that the moment he became cautious while doing something, he might make a mistake. His style was balls to the wall, or not at all. He felt that on the day he had to start being cautious doing something, was the day he should stop being a thrill seeker.

He didn't want to lose his edge. Then it happened. It seemed like a perfect day on the mountain. The sun was shining. It snowed a beautiful powdery 12 inches the night before. What Ignacio didn't realize was that the snow was layering itself on his mountain. Depending how snow fell on mountains during certain snow thickness accumulations and temperature variations, unseen things could take place. Layers of snow can have unseen, thin shear layers between the snow layers. The shear layers can cause avalanches of the heavier snow layers breaking free on top of

them. Sometimes the shear layers cause no problems. Sometimes they do. Sooner or later, something sets off an avalanche. Ignacio's helicopter made a lot of noise day after day on his mountain with no trouble, until that day.

Ignacio jumped from the helicopter at the top of the run and landed in the snow as usual. When he made impact, a great shelf of snow collapsed with him. He had set off an avalanche and was going down the mountain with it! It seemed pretty cool at first, but it started to come over the top of him, as he progressed down the mountain. He panicked. The avalanche picked up speed causing great clouds of snow and ice to fume into the air, blinding the helicopter pilot. As the pilot tried to climb the helicopter out of the avalanche's mini storm, it crashed into a tree and exploded. The helicopter became engulfed by the avalanche and was pulled down the slope with Ignacio. The helicopter was covered with millions of tons of snow and ice and disappeared. The layer of snow and ice that had broken away with the avalanche was 14 feet thick, probably the result of years of snowfall.

Ignacio was on his way down the mountain with the avalanche, not hearing the explosion of the helicopter due to the tremendous roar of the force of nature that was engulfing him. He was wearing one of those inflating devices on his back to prevent from being suffocated by snow in the event of an avalanche. The device had inflated automatically. It was a bright orange color. Ignacio felt himself losing control and rolling head over heels with the force of the snow and ice. He had no time to think. He didn't know what to do. For the first time in his life, he was powerless. All his ski training was useless. All his years of thrill seeking gave him nothing to draw upon. He felt like he was going to die, just as Gil did last year.

He was wearing a proper helmet to protect his head from impact, but a concussion could still be possible. It seemed like he had been falling and tumbling for hours. Where was the bottom? He wished he were back home with his parents. He felt something warm running down his legs. He must have pissed in his ski pants. Great! Now what? He was still flipping end over end. He lost his left ski pole. He lost his right ski pole. He lost his right ski. He lost his left ski. The inflation device was still inflated and got in his face when he rolled, then was out of his face again, and then was back in his face. It was really distracting. He was still trying to figure a way out of the situation. He was helpless.

Ignacio started having bizarre flashes of thought. He remembered fighting the bulls in Spain. Then he thought of surfing. He remembered running from the dogs at the junkyard. He saw the parachutes and the hang gliders and the dirt and the colors. What was happening to him? Was he suddenly going insane? Why was he thinking about things that happened to him in the past? He had to think about the present. He couldn't. His life was flashing before his eyes. He heard that stupid expression before and always laughed at it. It usually happened to people when they thought they were on the verge of dying. It can't be the same with him though. He was incapable

of dying! He had proven it his entire life. No matter what he did, he couldn't die. He was just like Evel Knievel! He kept tumbling down the mountain. Luckily, the helmet he was wearing had a full-face shield, or his face would have been shredded by the snow and ice through which he was somersaulting.

He still had his gloves and ski boots on, so his hands and feet were protected. The inflation device was in his face again, and then it wasn't. Where is the bottom? When is it going to stop? It was so loud. It reminded him of Niagara Falls, except louder. How did those people go over the falls and live anyway? They were lucky. He remembered that he forgot to feed his fish. He thought that was a funny thing to remember in the middle of an avalanche. He kept tumbling, tossing, turning and plummeting down. "Please stop!" he screamed. "Stop! What's going here?" He hated the lack of control. All he could do was ride it out and hope for the best. He remembered being stung by the electric eels. He thought of the first time he rode a bicycle and broke his ankle. He loved that bicycle. Was he at the bottom yet? Why is there so much snow? Where did it all come from? Stupid question, he thought. He was surprised he wasn't cold. He toppled and stumbled. His arms and legs still felt uninjured. That was a good thing anyway. He wondered if the helicopter pilot was watching him going down the mountain. "Yeah, he would be watching and would come to get me!" thought Ignacio. "The pilot would save me."

"I'm saved!" Well, not yet. He was still falling down the mountain. Poor Ignacio would have really been disillusioned had he known as he was falling down the mountain that there was no pilot waiting to save him. The pilot didn't even know Ignacio was missing. The pilot was missing. Ignacio thought about his father. His father would save him! Or would he? Oh no! Ignacio forgot that his father was on a business trip in Tokyo. He wouldn't be able to save him. The stupid cast on his arm was starting to become more noticeable for some reason. Ignacio had many casts on different parts of his body and was used to their annoyances. He mostly hated the restriction of motion that some of the casts imposed...oh yeah, and the itching.

The worst cast was the body cast he had to wear when he was run over by the roller coaster. That was a major pain! Ignacio had to be in that cast for 3 months. By the end of his sentence of wearing that cast he was almost insane from the feeling the cast gave him. After he had that body cast removed, he vowed to never again endanger himself and get in a situation where he would need a body cast again. He naturally broke that vow relatively quickly. Ignacio wasn't happy unless he was being thrilled or recovering from a thrill-induced injury, anticipating his next thrill. Tumbling down that enormous mountain in the middle of an avalanche was not thrilling, however. He couldn't wait for that ride to end already. Where was the bottom? Wasn't he at the bottom yet? Stop already!

Ignacio thought back to the beauty of the last time he skied down that mountain last week. It was indescribable. He was in full control of his own destiny. He skimmed down the mountain,

gently caressing the white sparkly icy snow. His skis kissed the surface ever so gently. He was almost floating. The drop was so vertical that he felt like he jumped out of an airplane. The air was so clear and crisp and clean. The sun was bright. He saw a rainbow in the distance. He saw eagles soaring. Those eagles really had it made to be able to fly so free the way they did. He was flying down almost like an eagle, except he couldn't lift himself up to perpetuate the flight. He could only continue descending. He wished he were an eagle. He could fly out of there. Many of his fellow extreme skiers felt the same way. They described skiing down a steep mountain as similar to flying. All his pals had mentalities like his own. They had all parachuted out of airplanes to experience what it was like to fly. That was the problem though. Humans could only almost fly. We could only fall gracefully. There was no flying involved. Only the lucky birds could actually fly. The eagles, hawks, condors and all the other large winged birds were the kings of the sky with the way they could fly without flapping their wings, like gliders. He wished he could fly.

Then the avalanche stopped. Ignacio stopped moving. It was over! The only problem was that he was upside down with his arms and legs spread apart as wide as they could physically be. It was completely dark. While Ignacio was still somersaulting down the mountain with the avalanche, he could still see things. It was daylight. It was still morning. But now it was dark. Could he be covered by that much snow that it blocked the light? Ignacio was in fact covered by a pile of 26 feet of snow. His inflation device was still inflated on his back providing an air space for him to breathe. It was dark. He couldn't move! It didn't look good. He had never been in a predicament like this. He had no control over his environment. He was alive and seemingly unhurt. He couldn't move. Was it that he had broken every bone in his body and that is why he couldn't move? He was able to flex the muscles in his arms and legs without pain, so he probably had no broken bones. The reality was that the snow was so compacted around his body that it made it impossible to move.

Ignacio panicked and pissed in his pants again. The warm liquid trickled down his body from his groin area over his back and belly, down his chest, down the back and front of his neck, into his face and hair. He started crying. He couldn't remember the last time that he had shed a tear. Ignacio wasn't a crybaby. He cried when he was a little kid, like all little kids do. When he really got into his daredevil tactics, he stopped crying when he got hurt. He realized it was mistakes or circumstances beyond his control that caused the pain. Crying didn't make the pain go away. He had toughened up at an early age, shunning pain and tears. Pain was something he learned from because it taught him not to do again whatever caused the pain in the first place. He embraced challenges and planned everything he did. Mistakes became fewer and fewer. He thought he could do anything he wanted and flaunt conventions. People had the audacity to give him advice and tell him to be careful. How dare they? Maybe they were right.

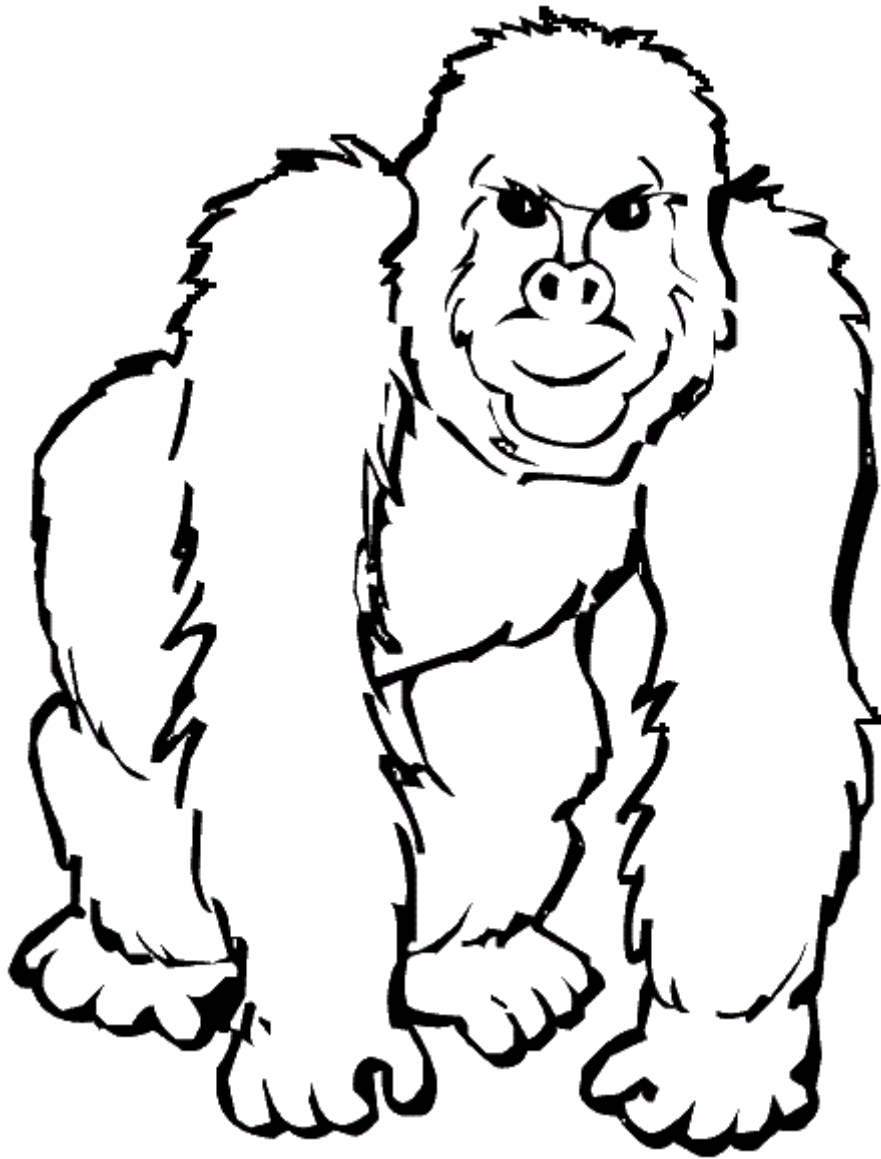
He was in a real fix. He was pissing in his own face and crying like a baby. He had to snap out

of it. If he could only somehow move. He hated being stuck in an upside down position. Why didn't he try to straighten up while falling? There was nothing he could do though. He had no more control over that avalanche than he had over the moon in the sky. He was stuck and couldn't move. Even the strongest man on earth would be unable to move in that situation.

Even a Clydesdale horse or a rhinoceros or a dinosaur wouldn't be able to move. Why wasn't he more careful? Why did he have to be so arrogant and think that he could own that mountain? Gil died on that mountain. Was he next? No! He would not die on that mountain like Gil! He was Ignacio and he was invincible! He would survive. He would get out of that snow and ski down that mountain again. He could do it! But how? He had to be able to move to be able to start to rescue himself. At least the inflation device had served its purpose. It had inflated and provided him with an air space in which to breathe. He wondered how long the air would last though. The snow was packed so tightly that there couldn't be any air passing through the snow from above down to him. That's why it was so dark. No light also meant no air. He started bawling.

Then the itching started.

20. Galen's Brain



20. Galen's Brain

Galen certainly was surprising. The little gorilla seemed to be as intelligent as a dolphin, supposedly nature's smartest animal. The gorilla had been brought to the African village 2 weeks before by a trapper, who found the primate wandering alone in the jungle. Most likely, Galen's parents were kidnapped by poachers and he was left behind, being too small to be of any value to them. Everyone in the village liked Galen and he became a sort of mascot. He didn't eat a lot, probably because he missed his parents. He wasn't getting skinny yet, so no one was worried. The village had a phone that was used by the village school's principal to contact someone in the United States who was interested in adopting Galen. African villages often gave away orphaned animals to zoos in America for a suitable "donation." Abigail was a teacher of the hearing impaired and deaf in Colorado and hoped to use Galen to work with her students. She had just arrived at the village to pick up Galen. The "donation" was paid and Galen was on his way to America.

Abigail had been working with the hearing impaired and deaf for 32 years, applying the latest methods to help her students. Her specialty was teaching sign language. The process involved learning the alphabet and words employing pictures, and then learning actual signing using fingers and hands. Abigail hoped to use Galen as a kind of symbolic starting point for some of the students. Not everyone accepted his or her deafness equally. Some people took it very hard and became introverted and depressed. The tougher cases are the ones Abigail hoped to help somehow with Galen. At first, Galen seemed surprisingly interested in the pictures Abigail used with the students. Galen began to imitate Abigail when she showed the pictures and explained their meanings. After a month of sitting in on training sessions, suddenly Galen began using his fingers like Abigail. It seemed that Galen was only imitating Abigail, not really knowing what he was doing. Then, to Abigail's amazement, he started using actual sign language.

Even more amazing was that he began speaking when he signed! Galen was talking! He didn't speak clearly, but he was speaking. The gorilla had somehow picked up language while sitting there watching Abigail teach. Galen was soon able to perform the entire sign language alphabet and could speak some words. His mouth was capable of limited speaking, not clear words but better than any animal on earth. Galen's speech was similar to a stroke victim's speech. It took some getting used to by Abigail to actually understand him, but he could definitely talk. Abigail's students couldn't hear him speak anyway. It was more amazing to Abigail that Galen could talk. What really excited everyone was that he seemed to understand the sign language. Galen was able to communicate in sign language. He talked openly to Abigail, but he signed to the deaf students.

It was a miracle of sorts. Galen's usefulness in the classroom was even greater than Abigail had hoped. He was able to help her reach the more difficult students. The introverted students who

found it difficult to learn sign language from Abigail were more than willing to learn from Galen! Galen had his 2 or 3 students and Abigail had the rest of the class to teach. Abigail couldn't believe what was happening. She had heard of primates being able to learn sign language, but she thought those monkeys were just imitating the teacher, not really thinking about what they were doing. Galen was actually capable of understanding what he was doing. He understood the sign language and the relationship of the signing gestures to the pictures. He understood the alphabet. He knew how to talk, though in a manner limited by his physiology. He must have understood what he was doing. He couldn't just be imitating the teacher. He could realistically communicate.

When he wanted food, he asked for it. When he wanted to go to the bathroom, he asked for it. When he was tired, he asked to go to his room for a nap. He was capable of genuine communication. It was no fluke, no imitation game. The question was whether or not to keep Galen secret or expose him to the world. Abigail wanted to protect Galen. Sooner or later though, one of her students would leak the information out of her school. She would deal with that when it happened. She asked of her students to keep Galen secret for the time being, until she could figure out what to do. Abigail continued using Galen as a sign language teacher and communicator for her tougher students. She noted Galen's increasing abilities. Her students were unable to hear when Galen spoke, but he continued to do so. His speaking actually seemed to get better and clearer, the more he spoke. After classes, Galen read books aloud to himself, to improve his elocution. Abigail helped him to correctly pronounce the words. The gorilla seemed to have a voracious appetite for learning. Abigail didn't know how it was possible. Could it be that her gorilla was some kind of evolutionary advance? Was it time for primates to learn and speak, starting with Galen? Maybe primates were already at Galen's level, but nobody knew it. Who would have thought primates could think and speak?

Was Galen the only one? How could it be determined? As much as Abigail wanted to keep Galen for herself and her students, she began to wonder about the possibilities. Should she consult with a scientist to evaluate Galen? Would the world be a better place with talking chimps running around? Imagine the help that intelligent primates could give to a better understanding of man's relationship with nature. What if there were other animals on earth that could communicate like Galen? Maybe mankind could learn a few things from animals. There would have to be some benefit in learning how to better coexist. Maybe man wouldn't have to keep eliminating natural animal habitats, and eliminating species in the process. Maybe we could stop endangering species to the point of extinction. Perhaps animals know about certain plants that can cure some of mankind's maladies naturally, instead of using prescription drugs with side effects. What should she do?

Months went by at the school with Galen getting smarter and Abigail's students continuing to learn sign language. As far as Abigail knew, no one had told the outside world about her gorilla.

Galen began asking questions. He wanted to know why he looked different from everybody else. Abigail told him it was because he was different from everybody else. He said he didn't feel different, only looked different. He wondered why he was the only person in the class who could speak besides Abigail. Abigail told Galen it was because everybody else was deaf, meaning they couldn't hear. He said he was sorry that they couldn't hear. Abigail started crying. Galen touched his leathery fingers to the tears on her face and asked what the tears were. Abigail said the tears were water that came out of her eyes when she was happy. Galen said he was glad that she was happy. He said he wished he could be happy. He said he was confused.

Abigail told Galen that she didn't know how to explain to him why he looked the way he did and why he was confused. There are some things in life that have no explanation. They just are what they are and we have to accept that there things that we can't change. It is useless to get confused about things that we can't change. It serves no purpose. He said he would try to understand, but it would be difficult. He wanted to know why the men had taken his parents in Africa. She said she didn't know.

Galen wanted to learn more. Abigail gathered resource materials for the High School equivalency tests and taught the materials to him. In 6 months, he was able to pass the exams and would have qualified for a High School diploma if he were human. Galen wanted to learn how to write. It was difficult for him at first, due to his large fingers, but in time he was writing as well as he was reading. He saw Abigail on a typewriter and wanted to learn how to use it. In 1 month, he learned how to use a typewriter. Galen's intelligence started to appear to be greater than an average human's. Abigail administered a typical I.Q. test to Galen and he ended up with and I.Q. of 130! Abigail gave him different versions of the I.Q. test 3 more times, with his score still registering 130. Abigail couldn't believe it. Galen was actually almost a genius and he was a gorilla! She wondered if he were getting more intelligent as time went on and it was true. After a year, she I.Q. tested him again and he scored 140! After 3 more different tests, he still scored 140. Something phenomenal was taking place. Abigail had to assure herself that she wasn't dreaming, that it was real.

Galen was curious what all the testing she was giving him was about. Abigail told him it was to see how smart he was. He said he didn't know what it meant to be smart. He just was the way he was. She said it was ok that he didn't understand. It didn't really matter how smart people were. All that mattered was that people were happy. He said he wasn't happy. He said he was confused. He said he guessed that he didn't really know what it meant to be happy. She explained that when someone was happy, they weren't confused about anything and when they were tired, they fell asleep right away and had good dreams. He asked what dreams were. She said dreams were things you sometimes saw while you were sleeping. Sometimes dreams were good and sometimes dreams were bad. He said he understood.

He said he had good dreams of when he was with his parents in the jungle. He had bad dreams of when they were taken away by the men. Abigail started crying. Galen asked why she was happy when he told her about his bad dream. She asked him what he was talking about. He said that she said she cried when she was happy. Abigail had to explain that sometimes she cried when she was happy and sometimes she cried when she was sad. He said he was really confused. She said it was ok to be confused. She gets confused sometimes. Nobody on earth lived his or her life without being confused once in a while. He said ok. Abigail realized Galen had a lot more to learn than just book learning. Books were easy to learn, given enough real desire to learn and a little intelligence. Emotions and people were much more difficult to understand.

Abigail wanted Galen to be happy, but didn't know what he required to be happy. She thought he might be happier back in his native Africa, so they flew back to the village. The village had another orphan gorilla that arrived a week before they got there. Abigail hoped Galen would be able to communicate with the orphan and possibly be stimulated to go back into the wild with his own kind. The trapper who found that new orphan was there having coffee with the principal of the school. The trapper advised not to attempt to release Galen back into the wild, because there was so much gorilla kidnapping going on. He said Galen would probably end up in a zoo somewhere in the world. Abigail didn't want anything bad to happen to Galen, but she still wanted to try something.

Abigail introduced Galen to the orphan gorilla to see what would happen. The orphan grunted and gestured at Galen. Galen didn't understand what the orphan was saying. He spoke to the orphan in his newfound English language, amazing the trapper and the principal. The orphan looked at Galen quizzically, turning its head with a confused look on its face. Galen couldn't remember how to grunt and gesture in the gorilla language, because he hadn't used it in so long. He kept trying to speak to the orphan as he spoke with Abigail. The orphan became nervous and attacked Galen. The trapper jumped in between the gorillas to break up the fracas. Abigail escorted Galen outside, realizing that he had no home in his native Africa. It wouldn't be safe for him from inevitable human intervention and he wouldn't be able to get along with his fellow gorillas. Abigail and Galen flew back to her school in America.

Abigail valued Galen for his intelligence and felt sorry for him as an animal living on an island, with no way to get off the island. How could she help him? Galen asked Abigail what she was going to do. She said she didn't know. She did conclude that she would have to get him out of the school, to protect him from being discovered. Abigail closed her school in Colorado and moved to her uncle's house in Oregon. Her uncle Barton was a scientist who lived on a 1,500 acre secluded forested property. Barton was interested in everything, as were most scientists, with a particular interest in primates. Barton was the one who suggested to Abigail to try using a gorilla in her teaching. Abigail hadn't yet revealed to Barton anything about Galen's recent progress. She hoped he would be sympathetic and would be able to come up with a solution.

When Abigail and Galen arrived, Galen greeted Barton with an outstretched paw and said, "Hello Uncle Barton!" Barton was dumbfounded that the gorilla could speak. Abigail explained to Barton that there were many surprising things about Galen. Barton had won the Nobel Prize in Science for his report on the theory of an evolutionary link between apes and man. The money prize was enough for him to buy his estate and conduct research at his own pace, without being slowed down by waiting for funding, as are most scientists. Barton had an excellent laboratory that was full of chalkboards and dry-erase boards littered with formulas, concepts and drawings. When Barton gave Abigail and Galen a tour of the lab, Galen was intrigued. Barton noticed Galen's fascination with everything in the lab. Galen stopped at a particular board with many things written on it. Barton said it was his most recent work toward finding the link for which he had been searching during the 11 years since he won his prize. Galen wanted to know what the writing was on the board.

Abigail explained to Barton how Galen had a high I.Q. and how he had rapidly learned to speak and learn things. Barton tested Galen with the most comprehensive I.Q. test available, resulting in a score of 145! Abigail noted that Galen's I.Q. kept increasing, which was unusual. Normally I.Q. is a number determined early in life and maintained. Barton tried to explain to Galen what was on the board that so fascinated the gorilla. Galen didn't understand. Barton produced several books that provided the background information necessary to understand the science on the board. Galen read the books with Barton's and Abigail's help. Galen gradually came to comprehend what was on the board and began asking questions. Barton was amazed at the gorilla's intelligence. Even Abigail didn't understand what was on the board. Science wasn't her thing. Barton explained the concept of DNA and how similar ape DNA is to human DNA. The particles that are different are the essences of what make apes think and behave as apes and humans as humans.

Scientists had for centuries unsuccessfully tried to crack the genetic code, to solve the concept of a missing link. No one has been able to do it. The greatest thinkers of humanity get close to the solution, and then get stuck. There is something out there, but no one can come up with a mathematical proof. It is easy to theorize about concepts, but difficult to back it up with verifiable evidence. Everything in science has to be backed up and repeatable. There can be no flukes or luck. If something happens once, it has to happen the same way each time, or it is invalid. Barton got close to the solution many times, but hit the wall. He was missing something in his equations. He didn't know what.

Barton gave Galen the Nobel Prize report to read for more background on the topic. Galen read the report and asked more questions. Barton answered Galen's highly intuitive questions. Barton was impressed by Galen's quick grasp of the material. Abigail was right about the gorilla. He must be a genius. Galen kept going back to the board to study it. Abigail helped her uncle around the lab with his other experiments, while Galen studied the board. Galen asked more

questions, which Barton answered. Barton was wondering if Galen fully understood what was actually taking place on the drawing board or if he was still confused. Galen didn't seem to want to reveal all his thoughts. He wanted to figure it out for himself. Weeks went by with Galen studying the board and Abigail helping her uncle at the lab.

Barton took a sample of Galen's blood to test the DNA and compare it to human DNA and ape DNA. To Barton's and Abigail's surprise, Galen's DNA was actually closer to human DNA than ape DNA. It was impossible! They tested 9 more times and the results were the same. Galen was more human than ape! He looked exactly like a gorilla, being average size for his age. His skull wasn't larger than normal. The similar DNA might be what gave Galen his superior intelligence. The fact that Galen could talk was really the kicker. Somehow, his vocal cords and mouth were capable of creating human speech. Abigail admitted that when Galen first started talking, he sounded like a victim of stroke, really mumbly and slurred. The more he talked the smoother and more intelligible his speech became. Barton argued that Galen physiologically shouldn't be able to speak, yet he was doing it. It was one thing to be intelligent enough to speak. It was another thing to be physically capable of doing it. Abigail realized that her uncle was right. She didn't really think about Galen being able to speak. She was so impressed by it, that she was caught up in it.

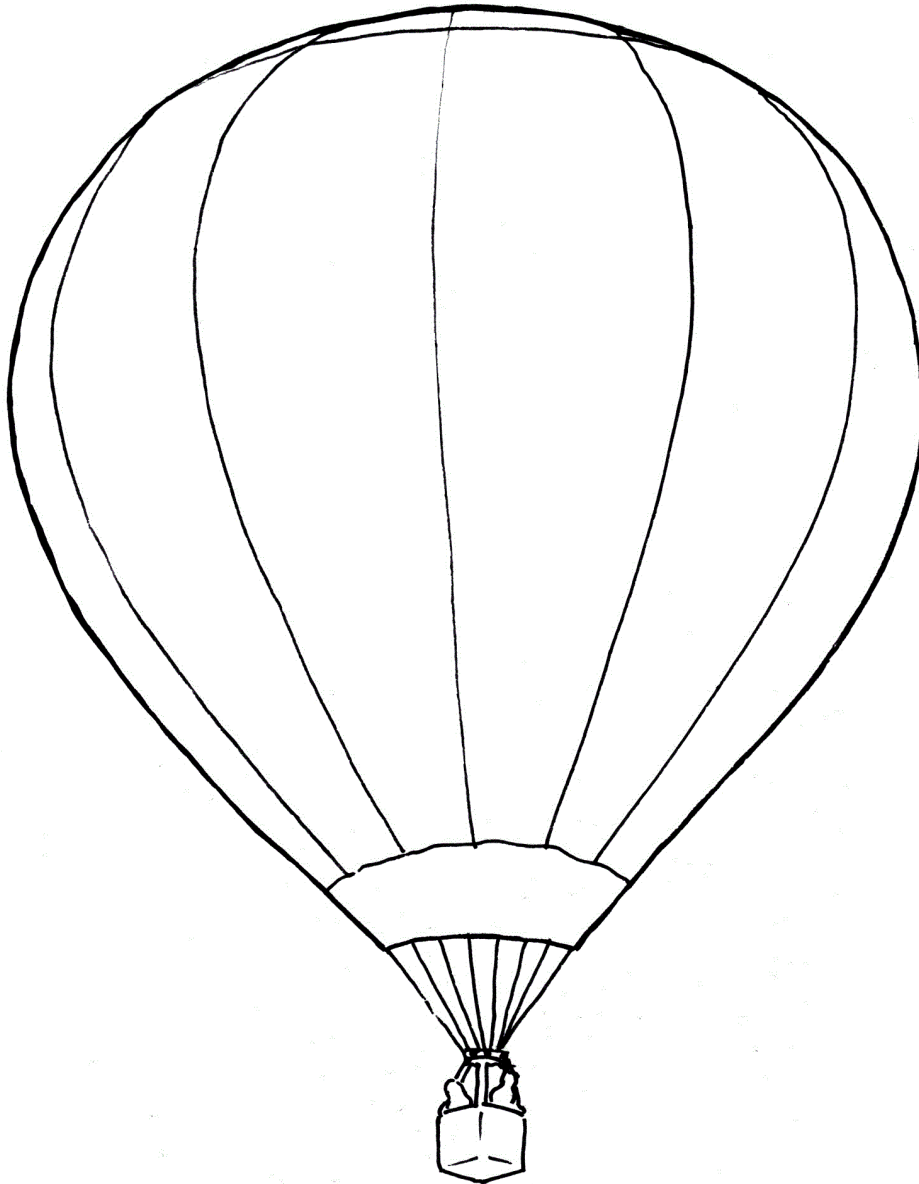
Barton and Abigail talked with Galen about his ability to speak and how it shouldn't be possible. Galen agreed with their argument, but said it was happening anyway, believe it or not. Galen didn't think it was such a big deal. He didn't realize how special he was. He was the only animal in the history of mankind that could speak intelligently, not just repeating like a parrot. Galen finally grasped the importance. To him, he was just doing what came naturally. Galen wondered if his parents were just like he was. Maybe his parents were super smart and could also learn to talk. Maybe there were more animals on earth that could think and speak, not just apes like himself. Barton didn't think so. Man had been experimenting with animals as long as anyone could remember. Someone would have discovered a Galen type of animal by now. The world had never seen a Galen before. Galen argued that there could be animals on earth living so secluded and isolated from humankind, that there could in fact be other undiscovered intelligent species like himself. Barton agreed that it was possible, but unlikely.

Galen became upset at Barton's continuing negativity and growled at him. Barton jumped back a step, surprised at the sound. Abigail rushed between Barton and Galen, trying to calm down Galen. Galen said he was sorry for being so brash. He was just tired. Barton forgave Galen and gave him a big hug. Galen hugged Barton and squeezed a little too hard and a cracking sound was heard. Galen said he was sorry for hugging so hard. He didn't know his own strength. Barton realized Galen could have crushed him to death had he wanted. Luckily, he was a friendly gorilla. Barton told himself to be careful what he said in earshot of Galen. Galen was intelligent, but was still not as refined as a human was and could possibly fly off the handle, if

provoked. Abigail told herself the same thing. She and Barton privately discussed how they had to treat Galen with kid gloves until he had a better grasp on things. Everything was moving so quickly for Galen. He needed a little time to soak it all in and grow with it.

Galen continued studying the board in the lab, sleeping on the floor in front of it. Galen woke up in the middle of the night sometimes to look at the board for a while, and then go back to sleep again. It was clear to Barton and Abigail that Galen was for some reason obsessed with the principles and concepts on the board. Barton had given up 3 months before trying to come up with the solution, but had left his most recent work there on the board. Barton thought that it didn't hurt anything for Galen to study the board. Maybe the gorilla would learn something. Barton enjoyed answering Galen's questions and discussing the views. One morning, Barton noticed Galen writing something on the bottom of the board with a red marker, where there was still some space remaining. He also noticed in the middle of the board that one of the formulas had a red line drawn through part of it.

21. Jacob's Breeze



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Jacob had always loved the sky, breezes and air, since he was a kid, when his father Kyle first took him up in a hot air balloon at the age of 3. To Jacob, the closest thing to being a bird is floating in a hot air balloon. Between the occasional blasts of the burner to create hot air for lift, the air was silent. The rider could hear the breeze. The rider could hear the flapping of wings when birds flew by. There was nothing like it. Jacob had experienced many things in his life, including all the major thrill seeking adventures. Jacob concluded that ballooning was the most satisfying thing to do of all the things he had tried. Since Kyle owned a hot air balloon ride business, Jacob always had his own state of the art balloon to play with. Jacob had been ballooning alone since the age of 17, the legal age for such an activity. Kyle taught him how to "fly the balloon," he called it, when Jacob was 11.

At 23 years old, Jacob felt he could fly the balloon anywhere, for an unlimited amount of time. The only real limitation on flying a balloon was the amount of food and fuel for the flame. It depended if a flier wanted to stay up in the air for as long as possible for his own true flying thrill or land and take off repeatedly for an extended period. The true fliers wanted to stay up in the air for as long as possible, not touching down. Jacob felt himself to be a true flier. He wanted to fly in a balloon for years if possible, never touching ground. He was so fanatical about balloon flight that he was starting to get maniacal. Kyle had noticed Jacob's increasing obsession with balloon flight over the years. Kyle didn't know how crazed Jacob really was. Jacob had kept his feelings to himself about balloon flight, not wanting Kyle to think he was obsessed to the point of seeming suicidal with recklessness. Jacob felt that if a balloon mission were thoroughly prepared for, nothing within reason could go wrong.

Jacob's favorite book was "Around the world in 80 days." He remembered the first time he read that book. His grandmother gave it to him as a birthday present when he was in the 3rd grade. He was so impressed by the book that he read it repeatedly. He got into trouble at school because he wasn't reading the books that he was required to read. His father had to intervene to make Jacob read his schoolbooks first, then his favorite book. The concept of flying around the world in 80 days had always fascinated Jacob. The feat had never been accomplished by anyone. The concept of the book had been imagined before the age of airplanes. Hot air balloons were used for all travel at one time, gradually being replaced by trains, autos and finally the fastest mass transport of all, airplanes.

After reading the book for seemingly the 10,000th time, Jacob decided that he wanted to fly around the world in a hot air balloon. He didn't want to do it just to prove that it could be done. He wanted to do it for himself. Jacob's greatest love was flying a balloon and the only way to make flying a balloon better was to fly it over the greatest measurable distance, around the world. Jacob had prepared himself for the around the world flight for many years, gradually increasing

the distance each time. The length of the distance is what determined the size of the balloon and support systems involved. The amount of fuel for the flame determined the distance traveled, more or less. The amount of food and water determined how long he could have sustenance. The 2 needs worked hand in hand. Jacob calculated everything meticulously and rounded the numbers up, to provide for contingencies.

The cost of the journey was no object to Jacob. Jacob had many sponsors through his father's hot air balloon ride business, who provided the funding. Jacob's balloon and basket were painted with the names of the sponsors. The calculated amount of lift necessary required 3 balloons grouped together to provide enough hot air to lift the weight of the basket. It wasn't really a basket as people think of it. It was actually more of a sealed container with windows. The container provided a weather resistant shell in which Jacob could live and navigate. The basket contained myriad pieces of equipment, including compasses, weather radar, weapons, pressure/wind sensing devices and other equipment necessary for the trip. Kyle provided the initial guidance for what was likely to be needed for the journey. Jacob then extensively researched what was actually necessary.

Jacob talked to many long-distance fliers to get their take on the requirements. Each of the 3 balloons would be 1000 feet high. The sausage-shaped capsule would be 150 feet long and 50 feet wide to contain all the provisions, fuel and gear. The cost of the equipment would be an estimated \$892,000. Of course, the cost of the venture meant nothing to Jacob because he wasn't paying for a cent of it. The sponsors felt that their money was safe with Jacob. He had been flying for years, and never crashed. Jacob had the luck of Charles Lindbergh, having flown millions of miles and never getting hurt. Jacob was like Steve McQueen. He did things his way or he didn't do it and walked away. Jacob told the sponsors how much the venture would cost without batting an eye. Initially the sponsors balked at the cost. Jacob simply told them that either they pay or someone else will. The sponsors at first walked out of the meeting, feeling insulted by Jacob's arrogance. Just as Steve McQueen always won, Jacob won. The sponsors talked to Kyle and Kyle assured them that Jacob knew what he was doing. The sponsors signed.

Jacob was going to film and document the entire journey. As part of the deal, the sponsors were given the film rights and book rights for the adventure. The sponsors wouldn't have provided the money without the extra rights. Having their names painted on the side of the balloon wasn't enough. Any sponsor that Jacob would have approached would have wanted the same. The trip would be a huge human-interest story, because Jacob would be alone for the entire journey. Jacob was interviewed before the mission by all the local news people. Barbara Walters flew in for an interview. Representatives from The Weather Channel arrived to give Jacob some last minute meteorological advice. Jacob estimated the trip would take approximately 6 months. Obviously, the time of 6 months was longer than the original book's fantasy time of 80 days, but it was reality that Jacob was dealing with, not writer's fantasy. Jacob would have plenty of

redundant weather-resistant film equipment running and would keep a copious waterproof daily diary. He planned no live broadcasts, choosing to periodically transmit broadcasts to the internet.

Jacob currently had no wife or girlfriend, choosing the solitary existence of ballooning. He had always been a solitary type of person, starting with being an only child. He grew up entertaining himself. He had plenty of friends growing up. He wasn't exactly a weirdo. He simply preferred the freedom of the air to being bogged down by boring chitchat. He was planning to bring along his parrot, Chico for company. Jacob liked that parrot that he had since he was a child. Since parrots can live for 80 years, the bird would likely be with Jacob forever or at least until Jacob or the parrot died. The parrot was 1 year old when Jacob received it as a pet when he was also 1. The parrot was the same age as Jacob at 23. Chico liked Jacob and Jacob liked Chico. They made a good pair. They entertained each other. Chico knew how to sing and play cards. Chico had accompanied Jacob on all his balloon trips. Jacob wouldn't go anywhere without the adventurous bird. The parrot had its own food on the trips, the Purina parrot chow that was recommended by 4 out of 5 vets.

Jacob had his research done and he thought he was ready to head out. Then his mother had a stroke, which was unexpected for her age. When Jacob visited her in the hospital, she told him she didn't want him to go. She said life was too short to take chances doing stupid things like flying in a balloon. Jacob gently told her he was sorry but he had to go on his around the world trip. There was nothing that she or anyone else could do about it. Kyle was at the hospital visiting with Jacob and told Jacob's mother to leave Jacob alone. Kyle was a firm believer that people always had to do what they had to do, given the opportunity. The beauty of life was being able to pursue happiness without limitations, as Jefferson wrote in the declaration. Jacob's mother has always thought Kyle was a little crazy as well.

Kyle felt that the only way to honestly pursue happiness was to just do it and not think too much about it. If opportunity presented itself, happiness must be pursued. If people always waited for the right time to do things, they might never do anything. Waiting for money to do something was one thing. Some things required money. Opportunity to do things was really the main thing. Jacob's single status enabled him to do whatever he pleased. He had established that years ago. Jacob had girlfriends years before and he had many good times. He broke many hearts of girls who broke his heart in return. He had a lot of fun along the way and had established a reputation as being a bit of a lady killer. Jacob was done with women for the time being. He felt that it was better for everyone involved that he stayed celibate. Jacob was at peace with himself and would accept whatever happened without bitterness.

Jacob's mother pleaded with him not to go on the trip. She said she had a premonition that something bad was going to happen. Jacob's mother was never into the concept of hot air ballooning, always worrying about her husband and Jacob when they flew. She said she had

been having bad dreams about Jacob's world mission. Just before her stroke, she claimed she had been having bad dreams for the 4 days leading up to the stroke. She was subtly implying that Jacob had caused the stroke. Kyle and Jacob knew otherwise. Jacob's mother had smoked cigarettes for 32 years. Kyle didn't smoke. Jacob didn't smoke and thought people who smoked were idiots. Jacob and Kyle knew it was the smoking that had caused Jacob's mother's stroke. As much as Jacob loved his mother, it was wrong of her to imply that his trip caused her stroke. He resented it a little. He felt sorry for his mother but he definitely didn't feel to blame for her stroke.

Perhaps his mother thought she would be able to convince him to change his mind about flying. He absolutely would not cancel his trip for any reason. He may delay the trip, but never cancel it. The only reason he would cancel is if he were struck by lightning and killed. He had been struck by lightning a number of times while golfing and while ballooning. In fact, he had been struck by lightning more times while golfing than while ballooning. Go figure! Jacob's mother had her point, weak though it was. She had never understood how Kyle and then Jacob could get any enjoyment out of flying. She had gone up once in a balloon before Jacob was born and didn't like it. The problem with her one and only trip in the balloon was that she was attacked by a pelican that stole the gold necklace from her neck as it flew by. That necklace had been given to her by Kyle. She really loved that necklace. She couldn't understand why that stupid pelican had stolen her necklace. She had never heard of a pelican that would steal something shiny from someone's neck. She thought pelicans only wanted to eat edible things. That pelican stealing her necklace possibly caused her to dislike ballooning. Jacob didn't care one way or the other if his mother liked ballooning or not. He loved it. His father loved it. His parrot loved it.

Jacob's mother's stroke was a minor setback. Jacob postponed the trip until his mother was out of therapy, 3 months later. He wanted to make sure she was on the road to recovery before he left. He was her only child after all. He had to see a little bit of her side of the situation. Kyle was glad that Jacob delayed the trip for his mother. Kyle loved Jacob's mother. Kyle knew that he had instilled a demon in his only son Jacob when he first took him up in the balloon. Life had all its mysteries for people to be amazed at or to solve. Jacob was a mystery solver. He didn't sing the same tune as others did. He followed his own path. Perhaps it was because he was an only child. Perhaps it was because he was who he was. He had to live his life, not anybody else's. Kyle respected Jacob's decision to continue to take the trip.

Kyle wished he had the balls to go on an around the world balloon trip like Jacob. Kyle was content in living through Jacob's craziness. Kyle was content with running his balloon ride business, but not going on major trips. Kyle had seen too many of his friends crash and die on balloon trips. Kyle couldn't wait for Jacob to take off on his voyage, but had mixed feelings. On the one hand, Kyle wanted Jacob to succeed on the mission. On the other hand, he wanted Jacob to be alive, safe and happy. Kyle knew that Jacob was never happy unless he was on his balloon.

What a bizarre predicament Kyle had put himself into. There was a great amount of pleasure in seeing other people being happy. It is just as difficult to see the same people unhappy.

No one outside of prison or other captivity should have to be confined or restricted or play games by other people's rules. It was the way life was meant to be. Pursuit of happiness was given to all individuals by nature. Everyone should be able to have the elusive happiness. Jacob was lucky enough to have his mother and father to provide him with the ability to do what he wanted. The problem his mother found was that she feels she created a monster. Kyle didn't see it that way.

The greatest, most noteworthy individuals of all time were able to progress and do what they had to do to be as great as they became. What would have happened if Edison, Pasteur or Tesla were held back? The world would possibly have been a different place. Maybe not, but who knows? Nobody can look back at things and predict a different outcome. History happens the way it happens. It is like a football game when one team misses a field goal and then later in the game people think it was the game changing moment. Life had to be grabbed by the balls. Jacob was one of those people. Jacob fully respected what people's opinions were of his ballooning, but he really didn't care. He did what he did, because he loved it.

The trip's new date was scheduled for March 1. Jacob planned to take off from Kitty Hawk, North Carolina, the same place where the Wright Brothers attained their first ever motorized flight in 1903. Jacob checked the weather forecasts well ahead of time. It came down to the nut. There was no stopping. Jacob had everything checked and quadruple checked by his ballooning guy. Jacob's ballooning guy had been with Kyle for the entire time that Kyle had been ballooning. The guy was pretty old at 86, but he really knew his stuff. The guy was one of the best in his profession, if not the best, at preparing for such crazy missions as Jacob's. Jacob's ballooning guy had a strange ceremony that he performed before Jacob or Kyle took off on a journey. It was an intensely spiritual ceremony involving candles, incense and blood. With candles and incense burning, the old guy would stab his finger with his old boy scout pocketknife, drawing blood. He would then have all the people embarking on the flight do the same thing. Everyone would touch their fingertips together and yell the phrase, "Live free or die!" Then they would say it 2 more times to solidify the effect. The ceremony always creeped everybody out. They felt as if they were going on a mission to Mars or something.

The old guy was really serious about the ceremony, so no one ever objected to participating in it. Kyle never had a problem on the thousands of trips he had taken with the old guy's ceremony involved. He wasn't about to test fate. Jacob similarly respected the old guy's ceremony, never having mishaps on any trip. Jacob, like his father wasn't going to mess with a good thing. The balloon was in the air at 6:00 am per schedule and it was on. Jacob's traditional send-off was to light a stick of dynamite and throw it out of the basket, obviously making sure he didn't hit

anybody. Jacob also fired all 7 rounds of his model 12 shotgun, making an even more terrific racket. The crowds that gathered to watch the takeoff were always warned ahead of time of the impending racket, to prevent heart attacks. Jacob always felt like he was back in the Wild West with all the gun blasts and explosions. He felt it was a proper way to start the undertaking. "Let's go out with a bang!" he would say.

That shotgun was passed down to him from his father who had passed it down from his father. That shotgun had been used many times to fend off birds and bats in the sky that had interfered with missions. The last time that Jacob had to fend off animals was when the vultures tried to attack his beloved parrot. The vultures seemed to have a thing against his balloon and belongings. Some of the vultures pecked violently at the balloon, trying to puncture it. Others bothered his parrot. Others bothered him. Jacob produced the fully loaded shotgun and accurately blasted at the vulture flock with birdshot rounds, knocking 11 of them out of the sky. The remaining vultures retreated and ate the fallen members of their flock on the ground.

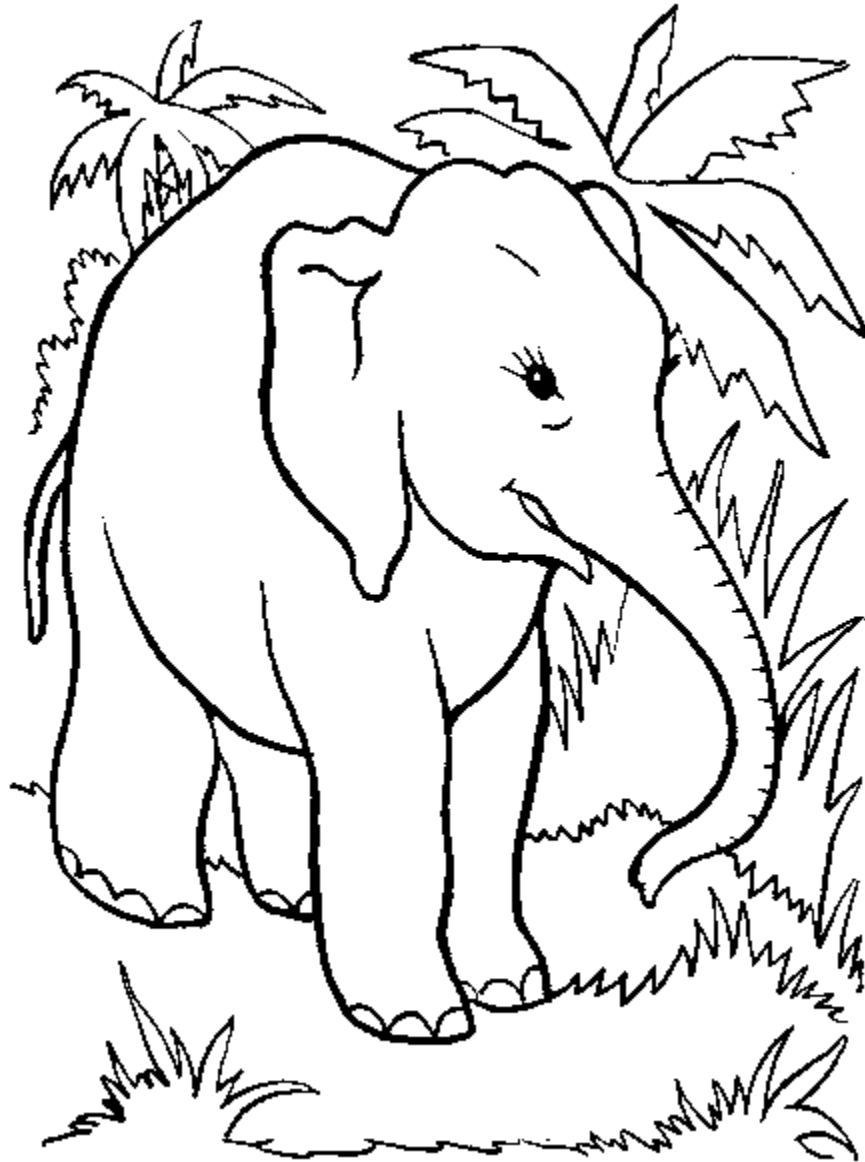
He also had a .243 rifle on board the balloon. Jacob had a few other tricks up his sleeve in the weapons cabinet. He had various devices in storage waiting to be activated as required, including hand grenades, spear guns and pistols. Jacob was off. The balloon was in flight. Chico was squawking the usual sound he made when they hit the sky. The parrot loved to ascend into the sky. It lived for it. People who have witnessed Jacob and the parrot going on flights in the past have noted that Chico appeared to be more excited than Jacob was. Jacob had noticed the same thing in the past. His crazy Chico loved flying in balloons. There was just something about it that really got to the bird. Chico was caught up in the excitement of the balloon leaving. The 300,000 people who were at the takeoff of the balloon really got into the excitement. The crowd started gathering at midnight, with hundreds of vehicles filling the vast fields there. It was an event.

The plan was to fly from East to West across the country toward California, then to cross the Pacific Ocean, etc. Jacob flew at a high enough altitude to have room for error if something went wrong. If he started losing elevation quickly, for example, he would still have plenty of elevation to come up with a solution before crashing. Jacob had known fliers who had crashed. It was never a pretty sight. Flying a balloon was a tricky operation that wasn't suited for amateurs. If burners failed or fuel ran out, or tears in the balloon fabric occurred, only a pro flier would be able to recover safely. If more than 1 negative thing happened simultaneously, even a pro had his life in his hands. In the event of trouble that forced an emergency landing, the most difficult thing to do was to descend slowly. Balloons had to come to rest easy, since they didn't have landing gear. There usually wasn't a runway either. Sometimes, the balloon went down so fast, there was no choice of landing location. When a balloon lost its lift ability, the wind was the flier's worst enemy.

The wind could slam a balloon into the ground in seconds. It always took more than seconds to make corrections in a balloon's flight, thus the hazard. Jacob and Chico ascended to cruising altitude with no issues. At 15,000 feet, they leveled off. Flying a balloon involved continuous reaction to prevailing conditions. There wasn't much control per se. The best a balloon flier could do was attempt to limit what the wind was trying to do to his balloon. Through a combination of burner firing, wind direction and guessing, the pilot did the best he could. The challenge of balloon flight always brought out the best in Jacob. That is why he loved it. He felt so alive in the sky.

The tropical depression that had formed off the coast of Africa didn't show up on Jacob's weather forecast for the day. The depression had rapidly moved in a northerly direction and had escalated into a tropical storm as Jacob took off on his flight. While Jacob was still over North Carolina, the storm had become a Category I hurricane and had quickly caught up to him. The hurricane became Category II when it grabbed him, his parrot and his balloon. The hurricane rotated Jacob out over the ocean and was carrying him to Europe over the Atlantic Ocean. Jacob had become ensnared in a hurricane that eventually escalated to Category III and he couldn't do anything to stop it.

22. Halina's Trunk



22. Halina's Trunk

In India, elephants were cherished animals. They provided transportation, safety and status. The country had an almost religious type of love for the great beasts. The Indian people were very spiritual and believed in many things that could heal the body and soul, not the least of which was elephants. Elephants were bred in India and raised in a nurturing atmosphere. As big as the animals were, if they were treated properly from birth, they could be as gentle as armadillos. Occasionally, an exceptional elephant was discovered. Halina was one of those elephants.

Halina was born to a wealthy family in New Delhi that owned a great many elephants. The elephants were sold or leased to businessmen to be used as transportation. When Halina was born, he seemed to emanate an aura. The sound he made was different from a typical baby elephant. When Halina was hanging out with the other babies, his voice was easily distinguishable from the others. Normally, baby elephants emit a weird trumpet-squeak. Halina's voice was calmer with a lower tone. He didn't seem to get upset at anything. When he was hungry, he simply uttered a low pleasant grunt. His handlers noticed Halina's voice and had been discussing it among themselves for months. It was like no sound they had ever heard before, either from an elephant or any other animal, for that matter.

Elephants are capable of creating ultra-low frequency sounds, due to the structure of their immense skulls. Sometimes, the sounds were inaudible to humans. It was believed that the sounds were used by elephants to communicate with each other. Whales in the ocean use similar sounds, except they are of a higher frequency. Depending on how old the elephant was, usually determined the frequency range of which they were capable. The older elephants could mutter so low that only other elephants could hear it, which was their intention. Humans were incapable of deciphering the sounds, even if they could hear them.

Halina's voice continued to baffle his handlers as Halina continued to grow. When Halina's owner was first introduced to the sounds of the elephant, he couldn't believe what he was hearing. As Halina got older, his grunting became more and more soothing to the human ear. Eventually Halina learned to control the sounds he was making. One day, one of Halina's handlers, Piedad was standing near the front of the elephant, cleaning its front feet. Halina directed the end of his trunk and put it to Piedad's ear. Halina began to mutter something. Piedad smiled and went into a trance as Halina continued muttering. Piedad slumped and sat down on the ground in front of the elephant. Another handler ran over to see what happened. The other handler thought that perhaps Halina had struck Piedad down. When the other handler arrived, he saw Piedad awaken with a smile on his face. Piedad had explained that the elephant had whispered to him and it made him feel extremely at ease and peaceful. Piedad was so at ease that he had fallen into a trance.

When news of the event got back to Halina's owner, he called a conference. Halina's owner,

Omer consulted with all his handlers and asked them if they had ever witnessed such a thing. They all said they hadn't. The handlers agreed that Halina was a special elephant and had been since birth. At 5 years old, Halina was full-grown and at the age of being sold or leased. Owners of elephants rarely kept elephants for pets, due to the high cost of upkeep. Elephants were bred and raised for eventual profit. Due to the recent developments with Halina, Omer considered what to do with the elephant. There must be some other value to Halina, unknown to everyone. There had to be. The elephant seemed too special.

Piedad brought Omer to the elephant stable to witness Halina's power for himself. Piedad escorted Omer to Halina's stall. With Omer standing at the railing, Piedad motioned to Halina to come to the railing. Halina walked over and instinctively placed the end of his trunk at Omer's ear and began muttering. Omer immediately started to smile. Then he grew woozy and had to be assisted by Piedad to the bench to sit down. Omer continued to smile even after he had passed out on the bench. Piedad pushed away Halina's trunk so that Omer could recover. Omer woke up and started crying. He claimed the experience had somehow changed his life. He stood up and reached out for Halina's trunk. The elephant brought its trunk closer. Omer held the end of Halina's trunk in his hands and kissed it. Piedad started crying. Piedad heard Halina beginning to mutter again. Omer placed the end of Halina's trunk to Piedad's ear and in a few seconds, Piedad passed out, smiling. Omer was convinced that Halina was some kind of mystical elephant. The Indian people didn't believe in magic. Halina's ability had to have been handed down to the elephant from the creator.

Omer didn't know what to do. He had allowed all the members of his family except his ailing mother, Adelaide to listen to Halina and they were all equally flabbergasted by the experience. Adelaide was 92 years old and recently became afflicted with lung problems. Omer was hesitant about exposing her to the elephant, due to her sickness. He didn't want her to catch something from the elephant in her weakened state. She hadn't been able to get out of bed for months and coughed constantly. The doctors could do nothing, merely attributing her sickness to old age. Omer couldn't accept the opinion of the doctors. He had to try something. Omer had his mother's bed wheeled to the open front door of the house and waited there with her and the butler. Piedad brought Halina to the house. Halina instinctively reached his trunk toward Adelaide's ear. Adelaide was frightened. Omer told Adelaide it was ok. He wanted to try something. He assured her the elephant was gentle.

She permitted Halina to move the tip of his trunk closer to her ear. When the trunk was just barely touching her ear, Halina started his low toned mumbling. In a short time, Adelaide's eyes started to close and soon she was asleep. Omer tried to move the trunk away, but Halina insisted on continuing what he was doing. Omer and Piedad watched in amazement as Halina continued doing his thing for Adelaide for 30 minutes. When Halina finally pulled his trunk from Adelaide's ear, she awoke. For the first time in months, she hadn't coughed when she called

Omer's name. She said she felt better for some reason. She didn't know if it was from the nap that she for some reason had just taken or from some other reason. Piedad threw his hands to his face and knelt down on the ground, stunned. Omer did the same. The 2 men felt as if they had witnessed a miracle. Omer leaped to his feet and hugged his mother. He said, "Don't you see what has happened? You're cured!"

Adelaide said, "You're right! I'm cured!" Piedad said, "It's a miracle!" Omer said, "Yes!" It appeared to Omer that Halina's mumbling through his trunk was some great mystical force. It seemed that if Halina muttered to someone who was healthy, they merely went into a trance and became tremendously at ease and happy. If Halina muttered to someone who was ill in any manner, they were cured of their illness. Omer suddenly realized that the arthritis in his left hand was gone. He hadn't noticed it until just then. The magic had worked on him as well! Omer spoke to Piedad of his theory. Piedad thought about the theory it for a moment. Piedad had suffered an injury to his back while playing soccer years back. It made it difficult to bend over too far forward without pain. Piedad tried to bend over to pick up a pebble from the ground. He felt no pain! Piedad shrieked with glee. Adelaide suddenly rose in her bed. She motioned for Omer and Piedad to help her. She lifted the cover and swung her legs to the side of the bed.

Adelaide sat on the edge of the bed contemplating. She started crying. She put her bare feet on the floor of the doorway and shakily stood up with Omer and Piedad each holding an arm. She motioned to them to let her go. Incredibly, she started walking! She walked outside of the house in her pajamas into the front yard. Omer and Piedad started crying. Adelaide had been a marathon runner in her younger days and was accustomed to running every day. When she became sick, she had to stop her running. She loved running for the freedom of it. When she ran, she created her own breeze. In India, breezes were essential, due to the heat and humidity. Adelaide thought back to her marathon days as she walked barefoot in the yard. She felt she had nothing to lose and started running! Adelaide was actually running! Omer and Piedad screamed at her to stop, but she wouldn't. Omer sent the butler after her to catch her. Adelaide was too fast for him. She ran across the front yard toward the side of the house and rounded the corner. The butler ran toward the corner of the house. When he got there, he saw that she had already run down the side of the house, had rounded the back corner and was running across the back yard out of his view!

The butler ran down the side of the house to the back, as Adelaide approached the front door of the house running at full speed! Omer begged his mother to stop running. She kept running. Piedad ran after her, but couldn't catch her either. Adelaide kept circling the house, increasing her pace as she kept running. No one could catch her. Halina tried to grab her with his trunk on one of her laps around the house, but missed. Omer and Piedad screamed at her to stop running. She wouldn't stop. Omer went into the house to get the young maid out to try to catch Adelaide. Even the young maid couldn't catch her! What had happened to Adelaide when Halina muttered

to her? It was as if she were a young woman again. Impossible as it may have been, she was running like a young woman. In fact, it looked to Omer as if his mother were actually running as fast as she used to in in her best days. Omer instructed everyone who had been trying to catch Adelaide to stop. He thought she would stop eventually when she got tired. Adelaide continued running laps around the house for 2 1/2 hours, which was approaching the amount of time it took her to run a marathon. Each time she circled the front of the house, she waved and smiled.

Adelaide was joyously reliving her past glory. She was able to run again and she wasn't going to stop. She felt reborn and refreshed. She felt as though she had been asleep for years, waiting for the time when she would run again. She never thought the time would come. She thought she would die before she ever ran again. She was taking full advantage of her newfound health and vigor. She finally stopped running when she hit the 3-hour mark. She stood at the front door of the house talking to Omer and Piedad, who were grateful that she finally stopped running. She drank half of a cup of tea and fell to the ground. Omer dropped and called to her. She didn't respond. Piedad yelled her name. She didn't answer. Omer put his head on her chest to listen for a heartbeat. He didn't hear it. Piedad and the butler tried. They couldn't hear it. The maid tried to take the pulse of her wrist, and then her carotid artery and felt nothing. Adelaide was dead! Omer thought she probably had a heart attack from running. Piedad agreed. Omer and Piedad started crying. The butler and maid went back into the house. Omer instructed the butler to call for an ambulance.

The whole time that Adelaide had been running around the house, Halina had been standing in the front yard munching on fruit, hay and other food. He took a long drink of water from the water trough next to the house. Halina walked over to the front door where Omer had placed his mother back on the bed. Omer was standing there crying, looking at his deceased mother. Piedad was crying at Omer's side. Adelaide's head was covered by the sheet. Halina pulled the sheet back from Adelaide's head. Omer yelled, "No!" Halina sprayed her face with the 9 gallons of water that were in his trunk! Omer shrieked in horror at what the elephant had done. Piedad grabbed the end of Halina's trunk and tried to move it away. Halina stood fast. Suddenly, Adelaide opened her eyes and said, "What's going on here? Why am I soaking wet?" Piedad fainted and fell face first over the bed. Omer screamed, "Mom, you're alive!" Adelaide said, "Of course, I'm alive. Why wouldn't I be?"

Omer said, "You died! Don't you remember?" Omer realized it was a stupid thing to ask someone if they remembered dying. They wouldn't be able to remember. They were dead when it happened. He was too upset to think. Adelaide said, "I think I would remember dying, boy!" She slapped Piedad's face to wake him and said, "Get off my bed, you idiot!" When Piedad awoke, he saw Adelaide alive and fainted again. "What's wrong with Piedad?" she said. Omer said, "You died mom. I swear you did! We thought you died, anyway." She insisted that she hadn't died. The butler and maid ran to the front door to see what was going on. Upon seeing

Adelaide alive, they both fainted. Omer said, "We didn't hear your heart beating. We couldn't get a pulse. You stopped breathing." She said, "The last thing I remember was that elephant mumbling in my ear." Omer said, "You don't remember getting out of bed and running around the house for 3 hours?" "Running around the house? I can't even get out of this bed!" "Yes, mom, you can run. Try it."

Adelaide said, "My cough went away! Omer my cough went away!" Omer said, "I know!" He said, "Your cough is gone. You can out of bed and not only walk, but run! You were running around the house, mom, like in the old days! We tried to catch you to make you stop, but couldn't. You outran everybody here!" "You must be joking!" she said. Adelaide pushed Piedad off the bed and swung her legs to the side. She sat on the edge of the bed. She felt better than she had in a long time. "Why are my feet so dirty?" she said. "I told you mom. You were running around the house for 3 hours. We couldn't stop you! You were running in bare feet!" "I don't know what you're talking about!" she said. Adelaide stood up without asking for help from Omer. She walked out the front door into the yard. "Omer, Omer, I can walk!" she said. "It was because of Halina!" said Omer. "Halina? Who's Halina?" she said. Omer pointed to the elephant standing in the yard and said, "That elephant is Halina." "Oh. What do you mean it was because of Halina?" she said. Omer explained to Adelaide what had transpired and how she seemed to have been brought back to life by the elephant. She couldn't believe what he was saying.

As Omer and Adelaide talked, the ambulance came speeding up the driveway to the house.

23. Keenan's Decision



23. Keenan's Decision

Keenan, his friend Neil and the crew of 2 Sherpas were almost at the peak of Mt. Yetta. Mt. Yetta was technically the 2nd tallest mountain on earth, being 1 inch shorter than Mt. Everest. Not many people had heard of Mt. Yetta. Keenan had searched the world for a mountain to climb that no one else had. He wanted to be the first at doing something. He wanted to be in the history books. He wanted his children or nieces or nephews to read about him and be proud. It wasn't that Keenan was a hog for glory. He just wanted the world to know his name. Keenan's Sherpas, Mohan and Gerhan were the best that money could hire. It was almost impossible for a man to climb a tall mountain alone. Sherpas were absolutely essential.

Sherpas had recently reached a milestone for their industry. In the past, when Sherpas were injured or killed, while carrying for climbers, they were screwed. Sherpas didn't have health or life insurance and their loved ones received nothing when they died. Insurance was expensive. After years of lobbying for fair wages and insurance, the Sherpas finally won. Mohan and Gerhan were happy, knowing that if something happened to them, their wives and children would be provided for. They weren't indigent after all, like some natives in a Tarzan movie. Sherpas were human beings like anyone else, entitled to all the benefits of a safe work environment. A super high mountain wasn't exactly a safe work environment, but at least they would be accommodated if there were a mishap.

Mt. Yetta was never climbed until Keenan's attempt. That was the way he wanted it. The Sherpas were excited about being the first to climb it as well. Everyone thought Mt. Everest was the tallest and everyone wanted to climb it. Mt. Yetta was essentially just as tall. In fact, Mt. Yetta was more difficult to climb than Mt. Everest, which Keenan had climbed 14 times. Keenan was ready for a new challenge. Many of his fellow climbers died climbing Mt. Everest and other similarly difficult peaks. Keenan had never lost a member of his climbing parties, including Sherpas, in all his 37 years of climbing. Keenan felt that he was the best mountain climber in the world. He never failed. Keenan never failed at anything. He always did well in school, not that school was easy. Keenan always put forth his best effort at doing anything. He felt that hard work paid off and for him, it always did. Keenan maintained his health in top form. Keenan's father had died from lung cancer when Keenan was 3. His mother died from lung cancer when he was 7. Both his parents were smokers and Keenan felt that anybody who smoked was an idiot. Look at what happened to his beloved parents.

Keenan had lived most of his childhood and teen years with his wealthy uncle in Dallas, Texas. His uncle was an oil industry magnate and had inherited his oil wells from his father. His uncle didn't make Keenan's life easy. Keenan's uncle taught Keenan the value of working hard for everything. Keenan respected his uncle greatly and owed his climbing success to him. Keenan's uncle taught him that a person could have anything they want as long they really want it and are

willing to do whatever it takes to get it. Keenan felt that nothing in life should come easy to anyone. No one should be handed a cushy life. He hated those spoiled rich kids who were born into wealth. Unfortunately for them, they didn't have the choice of being born rich. It just happened. They didn't and couldn't know any better. Keenan didn't really hate the rich kids. He hated that they were wasted, not really knowing what life is about.

Keenan felt if life were easy, it would be boring. He always fought for what he wanted and got it. Keenan's uncle forced Keenan to get a bachelor's degree in petroleum mining science. That way, Keenan would have the knowledge necessary to carry on his uncle's work. Having oil wells producing oil, didn't mean that the wells would always produce. There was a science that determined the best place to drill for oil, based on numerous geological factors. It was essential for the owners of oil fields to constantly drill new wells to keep the black gold flowing. It wasn't as easy as people thought. John D. Rockefeller was the early expert on oil, back when oil was everywhere and closer to the surface. Recent years have forced oil drillers to go deeper and deeper. Since drilling for oil was so expensive, the drillers always wanted to find the oil on the drilled well if possible.

Keenan, Neil, Mohan and Gerhan hoped they would soon be able to go for the peak, the first people in the world to climb Mt. Yetta. It would be a great honor indeed. The Sherpas were excited about the event, having climbed Everest with Keenan each time that he did. They were at the last base camp in their 4 tents and everything seemed to be a go for the summit the next day. Then, day 1 of snow started falling. Snow was an expected event when climbing and allowed for. Usually they didn't climb upward when it was snowing due to incredibly increased chances of problems. The problem was that when it snowed, it was usually windy, sometimes very, very windy. The wind was the greatest hazard when mountain climbing. The last thing a climber ever wants to do is lose their position by being blown off their footing.

The climbers employed the latest high-tech equipment and methods. Everyone was connected together by high tensile strength ropes and stainless steel anchors. They utilized a redundancy anchoring system. If one person fell, they wouldn't pull down the next lower climber. The person falling would catch hold of the next anchor below them. As long as the anchors were solid, they could be relied upon. When anchors are placed in ice, they can't always be relied upon. At the top of the mountain they were climbing, it was solid ice. Extreme care was necessary. Keenan had never seen an anchor or rope break, because he always bought new equipment for each climb, expensive as it was. He wasn't going to risk anyone's life, if he could help it. It was stupid to compromise. He knew guys who had used old equipment while climbing and had perished on the mountains.

The snow fell for day 2. They would have to stay another day in their tents. Normally, they planned to have enough food for the estimated time of the climb and added 7 more days for

contingencies. After that, they could live off their body fat for another week if necessary. They had unlimited water in the form of melted snow and ice, as needed. It kept snowing. Keenan and Neil weren't worried yet. Mohan and Gerhan weren't worried yet. They had completed late summits many times before. It made for a better story that would stand out in their memories longer. The Sherpas loved mountain climbing as much as Keenan and Neil. To the Sherpas, it wasn't just a job; they actually loved it, possibly more than Keenan and Neil. The Sherpas grew up in those higher elevations of the Himalayas, which made it easier for them to adapt to the higher elevations as they climbed. Keenan had been climbing for so many years, that he almost had the physiology of a Sherpa, so climbs didn't bother him as much as they did when he first started climbing. Mohan and Gerhan were brothers that Keenan hired for his 1st Everest climb, and had hired them ever since.

Keenan's friend Neil was going along on the climb of Mt. Yetta just to see if he could do it. He wasn't as experienced a climber as Keenan, and certainly not as durable as the Sherpas. Neil had made it to that last base camp, so he felt he was doing pretty well up to that point. Keenan and the Sherpas had been watching Neil closely all the way up. They didn't climb as quickly as they usually did, because of Neil. They wanted Neil to enjoy the climb and not die trying. Neil had started to get a little queasy from the altitude and was glad to be resting at that last base camp. Neil didn't communicate his sickness to the others. He knew the other guys were tough and wanted to reach the summit. He didn't want to hold them back. The Sherpas were a couple of tough hombres and he didn't want to piss them off either. Day 3 of snow kept the men in their tents again. The wind started picking up. The Sherpas had to fasten down the tents with the extra long stakes to prevent them being blown away. When it was stormy on the mountain, the tents were life saving devices. The material the tents were made from could withstand 100 mph winds. The tents had to stay attached to the ground to be useful, though. The Sherpas were so tough and resilient that they could almost survive in the open air with their clothing only if they had to. They always used the tents, of course.

Neil was starting to wish that he hadn't gone on the climb. He hadn't climbed with Keenan on the Everest climbs. He had climbed on shorter mountains with other climbers, but he was no Keenan. Neil was a tough character, but not as tough as Keenan or Mohan or Gerhan. Day 4 of snow and increasing winds and hail stranded the men again. The Sherpas were consulting with Keenan as to whether they should abort the climb and retreat to the next lower down base camp. Keenan had never retreated on a climb and never would. Keenan proclaimed that he would climb to the summit alone if necessary. The Sherpas themselves would never choose to retreat. They were thinking of Neil. Keenan forgot about Neil's lack of experience. Keenan had a meeting with Neil about what to do. Neil agreed that they should wait for the snow to stop and then go for the summit. Keenan agreed.

Day 5 of snow stranded the men to the tents. The winds increased again. It didn't seem the

winds could blow any harder, but they did. Snow was capable of falling in the mountains continuously for weeks. The Sherpas said they had seen snow fall in the past for an entire 6-month climbing season. That year hadn't been that bad snow-wise. That was why Keenan was so psyched about doing the climb. They had to strike at the mountain during the mild winter. It seemed that nature was finally waking up and beginning to belt it down. Days 6 and 7 of snow continued to strand the men. Neil began to get worried. Keenan began to worry about Neil. Keenan went to Neil's tent and asked him if he wanted to retreat down the mountain. Neil said he didn't want to. He wanted to be part of the first crew to climb Mt. Yetta. Keenan asked Neil if he were ok. Keenan noticed Neil's face looking a little bit yellow, a sure sign of altitude sickness. Keenan told Neil that one of the Sherpas could take him down the mountain to safety if Neil wanted.

Mohan didn't really want to take Neil down, but if he had to, he would. It was his job. Neil wanted to go on to the summit. Keenan really wanted Neil to go to the summit. It would be a once in a lifetime opportunity to do something before anyone else had. Neil decided that he would go on, despite illness. Keenan talked to Mohan and Gerhan about Neil's obvious altitude sickness and they each had a look at Neil. Mohan and Gerhan weren't worried about Neil yet. They had seen men more afflicted men than Neil who had been able to finish climbs. Neil was still coherent and agreeable. He still seemed to have his wits about him. Day 8 of snow came and went with the men still hiding in their tents. Food was running low. Keenan wasn't worried yet. Days 9 and 10 of snow continued to fall on the men. The winds had let up a little.

The mountain wind had for some reason, always bothered Gerhan. He didn't like the sound the wind made up there. The wind on the mountain was more of a howl. There was something about wind in the higher altitudes when it was combined with the jagged mountain peaks. The swirling air made a scary eerie howl. The howling wind didn't seem to bother Mohan or Keenan. Neil was verging on getting delirious in his tent. Neil had been thinking back to the time when he and Keenan went scuba diving in Bonaire. They had encountered a gigantic octopus that had dozens of tentacles. Neither of them had ever seen anything like it. They had grown up believing that an octopus had 8 legs and that was it. That crazy thing they saw had to be some kind of a mutation or something. They had been scuba diving for conch shells in the coral reef when they saw the giant octopus. The octopus slowly slithered in their direction. When they noticed the beast approaching, they swam away from it. It kept coming after them. They fired both of their spear guns at it and swam to the surface. They swam to their boat and left.

Neil didn't know why he thought of that story. Maybe he thought of it because he was starting to lose his mind. He tried not to let the other guys know he was losing it. Keenan knew Neil and he knew when Neil was in trouble. Keenan talked with Mohan and they decided that maybe Mohan and Neil should head back down the mountain. The snow didn't seem like it was going to stop and Neil was starting to lose the good fight. Keenan would rather have Neil safe than risk

his life for a stupid thing like climbing a mountain. Keenan didn't care about losing his own life, but he didn't want to be responsible for losing his friend's life. Keenan knew the Sherpas already seemed to have some kind of built-in suicidal tendency. Those guys were braver than any men he had ever seen. Those Sherpas were as brave as Marines or SEALs in combat. It was all or nothing. Keenan didn't have to worry about the Sherpas giving him any grief. It wasn't in their genes. They were hired for a job and they knew the risks.

Naturally, no Sherpa ever wanted to die while doing his job. They were always careful. They never did reckless things if they could help it. They only did whatever was necessary for the summit and no more. Keenan had always credited his Sherpas when he reached the summits. A non-Sherpa could never climb a mountain as tall as Mt. Everest or their Mt. Yetta without the Sherpas carrying the loads that they did. Those guys were like human burros. They could be loaded down with a lot of weight and still be agile climbers. No one knew how they did it. They were seemingly inhuman. They were definitely a special breed. All mountain climbers who hired Sherpas owed great debts, including their lives, to the Sherpas. The problem with most mountain climbers is that they took the glory for reaching summits of mountains, not crediting the Sherpas who actually did most of the work. The Sherpas climbed carrying the load right along with the so-called heroes who only carried themselves.

Mohan consulted with Neil, who was on the verge of something bad happening to him. Mohan informed Neil that per Keenan, Mohan would take him down the mountain. Neil said ok. Gerhan and Keenan readied the 2 guys for their descent. Going down a mountain can be trickier than going up, if everybody isn't careful. Neil's weakness didn't help matters, but Mohan was a bull and could bear the heavier load. Keenan knew his friend would be in good hands with Mohan and ordinarily wouldn't have been too worried. The problem was that they had possibly waited a little too long to send Neil down the mountain. Neil had allowed the altitude sickness to get the better of him. It would be a more difficult mission for Mohan to get Neil down. Mohan still wasn't worried. Those Sherpas were so unnaturally strong that they could carry men on their backs if they had to. Mohan was starting to wonder if he were going to have to carry Neil down. Mohan didn't look forward to the possibility, but it was his job and duty.

Keenan and Gerhan bade a reluctant farewell to Neil and Mohan. The 2 remaining on the mountain hoped their companions would be ok. The snow kept falling on day 11, keeping Keenan and Gerhan in their tents, again preventing the attack on the summit. Keenan was beginning to get anxious about the summit. He could taste it. They were almost there. Why did it have to keep snowing? It was beginning to look to Keenan as if they might not make the summit. The snow didn't prevent Mohan and Neil from heading down the mountain. The snow restriction was only placed on climbing up the mountain, not down. Mohan and Neil started down. The 1st day down was ok with a lot of progress, even with the snow falling. Neil seemed to be climbing fine. Going down in elevation helped to ease his altitude sickness. They went

down the mountain using the same anchors they had used going up. Mohan was above Neil, in case Neil slipped, to prevent Neil from falling. The 2nd day down was fine.

There was no challenge that Mohan would back away from. He feared no mountain. He feared no force of nature. On the snowy morning of the 3rd day down, Mohan lost his footing when a gust of wind hit them. Mohan fell headlong down the crags of the mountain and broke his leg on a sharp outcrop of ice. He screamed from the pain. Neil fell from the force of Mohan pulling him down. He was knocked unconscious. The 2 of them were hanging in the air, both held in place by 1 anchor. Mohan's leg was aching badly. Mohan had broken body parts in the past, but this one hurt more than the others. Neil was dangling unconscious. Mohan was dangling with a broken leg. What now? The 2 were in dire straits.

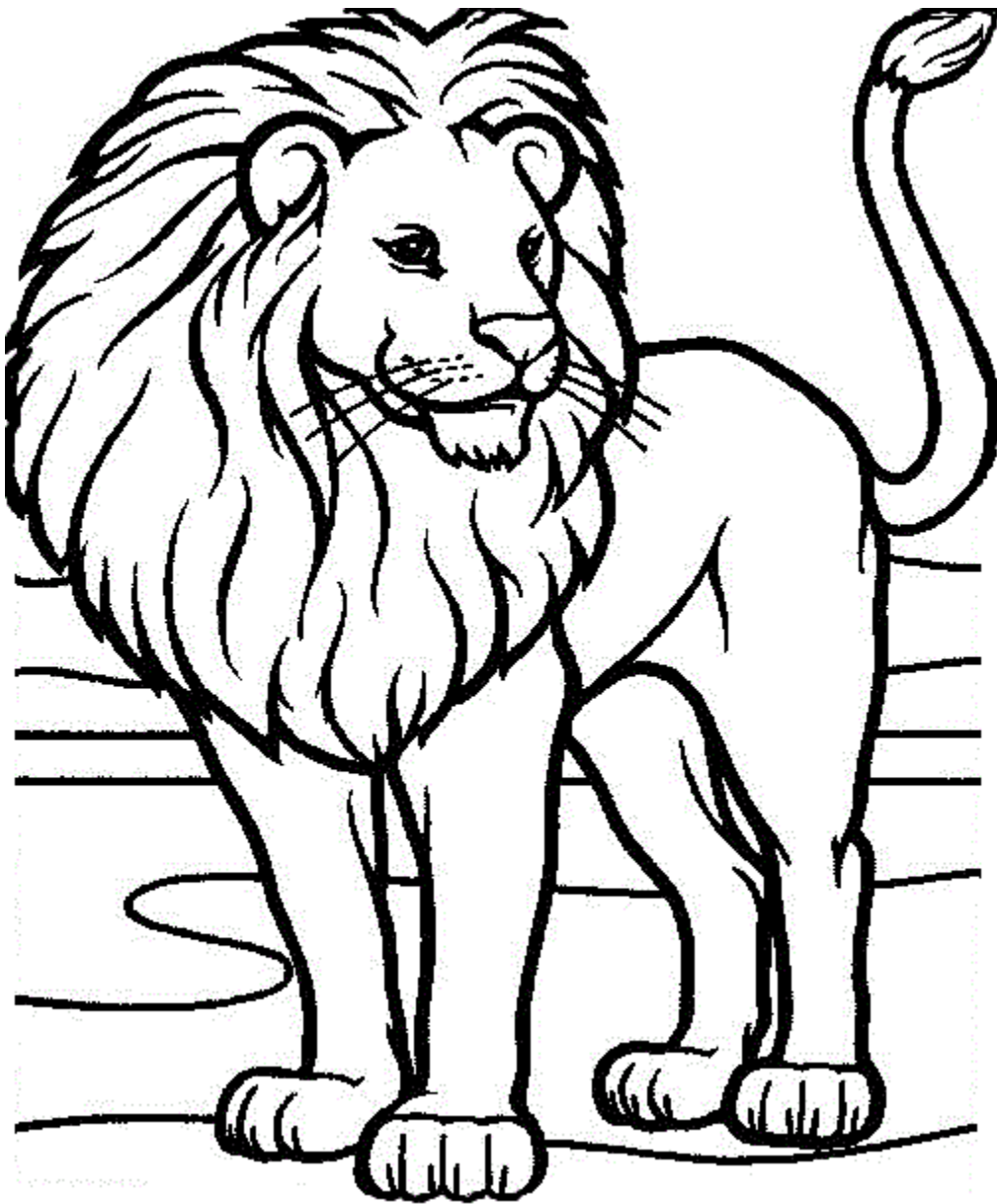
Keenan and Gerhan looked forward to attacking the summit on the day after Mohan and Neil's accident. Keenan and Gerhan both assumed Mohan would get Neil down safely. Little did they know that their companions were in big trouble. Keenan and Gerhan had to wait because of another snow day, and then another snow day. It didn't look like they would be able to reach the summit on that climb. They had run out of food and were living on fat reserves. They only had water. At least, they had learned the mountain and it would be easier for them to summit on the next climb. Keenan and Gerhan decided to head down. They went slowly to preserve their dwindling energy. On their 2nd day down, Keenan fainted. That was the first time that Keenan had fainted while climbing. He attributed it to the fact that they had run out of food and it was starting to take a toll on his body. Gerhan was still ok. Gerhan had to wait for Keenan to recover until they could continue down.

On the 3rd day down, Keenan looked down and couldn't believe what he saw. Neil and Mohan were dangling in the air by a rope, swinging to and fro with the wind gusts! Oh no! Keenan yelled to Neil. Gerhan yelled to his brother. There was no response from either dangler. As Keenan and Gerhan got closer, they could see Mohan's leg bleeding. Mohan waved feebly. Neil appeared to be unconscious. When they arrived at the dangling duo, they knew what they had to do. The next base camp was another day down the mountain. They had to get those guys down there into the tents before things really got bad. They attached Mohan to Gerhan's rope. When they reached Neil, he appeared to be unresponsive. Mohan said that Neil was gone. Neil's face was blue and frost bitten. Mohan told the story of how he fell and broke his leg. Neil became unconscious from the impact of falling and then passed away later. Mohan felt that he was responsible for Neil's passing. Keenan and Gerhan assured Mohan that it wasn't his fault. It was nobody's fault. The mountain had taken Neil; no one else had.

Keenan couldn't believe his friend was gone. They attached Neil's body to a rope between Keenan and Gerhan. Mohan was able to slowly climb down with his broken leg. Keenan began to wonder if any of them would make it off the mountain alive. He had never had such

difficulties before. He never had to accommodate an injured Sherpa. They were out of food. They were days from the bottom of the mountain. It was snowing. He was always able to rely on the Sherpas. He never had to bring down a lost friend before either. He couldn't believe Neil was gone. He should have watched Neil closer. He had been too greedy for the summit. Now his friend was gone. What was he going to tell everyone? Keenan felt that he had failed. He had never failed at anything.

24. Nestor's Duty



24. Nestor's Duty

Billionaire Nodd Roddy determined that after he had made enough money, he would start to give back to society in the form of charity. He had always felt that he was a valuable member of society already. He owned a large company staffed by many high-paid employees. His wealth was spread out among the people via the salaries that he paid. His employees in turn spent the money that he gave them and supported the economy. Nodd never gave directly to society though. He had been waiting for the right moment. He wanted the value of the stock that he owned of his company to be worth \$2 billion, and then he would start to give back. The moment had finally happened and he was looking for something suitable. He had always been interested in animals, both wild and domestic. He appreciated the fact that the big cats were disappearing from their natural habitats of Africa and India. He wanted to somehow enhance the preservation of the noble beasts.

The trouble with relying on animals bred in captivity such as zoos is the limited gene pool involved. When the number of animals used for breeding gets too low, risk of partial inbreeding may occur, resulting in birth defects and the weakening of the species. Something had to be set up where lions for example, could be bred in larger numbers in the U.S., where they could be protected and nurtured. Nodd consulted with a leading biologist named Ahmed and decided to buy a 30,000 acre estate in Texas where lions could be raised. Ahmed would be hired to raise the lions. However, Nodd didn't want the lions that were raised to end up trapped in zoos. He wanted the lions to be raised from cubs to be gentle, obedient and somehow useful to society. He came up with the idea to use lions as K-9 animals in place of dogs. Nodd discussed the possibility with Ahmed and it seemed that it would work.

Nodd then consulted with the city Police Departments of New York, Chicago, Los Angeles and Dallas. The police agreed that it would be a good idea. Lions had been trained for years to be used in circuses and Las Vegas acts. Why not use lions as K-9 animals? Some of the K-9 cops who used dogs couldn't wait to get their hands on a lion. Those guys thought a lion would be unbelievable in a drug raid or for crowd control. Who would be stupid enough to mess with a lion? The mayors of the cities were asked to form committees to discuss the use of lions. While the committees reviewed the proposal, Ahmed went to work.

It took a couple months for Nodd to buy the estate and for Ahmed to acquire suitable breeding lions from the zoos of the world and from Africa. Ahmed ended up with 166 lions. Some were purchased in Africa from a nature preserve and some were borrowed from zoos. The lions ended up forming into their own prides on the estate. The intent was to use only the newly born lion cubs as K-9 trainees. Ahmed hired numerous people to help with the feeding, breeding, training and careful upbringing of the lions. He also hired K-9 cops from a Texas Police Department to help with the specific police training. It wasn't a simple matter of bringing up the cubs to learn

how to do one thing, as in a circus. The cubs were being brought up to learn to love man and be able to be disciplined by man at the same time. There had been many recent discoveries in animal behavior that Ahmed had been anxious to try out on his lions. All the old ways of training animals were modified to allow the animal being trained to grow and learn together with the trainer.

After 11 months, the city committees finally accepted the idea of using lions as K-9 animals and gave the approval. Nodd was concerned with scientifically increasing and preserving the world's lion population. If the lions could be useful to mankind, it would be all the better. The cities had taken longer to approve Nodd's idea than he thought they would. He was well aware of bureaucracy. He had used it to his advantage many times. He had been held back many times as well. As long as Nodd's money could be used to benefit the lions in some way, he was happy. He felt that deep down, he was doing a good thing.

The first lion cubs had already been in basic training for a few months. Ahmed picked one of the cubs out of the bunch to be the first K-9 candidate, while the other lions continued their basic training. From the beginning, Ahmed had been consulting with the other trainers and feeders about which lion cub stood out the most. Nestor was everyone's favorite. He seemed to be the easiest going and intelligent. He would probably be able to keep up with the rigors of K-9 training. Ahmed decided to work with Nestor in the more advanced training involving the K-9 cop, Benedict. Nestor was put through the paces of the obstacle courses, building encounters and crowd control scenarios. The lion passed all the training with flying colors. Benedict remarked to Ahmed that Nestor had learned the K-9 tactics faster than any dog he had trained. Ahmed wasn't surprised. He knew the lion was one of the most intelligent animal species. Lions were always popular in circuses due to their easy trainability.

Benedict consulted with his Lieutenant about when Nestor could be inducted into duty. Benedict's boss was still reluctant to use a lion in the K-9 corps, because the concept hadn't been tried yet. The mayor had approved the lion's use though, so there was nothing the Lieutenant could do about it. After 2 weeks of debating about it, Benedict's boss gave the ok. Ahmed informed Benedict that Nestor needed another month of follow-up training, and then he would be ready. Ahmed wanted to be sure how Nestor would react in a more populated area, before he released the lion to Benedict. Ahmed took Nestor to a public park. Nestor had a specially made heavy-duty harness and leash that he would wear when he was on K-9 duty. Ahmed wanted to be sure that Nestor could handle wearing the gear while strolling around the park.

Ahmed's vehicle had the same tinted windows in back and the same cage that Nestor would be in when he was in the police K-9 vehicle. Ahmed wanted to evaluate everything. Nodd was relying on Ahmed to do it right. Nodd didn't want anything to happen to Nestor or any of his humanitarian efforts. At the park, Nestor hopped out of the back of Ahmed's vehicle and stood

waiting for Ahmed to attach the leash. A squirrel ran by and Nestor roared at it. Ahmed almost had a heart attack at the loud sound of the roar. He hadn't heard Nestor roar like that while training at the estate. At the estate, the lion had grunted and growled a little, but didn't roar. A woman who had been walking her poodle down the park drive screamed when she saw the lion. Nestor growled at the woman's poodle. Ahmed assured the woman it was ok. Nestor was a trained lion and she didn't have to be afraid. The woman picked up her dog and ran in the opposite direction as fast as she could.

Ahmed hadn't considered how people in public would react to the sight of a lion. Nestor had been trained from birth to be with people. People had no reason to fear him. Nestor's typical duty would be assisting police breaking into drug houses. Occasionally he would be used for crowd control, when horses weren't available. A man jogged by Nestor and Ahmed and Nestor growled at the man. The man stopped and asked if Nestor was a real lion. Ahmed told the man Nestor was indeed a real lion to be used in police work. The man thought it would be a good idea and continued running again. People who were walking by stopped to take a closer look at the lion. Ahmed invited people over to see Nestor. Ahmed didn't allow the people to get too close or to pet Nestor, because it might confuse Nestor's training. Nestor was trained to be a disciplined police animal, not necessarily a friendly pet. Ahmed and Nestor walked around the park getting stares from everyone. Eventually, Nestor stopped growling at everyone, finally getting used to seeing people. Ahmed was hoping for that.

Ahmed felt more confident with Nestor and took him to the park every day. Nestor seemed to like walking around in the fresh air and sunshine. Ahmed carried a large plastic bag when he walked Nestor, to pick up the obviously large droppings associated with a lion. Nestor had a funny habit of scratching and clawing at the grass after he pooped, slightly damaging the lawn each time. A park official was driving by one day, noticed the damage and informed Ahmed of the park's policy. Ahmed told the official to send a bill to Nodd Roddy. Ahmed knew that Nodd would gladly pay for any damage caused by his lion. It was simply a part of the lion's acclimatization into society. The official said he would definitely do that. The official asked Ahmed how much longer Nestor was going to be walked at the park. Ahmed told the official that Nestor's training was almost complete and that Nodd Roddy was donating the lion to the Police Department to be used as a K-9 animal. The official thought it was a good idea.

When Nestor was ready to be transferred to Benedict for the final police training, Ahmed informed Nodd. Nodd hugged Nestor and said, "You be a good boy, now!" Nestor purred. Ahmed transported Nestor to the Dallas P.D. where Benedict would take over. The Dallas P.D. had a comprehensive facility for specialized training used by officers and K-9 animals. The facility was constructed with the city's particular problems in mind. All the major cities of the world had the same basic problems. Dallas had large drug and immigration issues. Nestor would be taken through the paces in the facility to be used in specific situations as Benedict saw

fit. The facility administrators had a lot of work for Benedict and Nestor to accomplish. Depending on how quickly Nestor grasped the final training determined how soon he would hit the streets.

Due to the newness of the concept of using a lion as a K-9 animal, everyone at first thought it would be a great idea for the obvious reason of the fear factor of the lion. It is probable that not many alleged criminals would be face to face with a lion and think about anything else but giving up. What the officers were concerned about was the trustworthiness of the lion. Benedict assured everyone that Nestor had been raised from a cub in the most nurturing environment possible. Nestor was not a lion that was taken from the wild. He had no concept of what it was like to live in the wild as a lion. All his needs had been taken care of by humans his entire life. Benedict and Ahmed had witnessed Nestor's gentleness and intelligence and had no hesitation about his potential usefulness and reliability. Nestor had his inherent savagery and that was all. The lion wasn't aggressive unless instructed to be by his handler.

Benedict taught commands to Nestor using the same Native American Navajo dialect that was used during World War II for military codes. Any of Nestor's handlers would have to learn the same commands. The special dialect was necessary for Nestor to prevent criminals from attempting to give Nestor commands in a common language such as English or Spanish. The lion had to be fully controllable by the police only. Nestor seemed to appreciate his special commands, which he had learned very quickly.

Nestor completed the 3-month training at the facility in record time. Normally it took 4 months for a dog to complete the training. The immense strength of Nestor compared to a dog was the first thing that Benedict had to get used to. Nestor's strength made it difficult for Benedict to hold the lion back, but Nestor knew his place. The lion was gentle when he had to be and savage when necessary. The dummies that were set up in the facility were designed to be used with a dog. Nestor destroyed every dummy in the facility the first time he got his teeth into them. Everyone expected the lion to be destructive, but didn't realize what would actually happen. The officers saw first hand the ridiculous power of an adult lion.

Nestor was large for a lion due to the special diet he had while growing up at the estate. He tipped the scales at 590 pounds, which was the equivalent weight of 5 average K-9 dogs combined. The Police Department had a custom bulletproof vest made for Nestor, which cost \$3,000. The department hoped the cost would be worth it. Of course, Nestor ate more than a typical dog as well, making his upkeep more expensive. Everyone figured the lion would cost more money to use than dogs. It was hoped that the lion would have a greater impact than a dog, when actually used. Sometimes when a K-9 dog was used in a situation, the perpetrator wasn't afraid of the dog and resisted capture. A lion would have to be more efficient. Who would be stupid enough to resist a lion? That was the concept.

Nestor and Benedict were ready for K-9 duty. On their first outing, they were called to a raid of a suspected crack house in a Dallas suburb. The call came at 11:30 pm. It was completely dark outside on the cloudy night. The house was located on a poorly lit street with the streetlights broken in front of the building. The members of the raiding party parked their vehicles around the corner. The officers then walked down the street in silence to the front of the building. Nestor was covered in a black outfit to conceal his light-brown color. The raiding party waited at the door as the officer with the battering ram counted to 3. On the count of 3 they smashed the door down and entered the building, yelling, "Dallas P.D., Stay where you are! Drop your weapons!" The 5 armed men in the room ignored the police commands and opened fire. Bullets started flying everywhere.

Benedict gave the order to Nestor, "Beepeetoh, Octoh, Areetoh!" and turned Nestor loose. Nestor roared. The first man Nestor saw in the left corner of the room was firing a machine gun that he held in his left hand, and triggered with his right hand. Nestor leaped at the man. The lion grabbed the gun and tore off the hand he was holding it. Nestor was grazed in the head with a bullet. The man started screaming. Nestor roared again. He turned to the man in the right corner of the room, leaped and tore off the man's left hand with the gun that was held by it. The man fell to the floor and fainted. Nestor had been grazed again in the head. The lion felt no pain, only intense thrill. Bullets kept flying. One of the drug dealers was shot by an officer and fell to the floor. One of the officers was hit and fell. Nestor was grazed again in the head. Benedict was knocked to the floor.

Nestor turned around and ran at the hood who had knocked Benedict to the floor and had started hitting Benedict with his empty weapon. Nestor grabbed the man by the back of his leather jacket and threw him out the window into the street. The 5th criminal threw his gun to the floor and put his hands in the air, signaling surrender, just as the growling Nestor approached him. Nestor's training told him to stop attacking when a perpetrator surrendered. The lion knocked the man to the floor and held him there with 1 great paw, while another officer cuffed the man. Benedict stood up and attached the leash to Nestor's harness. Benedict noticed the wounds on Nestor's head and took the lion outside to fix him up. Nestor had possibly saved some of the officers from being shot or killed.

The experiment proved to be a success for Nestor's first mission. Benedict prepared a report for the department detailing what had taken place. The other officers of the raid read the report and corroborated Benedict's description. The lieutenant wondered if the way that Nestor had torn off 2 of the men's hands would be considered excessive use of force. Everyone in that room was shooting to kill. It seemed that Nestor hadn't killed anyone, only temporarily disabled the person. It would likely be possible to surgically re-attach the hands. One of the drug dealers had been killed by 1 of the raiding officers in self-defense. It would have to be considered self-defense for Nestor to tear off a man's hand while he was protecting himself and the other officers.

25. Lamar's Despair



25. Lamar's Despair

As Lamar walked through his Kentucky woods, he felt as if someone were watching him. It hadn't always been like that. He remembered when he was young about 90 years ago, when at the age of 14, he and his father went fishing. They had the woods to themselves. Only he and his father were there. No one else inhabited the woods. They had the stream all to themselves. The fishing and hunting were easy. They always caught all they could eat. They never had any problem finding food and drink. They could walk anywhere in any direction for miles and never see anyone. Ah, the good old days. Lamar's father was gone and he was alone in the woods, or sometimes alone. It all started about 40 years ago when people started coming to the woods, looking for something or someone. Lamar could never tell what the people were looking for. All he knew was that they were in his woods making a lot of racket.

The people would never see him, because he was always too clever to be seen. Lamar always heard and smelled people coming a long way off. People were careless when walking in the woods. They always stepped on twigs, giving themselves away. The people always smelled funny. They smelled like something that Lamar had never smelled growing up in the woods. It wasn't a natural smell. It smelled bad to his nostrils. He smelled people walking in the woods before he heard them breaking twigs with their feet. He would see people finding his footprints in the damp forest floor and pour some white creamy stuff in the indentations. Then the people would wait for a while. Then they would take the white stuff out of the footprint in 1 solid piece. He always wondered how they did that. He wondered why they did that in the first place.

People seemed to do a lot of strange things when they came into his woods. Lamar had seen people dressed up in the skin of a bear while other people held a black, square shaped object up to their face, seeming to look at the object up close. He couldn't understand why they dressed up in the bearskin like that. He couldn't understand what the object was they held so close to their face either. The person in the bear suit would walk through the woods upright, something a bear would never do. Lamar had wrestled with, killed and eaten many bears in his lifetime and he had never seen one walk upright. Sure, a bear would occasionally rear up on its hind legs in a threatening manner, but only for a moment. The bears tried to scare him away by standing up like that, but he laughed at them. Lamar always thought it was funny for a bear to challenge him in his own woods. He was the king of his woods. When Lamar's father was still alive, Lamar's father was the king. Lamar's father fell off a cliff and died while riding on the back of a stampeding bison that he was trying to kill and eat at the time.

Lamar missed his father and other relatives. He hadn't seen any of his relatives in a while. He had been wondering if he were the last of his family still alive. It couldn't be though. His family was a strong, intelligent and capable breed. There would have to be some of them around somewhere. He had wandered through a great part of his woods over the years, but found no one

he knew. He had seen plenty of people, whom he had avoided, but no one from his family. Lamar decided to take a long journey in one direction to cover a greater distance. Maybe he just had to get far enough out of his local woods to find his people. He hoped. He determined to walk in as straight a line as possible from east to west. He would use the sun as his guide.

In the morning, he woke up and ate some of the provisions he had stockpiled next to his stream nest. He was always hungry and had to sustain his 7'5" tall body with a lot of food each day. At 393 pounds, he sometimes had to go hungry until he gathered more food on the following day. From the pile of food, he ate 14 squirrels, 6 rabbits, 3 raccoons, 7 possums, 2 whitetail deer, approximately 130 crayfish from the stream and a snake. Some of the carcasses were starting to decay from the heat and humidity, but he didn't mind. He drank 3 gallons of water from the stream, then filled up the deerskin water bag with another 9 gallons for the journey. He stuffed the bearskin duffel bag with 425 pounds of various dried meats that he had been curing for the past 3 weeks. He took a huge poop and set off on his journey.

The water bag and duffel bag would have been exceedingly heavy and cumbersome if he had dragged them on the ground. He used a sled-like contraption that he had seen red-skinned people using when they still lived near his woods. He cut 2 long branches from a tree and tied them together in the shape of an X. Two ends of the branches rested on his shoulders and the other 2 ends dragged on the ground making minimal contact. The water bag and duffel bag were then placed on the branches. The apparatus made it much easier to transport heavy loads. Lamar was using it for the first time and it seemed to work. He wrapped moist moss around the ends of the branches that rested on his shoulders for padding. He also tied small vines around those shoulder ends, draped the vines down the front of his body and tied them to the badger-skin knife-belt around his waist. That way his hands were free to carry his 10-foot long spear and bow.

The arrows that went with the bow were carried in a quiver across the middle of his back. The spear was tipped with a razor sharp piece of flint. The 33 arrows were also tipped with sharpened flint. He carried extra pieces of flint for the spear, arrows and knife in the quiver. Lamar also had devices for making a fire in the tool bag on the sled. He also had in the tool kit some spare repair parts for the arrows and knife. Since Lamar's body was covered from head to toe with fur, he didn't require any clothing. He wore strips of badger leather on his immense feet to protect the soles and provide traction on slippery surfaces. Sometimes he wished he didn't have so much fur on his body, because it got really hot where he lived and he had to pant to cool himself when he wasn't near a stream in which to cool off.

Lamar thought people looked funny without fur on their bodies. He wondered what that felt like. It seemed so unnatural to him. In his woods all the animals were covered with fur. The first time he saw a person with his father, he didn't know what it was. It looked like some animal that had all the fur scratched off it. He wondered if the people he observed had ever actually seen him.

He had always been careful to remain hidden, just like his father had always told him and his father's father had always told his father.

Lamar had a great many questions to which he wished he had answers. Every day he lived, he thought of new questions, to the point of almost driving himself crazy. He wished he had someone to talk to, someone who could answer his questions or at least be able to intelligently discuss them. The whole reason for the journey he was on was to find someone from his family to talk to. He thought about what he would do if he found one of his family members. Would they know him? Would he know them?

Lamar walked through the woods for 3 weeks in an approximately westerly direction and found no family members. He had run out of the food and water that he was dragging and abandoned the sled. He turned to eating the fresh meat that he harvested with his spear, bow, arrows and knife. He was getting tired of dragging that sled around, preferring to be fleet of foot and unencumbered. He could actually run pretty fast for a being with such a large body. He could outrun any wolf, deer, bear, bison or horse. He had settled down for a nap against a tree when he smelled someone. Then he heard them breaking twigs with their feet. They were walking in his direction! He climbed the tree to get a better vantage point. In the distance, he could see a person walking with a stick in his hands. The stick was much shorter than Lamar's spear. The person couldn't possibly do anything useful with that stick.

The person stopped and looked in Lamar's direction. The person seemed to look up at Lamar in the tree. The person lifted the stick to its face. Suddenly Lamar felt something sting his left arm, probably a bee. He heard a loud noise. He saw a puff of smoke come out of the end of the person's stick. He heard something hit the tree next to his arm. He heard another loud noise. He saw another puff of smoke come out of the person's stick. The person had seen him! Lamar jumped down from the tree and ran in the opposite direction as fast as he could. The person had seen him! He couldn't believe it. After all those years in the woods of never being discovered by the furless people, one finally saw him. His left arm stung from the bee and was bleeding a little. What kind of a stick did that person have? It seemed to make a loud sound and smoke came out of it. It didn't look like it could do much else though. Lamar doubted if the person would be able to kill a bear with that little noisy smoky stick.

When Lamar felt he was far enough away from the person, he took a swim in the stream. He loved swimming. It was another of his great joys. To Lamar there was nothing like cooling off on a hot day in the stream. He swam upstream and downstream. The water rinsed all the ticks, fleas and lice from his fur and gave his fur a nice shine when it dried. After 2 hours of swimming, Lamar climbed out of the stream and sat on the stream bank. The bee sting had stopped bleeding. When he touched the location of the sting, he noticed something under the skin, something hard. With his knife, he pried an object from the wound. It was like something

he had never seen before. It was hard and shiny. It wasn't a stone or piece of wood. What was it? He thought he had been stung by a bee. It was like no stinger he had ever seen before.

Could the stick that person was using have somehow thrown the object at his arm? No, it couldn't be. Lamar had seen many things but he had never seen anything like that. He had seen the red-skinned people blowing small sharp sticks through a larger hollow stick. He had never seen them blow a hard shiny object like the one he was looking at. How did the object get in his arm? If it wasn't a bee sting, then what was it? The person's stick must have put the object in his arm. The person was trying to do harm to Lamar! Lamar didn't like the idea. The person made the noise and smoke with the stick 2 times. The 2nd time must have hit the tree next to him. Lamar wondered what would have happened if he had stayed in the tree. The person may have used the stick again and again. Lamar may have been hurt by the person.

Lamar was no idiot. The swim in the stream had awakened his brain. The person with the stick was trying to kill and eat him just as Lamar had killed and eaten bears and squirrels his whole life. It was then that Lamar realized he almost lost his life to the person with the stick. The person would have probably have started eating him already. Lamar hadn't expected people to want to do such a thing to him. He had never been the victim. He was always the victor. He had a strange feeling. He felt weak. He didn't like the feeling. It was his woods. He allowed people to walk through his woods. He had always hidden from people because his father told him to. He didn't know why he had always hid. He just did. After the incident with the person's noisy stick, Lamar realized why he had been hiding all those years.

It was apparent that the furless people wanted to kill Lamar's people. Lamar wondered if the reason he couldn't find any of his family was that the furless people had killed them all. Lamar was saddened by the revelation. Was he alone? Was his trek a waste of time? Was he trying to find members of his family who no longer existed? Why did the furless people want to kill him? He never harmed anyone. If the furless people had ever met him and talked to him, they would realize what a nice person he was. Maybe the person with the stick had just been really hungry. There were plenty of other animals in the woods that the person could have eaten. Why did that person choose him? Maybe when the person spotted Lamar and realized what a large amount of meat he would provide, the person couldn't resist trying to catch and eat Lamar.

Lamar pondered what he was to do about his situation. Should he go back to his old woods and resume hiding there for the rest of his life? Should he give in to the furless people? Lamar wondered what his father would do in the situation. To Lamar's knowledge, his father had never had an encounter with a person with a stick. Or had he? Maybe Lamar's father had always taught Lamar to hide from people to avoid being attacked. Maybe Lamar's father or grandfather had been attacked in the past. The family may have been slowly eliminated over the years by the furless people. What should Lamar do? He felt those woods belonged to him. He was born and

raised in the woods. He knew the woods better than any furless person did.

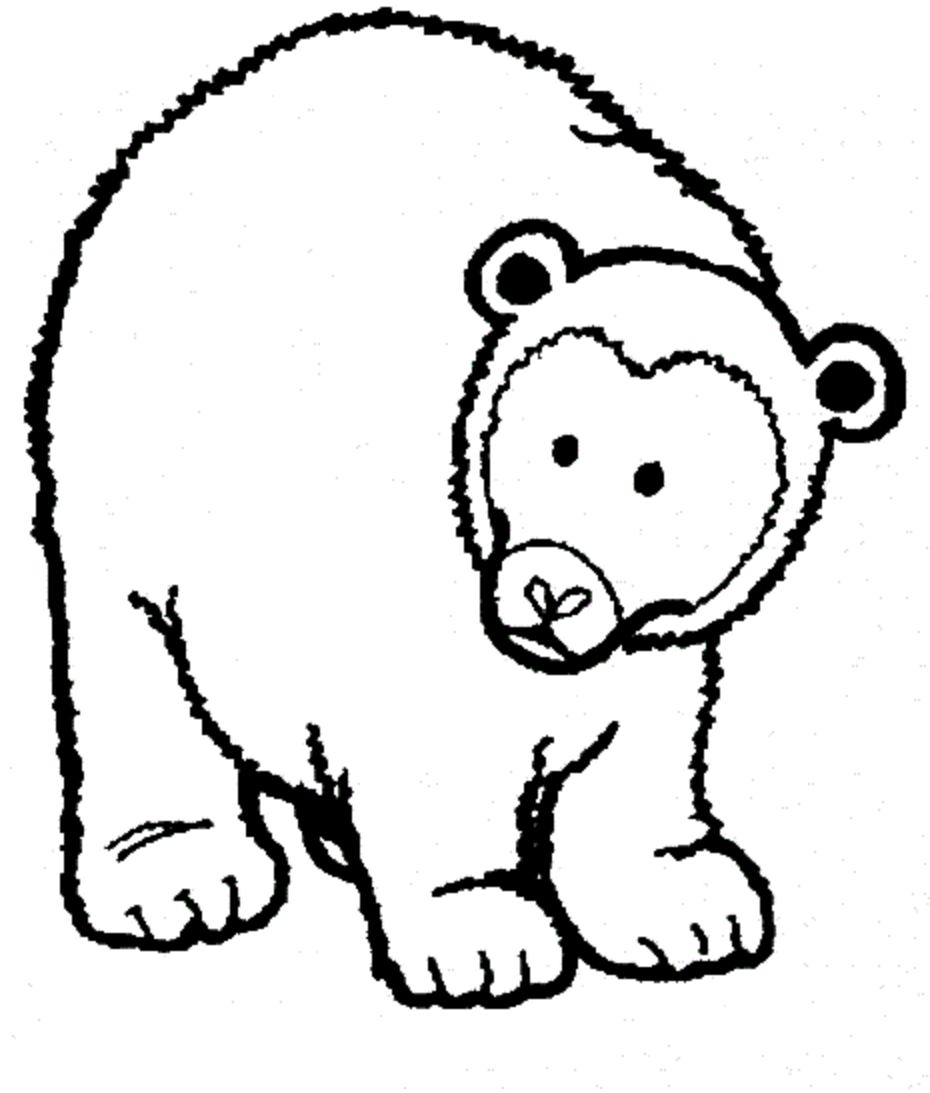
Lamar decided to take his woods back. He gathered his spear, knife, bow, arrows and tool bag. He took a huge poop in the stream so it wouldn't leave a trace. He felt better after taking that huge poop. He always felt better after pooping. He had made himself stressed out by thinking about the person with the noisy stick and had been feeling intestinal cramps. The pooping relieved him. Lamar was going to make that person pay for his arrogance. Lamar would have to be extremely cautious from that point on. He had to sneak along slowly and quietly to avoid detection. He covered himself with a layer of mud from the stream bank to conceal any scent he may be giving off. He didn't want the person to smell him.

Lamar sharpened all the flint points of his weapons to a sharpness beyond razor sharp. He found a special plant with poisonous leaves. He rubbed the leaves on all the flint pieces. He made a new weapon that he had seen the red-skinned people use. He took 2 strips of badger leather and connected them to a pouch from which he could launch rocks at great speed. He found a nice tree with the hardest wood and made more spears. As Lamar progressed through the woods toward the person with the stick, he dug pits and lined the bottoms with sharpened sticks. He rubbed the poison leaves on the tips of the sharpened sticks. He covered the openings with freshly cut boughs. He had used similar pits to catch many a wild boar. If he got a person on the run, they may fall into one of those pits. Lamar knew where all the pits were because he marked them.

As Lamar approached the location where the person had used the stick, he got down on the ground and crawled. He sniffed the air continuously. He crawled and sniffed. He felt like a snake slithering along the forest floor seeking prey. He was seeking prey. Lamar stopped. He smelled something. It was definitely the unnatural smell of a person. He couldn't yet tell if it was that person who had hurt him. He heard the telltale twigs snapping. It was definitely a person, clumsily making their way. Those people were so stupid. How dare they come into the woods and try to eat him? Those woods were his and his alone. That person was in for a big surprise.

It was that person! Lamar could see the person's unmistakable short stick through the foliage. The person was looking down on the ground trying to follow Lamar's trail. He was probably trying to see if there were any drops of blood. The small wound had hardly bled, so that was unlikely. The only thing the person had to follow was Lamar's large footprints. The person gradually came into view. Lamar slowly crawled in reverse to retreat to a better point of attack. The person continued cracking twigs and emitting its foul odor. Lamar hated that person. Lamar was going to make that person pay. Lamar crawled in reverse until he was behind a tree large enough to completely hide behind. Lamar stood up behind the huge tree and watched the stupid smelly person approach him.

26. Olen's Lie



26. Olen's Lie

Everyone he knew kept telling Stanley that he was too old to still be driving at 98 years old. He insisted he could see perfectly fine. As long as the state would keep issuing him a driver's license, he was going to continue driving. He had a lot to do every day as a handyman. Over the years, he had learned how to perform every process involved in building and maintaining a home. After retiring as a building contractor, he kept busy by doing fixit jobs for the people on his long list of contacts. He had all the money he ever needed in dividend stocks, so he took fair trades for his fees. His many customers were more than glad to pay him with items in lieu of cash. He made many friends working in that manner and was constantly referred by people.

He was driving along the town road on the way home from a job. He had just finished fixing somebody's leaky toilet. Stanley didn't mind getting a little dirty and smelly from work. He was a real man's man. The client paid him with 2 frozen 10-pound legs of lamb. Stanley liked lamb and gladly accepted the payment. Stanley wore glasses all the time and claimed to be able to spot raccoons from a long way off. He only had problems with seeing things close up, but didn't like wearing bifocals or switching to reading glasses. He found that if he squinted just right, he could read and see things up close with only a little blurriness. It was getting a little dark out but he thought he could still see pretty clearly. He spotted movement from the right, thinking it was a raccoon. As he drove closer, it appeared to be some kind of a puppy. Stanley had always loved and owned dogs, having a black lab, a shepherd and a setter at his house.

He pulled to the side of the road and got out of his van. When he approached the puppy, it growled at him with a strange tone. He had seen many puppies but never heard one sound like that one. The puppy had a dark brown fur with pointy ears like a husky. Since huskies come in many colors, Stanley assumed the pup was a husky. "What are doing out here all alone little pup?" Stanley said to the dog. The dog growled again. Stanley picked up the puppy, put it in the van and drove home. At the house, Stanley brought the dog into the house to meet his other dogs. His other dogs seemed to be friendly toward the pup, so he put it down on the kitchen floor. The pup immediately scurried over to the 3 food dishes in the corner and ate all the food remaining in them. Then, the puppy drank all the water in the 3 water dishes. "You must have been hungry, little pup!" Stanley said.

Stanley decided to name his new dog Olen after his great grandfather. "You look a little like my great grandfather!" Stanley said to the pup. Olen growled acceptance. Again, Stanley noted the strange growl emitted by Olen, but considered it a trait of the husky dog. Olen slept in the kitchen with the other dogs, each in their own dog bed. Olen had stolen the bed of the black lab. The lab being mild mannered as all labs are, didn't seem to mind. Stanley gave the lab a folded blanket to sleep on. Stanley made a mental note to buy another dog bed when he went into town the next day for his monthly haircut. He liked to keep the hair on his balding head short, because

it was gray and it made him look old if it grew too long. His friends always told him that he was old no matter what he did with his hair and would always look old. Stanley couldn't help holding on to a little of his vanity. He was a real stud when he was younger.

In the morning, Stanley put out the 4 random-sized dog bowls of food on the opposite side of the kitchen of where the dog beds were. Stanley used any old bowl for the dog bowls, not thinking it was worth it to shell out cash for a special dog bowl. Olen jumped out of his bed and ran over to the 4 dog bowls and starting eating from 1 of the bowls. He finished the food within seconds. When the 3 other dogs approached the bowls to eat their breakfast, Olen growled at them and finished eating the food from the 3 remaining bowls. The 3 startled dogs stood there in wonder at the little husky that somehow seemed too aggressive for his small stature. Stanley was also surprised at the hunger and aggressiveness of his new husky. Stanley picked up the growling Olen and took him outside to separately feed the 3 other dogs. Stanley would just have to feed Olen separately from the other dogs. It was a simple matter. He had to do the same thing with each new puppy he acquired. Normally, it was the new puppy that wasn't able to eat because of the presence of the larger dogs. In Olen's case, it was the opposite.

The way Olen growled was still interesting though. Stanley never heard such a sound from a dog before. He again shrugged it off as being a husky trait. He never saw a husky up close before, so he had never really known how they behaved. He felt it was a stroke of luck finding that husky and would tolerate any of the puppy's idiosyncrasies. He did wonder why Olen didn't have a tail like a typical husky. Maybe Olen's previous owner bobbed it for some reason. Or, maybe Olen got his tail caught in something and it fell off. Stanley had dogs in the past that had gotten their tails caught while slithering under fences and the tails fell off. Stanley felt it must be a natural process of nature so that the animal could escape with its life, minus its tail of course.

Olen looked cute with no tail. He was very stocky and handsome with his rich brown color. Olen was the best-looking dog Stanley ever had. Stanley couldn't wait to show Olen to his friends at the barbershop. They would be jealous and want one just like him. Stanley wasn't the type of person to flaunt things to other people. He was just so proud to own the little Olen, that he wanted to show him off. Normally, Stanley left his dogs at home when he went into town, but it was a special occasion. He carried Olen to the van and put him in the dog cage that was fastened to the floor of the van. Stanley didn't believe in driving with a loose dog in a vehicle, because he knew of too many dogs that were injured as a result of such a practice. The dog cage had a nice blanket in the bottom for comfort. When Stanley closed the door of the van, Olen lay down and went to sleep. Stanley figured the pup was probably drowsy from eating so much.

When they got to town, Stanley opened the dog cage to the growling Olen. He put a harness on the dog and clipped on the leash. Olen didn't like the leash and chewed through it within 2 seconds! Stanley said to Olen, "Bad Dog!" Stanley went back to the van while holding onto

Olen's harness. Stanley found a length of chain in the van that would do as a leash. He made a mental note to buy a suitable chain leash when he bought the new dog bed. Stanley attached the chain to the harness with a nut and bolt through the ring on the harness. Olen started chewing on the chain. Stanley wasn't worried that Olen would chew through the chain and walked to the barbershop with the dog.

When Stanley entered the barbershop, he announced, "Hey everybody, look at my new husky!" The guys stopped talking and looked over. Smiley the barber said, "Wow, he's beautiful!" Ralph declared, "Nice!" Franklin yelled, "Where'd ya get 'em?" Stanley said, "I found him on the road last night." "You're a lucky guy Stan," said Ralph. Stanley said, "I know." Smiley said, "Put him in the corner. I'll get him some water." Stanley said, "Ok." Smiley put down the trimmer he was using on Ralph and went into the back of the shop. Stanley walked to the corner of the barbershop with Olen. When he got to the corner, Olen started walking in a circle. Stanley recognized the action of the dog as an indication that the dog was going to poop. Stanley didn't want the dog pooping in the shop, so he tried to hustle Olen to the front door. It was too late. Olen pooped a huge pile in the corner and continued pooping on the floor all the way to the front door as Stanley dragged him. Everyone in the shop burst into uproarious laughter.

Stanley hastily opened the door as Olen continued pooping. The dog pooped on the doorway and on the sidewalk in front of the barbershop. Smiley emerged from the back of the shop with a bowl of water in his hand and spotted all the dog poop. Everyone was laughing. Smiley wasn't. He put down the water dish and yelled, "Stan, you better clean this up!" The guys laughed harder. Ralph was crying from laughter. While standing in the doorway, Stanley said, "Ok, Smiley...Sorry!" Franklin was laughing so hard, he farted. When Ralph heard Franklin fart, he laughed and also farted. Stanley heard the guys farting and finally started laughing himself. It was funny. The little dog couldn't help it. He probably really had to go. Stanley realized he should have walked the puppy outside first, before he took him into the barbershop.

Smiley ended up laughing and then he smelled the poop. The smell was so bad combined with the farts that Smiley declared, "Everybody out!" The guys ran out of the barbershop to the street. He retrieved a fan from the back and plugged it in. The smell was so bad, that the guys started to feel sick. "Sorry Smiley!" said Stanley. "It's ok, Stan. He couldn't help it! Wait a few minutes before you go back in to clean the poop!" said Smiley. "Ok!" said Stanley. The other guys were laughing like crazy on the sidewalk in front of the shop. Franklin asked Stanley, "What do you feed that pup? His poop really stinks!" "Regular dog food like the rest of the dogs eat," said Stanley. Ralph reached down to pet Olen and the dog growled. Ralph quickly retracted his hand. "Does he bite?" Ralph asked. "No. He likes to growl though," said Stanley. "I noticed!" said Ralph. "He sure is beautiful, Stan!" said Franklin. "I know. He was a lucky find," said Stanley.

After a few minutes, Stanley handed the leash to Franklin, went in the shop that was still stinking

from the poop on the floor and cleaned up the poop while trying to hold his breath. Smiley handed Stanley a mop to finish the job. After another 15 minutes, the floor was dry and Smiley sprayed some Febreze around the shop. Smiley called the guys back in and Stanley walked back to the van with Olen. Stanley would have to get his haircut on the next day. Stanley picked up the growling Olen and put him in the cage. Then, Stanley drove to the pet store for the dog bed and chain leash. When he was done at the store, he asked one of the employees if they wanted to see his new husky. They said yes. Stanley walked the guy to the van, opened the door and showed him his prize husky dog. The guy looked into the van and gazed at the sleeping dog in the cage.

"That's a husky?" the guy asked. "Yep. A brown one. Isn't he a beaut?" said Stanley. "Wow! I never saw a husky with such a beautiful brown coat!" said the guy. "Neither did I!" said Stanley. "What's his name?" said the guy. "Olen!" said Stanley. "Cool!" said the guy. "Where'd ya get 'em?" said the guy. "I found 'em on the town road." said Stanley. "Lucky!" said the guy. "I know!" said Stanley. "Later!" said the guy. "See ya!" said Stanley. Stanley closed the door and drove home with his happy husky. As Stanley turned onto his road, he heard Olen growling in the back. Suddenly, a deer ran out in front of the van. Stanley just missed the animal and came to a stop. Olen continued growling. "What's a matter boy?" When the deer disappeared from view, Olen stopped growling. Stanley wondered if Olen was growling because he had smelled the deer. He couldn't have seen it from the windowless van. If Olen smelled that deer, he must have an unusually powerful sense of smell.

Stanley pondered the thought as he continued home. As he drove, he again heard Olen growling in the back of the van. Stanley slowed the van just in time to miss hitting a raccoon! Could Olen have smelled that raccoon before they even got to it? Wow! Talk about a great sense of smell! Stanley had known that dogs were good at sniffing things, but never experienced anything similar to what Olen just did. Stanley wondered if his husky would be a good hunting dog with that great sense of smell. Think of the possibilities! Stanley turned into his long driveway. Halfway up the drive, Olen growled again. A huge snake slithered across the driveway in front of the van, followed by a snapping turtle. Olen had smelled the snake and the turtle! Stanley had seen a lot of things, but Olen's ability was verging on incredible.

When he arrived at the house, Stanley turned Olen loose outside with the other dogs to romp and play. Stanley was excited to get to the phone to call his hunting buddy to tell him about Olen. Stanley called his friend and informed him about the new husky and its tremendous ability to smell animals. He told him how Olen would make a great hunting dog. His friend agreed. As they talked, Stanley heard his dogs barking outside. Stanley put his friend on hold and went outside to see what the matter was. He looked around until he saw his 3 dogs barking at the base of the 160-year old oak tree in the yard. He didn't see Olen anywhere. Stanley walked to the tree and calmed the dogs down. He looked around and didn't see Olen anywhere. He heard a

growling sound coming from up in the tree! He looked up to see Olen in the top of the tree eating the honey from an old beehive that had been in the tree for years.

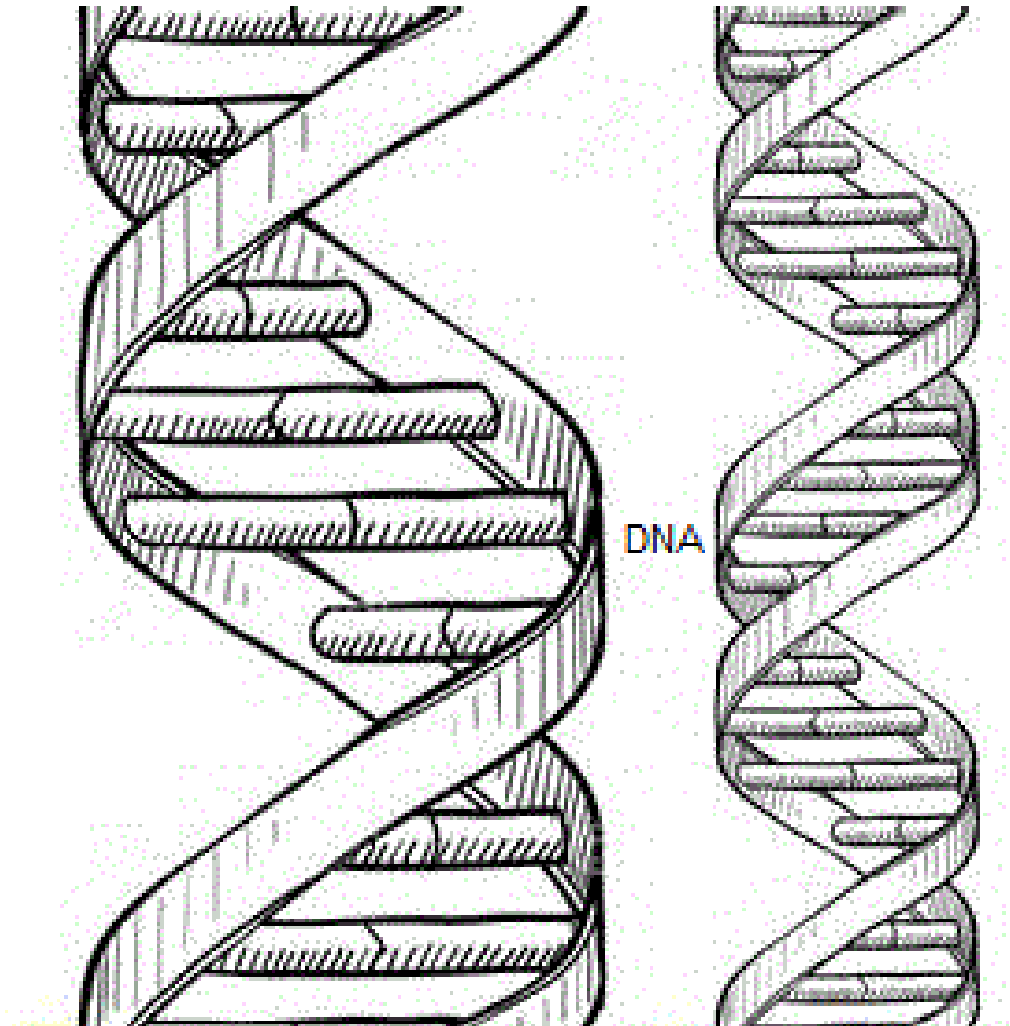
Stanley couldn't believe what he was seeing. Not only did Olen have the best sense of smell of any dog he had ever seen or heard of, but he could also climb trees! Stanley had seen dogs capable of climbing part way up a tree that was fallen or that had grown at an angle. He had never seen a dog that could climb a vertical tree. It must be that huskies have sharp enough claws that it gave them a better grip. Tree-climbing ability was another trait of huskies of which Stanley was unfamiliar. Stanley called up to Olen to come down from the tree, but the dog insisted on staying up there eating the honey. Stanley went into the house to the refrigerator/freezer and unwrapped 1 of the frozen legs of lamb. "Maybe Olen would come down from the tree for some lamb!" thought Stanley.

Stanley brought the lamb to the tree and looked up at Olen still eating the honey. Stanley held up the lamb and called up to Olen, "Here boy!" The 3 other dogs started jumping up, trying to get at the lamb, thinking, hoping Stanley was offering it to them. Stanley shooed away the 3 dogs on the ground. He called up to Olen again. Olen ignored Stanley and continued eating the honey. Olen dropped the almost-empty honeycombs down to the ground when he was finished with them. Some of the partially honey-laden honeycombs fell on Stanley's hat-covered head. The honeycombs stuck to his hat. Stanley called up to Olen again just as Olen dropped a honeycomb and it landed on Stanley's face! With 1 hand on the lamb and the other hand trying to remove the sticky honeycombs from his hat and face, Stanley was getting rattled. As Olen continued eating the honey, Stanley accidentally lowered the lamb too close to the ground and the Irish setter latched onto it.

Stanley yanked the lamb from the setter's jaws and yelled, "No!" Olen heard the yelling and looked down at Stanley. Olen spied the lamb in Stanley's hand and hurriedly scurried down the tall tree. Stanley had never intended to actually give the lamb to Olen. The leg of lamb was intended only as a lure to get the husky down from the tree. Olen had other ideas. When Olen reached almost to the bottom of the tree where Stanley was standing, Stanley held out the lamb to Olen. Stanley was standing 7 feet from the tree when he reached out the lamb. Olen leaped from the tree through the air and snatched the leg of lamb from Stanley's grip! Before Stanley realized what had happened, Olen landed on the ground with the lamb in his mouth, ran around the tree and climbed up it again!

Olen stopped just below where the honeycombs were in a nice crotch of the tree and proceeded to eat the still frozen leg of lamb! Stanley yelled up at Olen, "Get down from there, you crazy dog!" Olen ignored Stanley and continued eating the lamb. Stanley wanted Olen out of that tree, for his own safety. He didn't want Olen to fall out of the tree. Stanley went back into the house to get the other leg of lamb.

27. Carson's Study



27. Carson's Study

Carson was famous decades ago when he won the Nobel Prize, but he had fallen out of favor in his industry due to his recent exploits. He won his Prize for his work in genetics. After he won the prize, he became a member of the group of scientists that cloned "Dolly" the sheep. Most people expected more things to evolve from the sheep cloning, but society thought about the concept of cloning too hard and didn't want it to continue. Carson on the other hand did want it to continue. Carson's favorite book as a genius child was Mary Shelley's "Frankenstein." The idea that a human being could be brought to life from an assemblage of body parts so intrigued him that he had always wanted to try it himself. It took him many years of study and luck to win the Prize and make it onto the cloning team. He always wanted to take the research further. Science didn't. The cloning team was forced to disband and the research was halted.

Carson didn't stop. He left the United States and disappeared from the prying eyes of the public. He bought an island in the tropics and took 1 special person with him, Calvin. Calvin was an unusual student of Carson's while Carson was still teaching. Calvin took every course that Carson ever taught. Carson appreciated the enthusiasm of Calvin. They had many discussions after classes about the wide array of possibilities in Research. By coincidence, "Frankenstein" was also Calvin's favorite book. Carson and Calvin didn't want to create life from death per se. They wanted to create a new life form that would be a perfect combination of a human and an animal, essentially a perfect human. Since human beings had their weaknesses and illnesses, they believed that if an intelligent human were bred with a physically and physiologically stronger animal, perfection could be achieved. A perfect human could be created with the best characteristics of man and animal, a human that could live for perhaps 125 or 150 years, a human that could accomplish so many more things than any human had before.

Before Carson and Calvin left the U.S. for their island, Calvin visited a blood bank where his friend worked and acquired hundreds of blood samples. Carson also acquired hundreds of blood samples of myriad animals from a friend of his with whom he worked on the cloning team. Carson's friend didn't ask any questions. He knew Carson was up to something. The world would have to wait and see what it was. Carson transported the hundreds of thousands of dollars of lab equipment to the island. He had been planning his new work for many years. He and Calvin would show the world real research. They would show the world what could be done in science when people really applied the available knowledge. Their work would provide a means of creating a super race of people. Carson didn't think what they were attempting was crazy or unethical or farfetched. Their work was necessary for the longevity of mankind.

The world needed their work or the world would perish. Carson and Calvin would create a human being resistant to all diseases. Their human would heal faster when injured. Their person would possess a super intelligence. Their creation would be capable of solving all of life's

mysteries. Their man or woman may even be able to cure all the cancers, ebolas, zikas, AIDS and flus for the benefit of mankind. Their research would make them famous. They would probably win a Nobel Prize. Carson could taste the glory they would receive. Calvin knew Carson wanted the fame for the creation. Calvin would just be happy he had helped his hero Carson. Calvin would do anything Carson asked, including the illegal work on which they were about to embark. If anyone knew what they were doing, they could be fined or jailed and stripped of any status. No one could know what they were doing until they had their perfect human specimen. The world wouldn't understand until they saw the results.

The main issue Carson had confronted while on the sheep cloning crew was the incredible precision that was required. When dealing with genes, genetic material and chromosomes, it only required the slightest alteration to effect a major change in the results. Intense documentation would be required. Carson and Calvin would have to come up with a plan of attack before they began. Carson was familiar with the scientific method and all that it entailed. The only way they would be able to know what they were doing at any given time was documentation. The simple concept of trial and error wasn't good enough. The only way to improve on their results and go forward after each experiment was documentation. They had to write down every step with the reason for the step. All the theory behind the intricate operations had to pass continuous scrutiny and critique. Before they did anything, they had to discuss it. When Carson had finally achieved the success of the sheep cloning, it was only after years of experimentation and luck.

Carson didn't want to go through the process they went through with the sheep. It was too unorganized. It took too long to get the results. It had cost the investors millions of dollars. Carson's lesson from the sheep cloning work was that they didn't document the work properly. They didn't stop after each step and discuss the results. They had too many things going on at the same time. They didn't have a centralized thought process. By working with a small crew of 2 people, they would be able to work with 100% efficiency. They invested the majority of the money in buying the island and setting up the 100' by 200' laboratory building. There wasn't a lot of money left for waste. Carson estimated that he and Calvin could work for 8 years on the island before the money ran out. If they didn't succeed after 8 years, they would have to stop and go back to work at the college to raise more money to continue the work.

Carson was never going to give up on the work. There may be setbacks, but he would never stop trying. Carson and Calvin had many in-depth conversations about the importance of the work. Carson was completely confident that he would be able to rely on Calvin to do whatever was necessary to complete the work. At 67 years old, Carson didn't really want to have to go back to teaching to raise any more money. They had to succeed. Calvin had confided to Carson his unlimited devotion and agreed to go down with the ship if necessary. Carson didn't think there was going to be any sinking ship. At least he hoped there wouldn't be. He appreciated Calvin's

enthusiasm just the same.

Carson hired some local help on a neighboring island to operate the facilities on his island. They came each day in a small motorboat to run the checks on everything. No one had access to the laboratory building except Carson and Calvin. The one door of the laboratory was locked with the most sophisticated biometric lock available. The lock could only be opened if Carson and Calvin were both present. The lock was synchronized to the retinas of their left eyes. It was impossible to enter the building without successfully activating the biometrics. Carson knew he had to ensure complete secrecy. No one could find out what he and Calvin were doing until they were ready to reveal it to the world. They would only report a success. The locals didn't question anything, since they were so well paid. The people of those tropical islands were known for their secrecy. It was part of their spirituality.

The laboratory facilities included 3 military grade generators, 1 for the island power and 2 for redundancy. Carson would take no chances with the blood or other important phases of the experiments being spoiled. They were creating a test tube baby of a new order. The island was hot and humid year round. The lab had to be air conditioned and kept clean with a computer controlled air treatment system. Carson spared no expense. The air in the lab had to be absolutely pure to prevent contamination of the experiments. He had 2 electron microscopes to study the cells in minute detail. He had all 2 of the equipment he had during the sheep cloning. He didn't want to risk losing any time to breakdown. Carson no longer believed in downtime. He and Calvin would work 16-hour days, 7 days a week. They lived in the back of the lab building in a special sealed off area. All their food, water and other essentials were there.

The walls of the lab building were completely covered with those white dry erase boards to write notes on. Carson and Calvin wrote all there notes with permanent sharpie markers, so that no information would be lost. They intended to start writing their notes at one corner and work their way around to the right, clockwise. The permanently written notes would be valuable to provide insights as they went along. Carson had adopted the note taking method from the sheep cloning work. The exception was that during that work, they had to use dry erase markers and erase their work after a month due to the lack of board space. He felt that because they erased work, they lost easily viewable information that could have shortened the time of success. Even though they had everything written down on hardcopy, there was nothing like sitting in front of a big board, looking at notes and diagrams for inspiration.

Carson was an old school scientist who found the big boards to be the best way to work for him. He wanted to make sure he and Calvin would have relatively unlimited space for notation. Calvin also preferred to get inspiration from the big boards. It was tedious to have to sift through pages of letter-sized documents to find information. It was easier to see it on the board. They would still document everything on hard copy documents in detail, but the boards were

indispensable. Calvin was glad Carson covered the walls with the boards. It showed to Calvin that Carson really knew what he was doing. He had done similar work before and was going to do it again the same way. Calvin was excited to get started.

The first thing they did was create an outline. They didn't know which combination was going to work the best, so they created a chart that included combining everything with everything. All the human blood would systematically be mixed with all the animal blood. As they went along, they would know from the initial observations if they were to continue with that combination. Carson was not going to waste time on anything. They would make their combination, put in the test tube and observe. If the embryo didn't appear right and pass the exhaustive checklist, it would be discarded. Carson didn't want to wait too long on any one combination, hoping it would work. There was no way to force the work. Either it would work or it wouldn't work.

At first, they would have to start with a simple trial and error process. There was no other way to start. As they saw what seemed to work, they could then apply the raw science to it. Mixing of the genes and chromosomes was not a rocket science, but it required unusual patience. Carson knew he wouldn't be able to will the experiment to work. All he and Calvin could do was apply pure science to it and hope for the best. If it didn't work, they would move on. They started by creating a list of common animals, the blood of which would be sampled and mixed with human blood. The resultant embryo would either grow to perfection or be rejected. The intent wasn't to create a half-human, half-animal being. They wanted to create a perfect human that had just enough characteristics of some yet unknown animal or animals to make the human a superior human being in every way. Carson reckoned that it could be done. Calvin agreed. Calvin was a genius as well as Carson, though not as intelligent as Carson was. Calvin saw the potential of the experiment and was willing to try to achieve it. They didn't consider themselves as mad scientists, though other people may have thought so; thus the secrecy.

The list of common animals from which blood was to be used included: alligator, anaconda, anteater, baboon, bear, beaver, bison, bobcat, camel, caribou, chimpanzee, cougar, deer, dolphin, elephant, giraffe, gorilla, hippo, horse, hyena, kangaroo, lion, monkey, moose, mule, orangutan, ostrich, pig, rhino, sea lion, shark, sloth, tiger, whale and wolf. The blood from all the animals would be sampled one by one, until partial success was achieved. Then, they had to get into the microscopic work of messing with the DNA. It was a painstaking process, but there was no other way to do it. Carson and Calvin were eternally grateful to their friends for providing all the blood samples without any annoying questions.

Carson chose to start alphabetically with the alligator. They made the combination, "tubed" it and waited. In 3 days, they watched the embryo form. It appeared to be forming correctly. They ran the list of tests on it and it passed those. After a week, the embryo failed and they tried again with the exact same ingredients. After a week, the embryo failed again. After the 3rd attempt at

the same mix, the embryo failed again. They determined that 3 attempts was the limit. They next tried the anaconda. It also failed after 3 attempts. The anteater failed the 3 tries. The baboon was the first embryo to continue more than a week. It was logical they supposed that a primate like a baboon would result in a successful combination. The 1st baboon test lasted 2 weeks, then failed. The 2nd baboon lasted 3 weeks, then failed. The 3rd baboon continued for a month and looked promising.

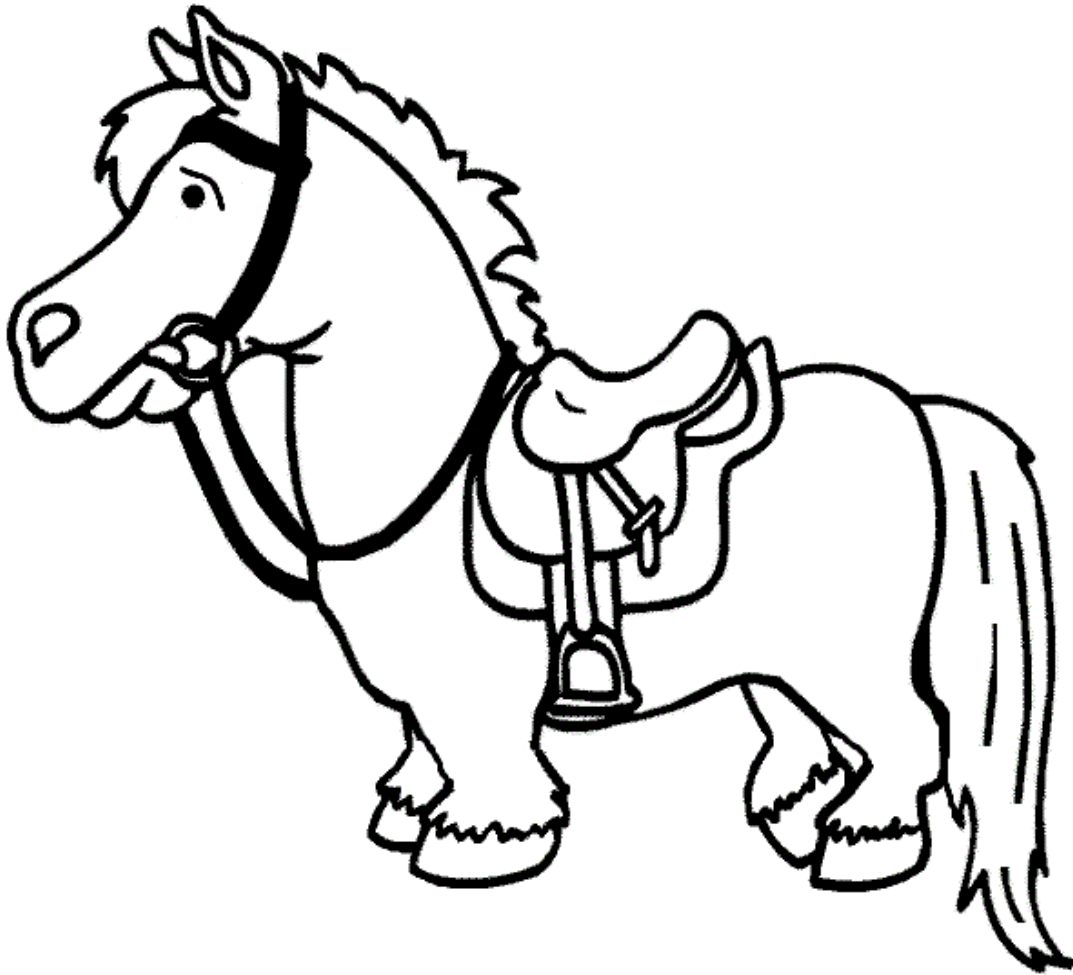
Carson and Calvin decided to allow the combinations to continue until they failed of their own accord. That way they could run parallel experiments simultaneously and not waste time. As the baboon continued, they tried the bear. The bear failed the 3 tries. The beaver failed the 3 tries. The 3rd bison test continued after 3 weeks. The bobcat and camel failed after 3. The caribou continued after the first test. The chimpanzee continued after the 2nd test. The cougar and deer failed. The dolphin, elephant and giraffe failed after 3 attempts. The bison and caribou finally failed.

The baboon and chimpanzee continued after 4 months. The gorilla continued after the first test. The primates seemed to be the only animals that were surviving. It made sense. They had to keep systematically testing the blood of all their samples to be sure. The hippo, horse and hyena each failed after a couple weeks. The kangaroo and lion samples failed after 3 tries. The 3rd monkey sample continued. The moose and mule continued for 2 weeks, then failed. The orangutan continued after the 2nd test. The ostrich, pig, rhino, sea lion and shark all failed after 3 tests. The sloth continued after the first test. The tiger, whale and wolf failed after 3 tests.

After 7 months, they had continuing success with the baboon, chimpanzee, gorilla, monkey, orangutan and sloth, all the primates. It was an obvious observation to only use primates, but they were meticulous and had to try all the samples. They didn't want to look back someday and regret not trying all the blood samples. In the process of creating the perfect human, every avenue available to them had to be explored. Carson would have it no other way. Calvin went along with Carson. The notes were piling up and the men were excited. There had been a tropical storm that passed over the island that knocked out the primary generator with a tree. The secondary generator kicked on in 1 second, providing essentially continuous power per Carson's plan. Carson notified his helpers who fixed the primary generator. Carson had the helpers construct a protective concrete roof over the generators to prevent future damage. The generators were already protected by the concrete wall that surrounded them.

The work was showing progress, but only time would reveal the true success. Carson and Calvin prepared secondary and tertiary trials of tests involving only the primate samples. Now that they knew the direction to go was with the primates, they went with the flow. After 9 months, they had created their first test tube super baby. It appeared to be perfect. Nothing could stop them now!

28. Palmer's Kids



28. Palmer's Kids

Darren's wife had left him the year before for a soccer player who resembled David Beckham, leaving Darren with the 3 boys Larry, Mack and Basil. The boys were aged 4, 3 and 2 respectively. Darren didn't have to work, since he received a large enough amount of money each month in child support. The result of the divorce also paid a large lump sum. Darren's ex-wife made a lot of money as a model. Darren stayed at home each day with the boys essentially being a referee the entire time. The boys constantly played and fought with each other. They were all healthy and strong due no doubt to their seemingly daylong aggressive wrestling matches. It was becoming more and more difficult for Darren to maintain order in the house. It didn't matter where the boys played, inside or outside the house. They always started out playing nicely and ended up fighting. The fact that none of the boys was in school yet didn't help matters. Darren had to constantly invent new ways to keep the kids occupied.

They seemed to have unlimited energy, even though he never gave them sugar. He fed them fresh fruit instead of fruit juices, which were essentially just sugar water. There was never candy in the house. The only time the boys had sweets was on birthdays. There wasn't a single porcelain object in the house intact. The boys had broken everything in one way or another. All the fancy vases and knickknacks were glued together. The plates and cups that they ate and drank from were made of unbreakable hard plastic. The only thing the boys couldn't break was the stainless steel knives, forks and spoons. Darren had tried many babysitters who weren't able to keep the boys in order for more than 1 or 2 sittings. Whenever Darren went in public with the boys, it was a real challenge. They seemed to know they could get away with things. They were certainly a handful for a man to take care of who grew up as an only child.

Darren never had the experience of being cooped up in a house with more than 1 kid at a time. He had no babysitting experience growing up, as most boys. Babysitting was pretty much a girl's occupation. He asked people for advice but nothing people told him seemed to apply to his boys. Darren hoped that when the kids got into school, things would get better for him and the boys, especially for him. The boys were always very happy. When they fought with each other, there didn't appear to be any hatred shown, only typical young frustration. Their many fights only lasted seconds, and then they went back to playing again. Darren admitted to himself that he was beginning to be accustomed to the antics of the boys, which was a good thing for him. It may not have been the best thing for the wild boys.

Darren assumed all kids were a little wild when they were little. He had to occasionally smack one of the boys on the bottom when they did something that endangered their safety, such as put their finger in an electrical outlet, or put a fork in a toaster to remove a broken-off piece, or put their finger in a lamp socket while the bulb was out, or play with matches, or touch a hot frying pan. He never got angry with the kids, only temporarily flustered. The boys seemed to sense

their power over their father. They seemed to feel they were allowed to get away with a little more mischief, since they were motherless. Darren admitted it was true. He felt bad that the boys had no mother to give them the proper nurturing that only a mother with maternal instincts could give a child. A man could only nurture a child to a certain point. The maternal instinct only present in women was important to a child's development.

Because of that acknowledgement, Darren was a little easy on the discipline. His allowance of their wildness was to an extent his fault. He didn't want to yell at them or hit them. He loved the boys and he hoped the boys loved him back. They didn't always show their love when they were fighting with each other and smashing things. Darren assumed the boys would calm down, as they got older. He wasn't sure how long he would be able to wait though. He didn't want the boys to get hurt while fighting. Darren and his wife had a dog in the family, but she took the dog as part of the divorce settlement. She wanted the dog from the beginning, so Darren let her have it. Darren considered getting another dog, but felt it would be too much to manage. He had been considering it as a diversion for the boys. He thought his boys might be too crazed for the dog. When his wife was in the household, the dog worked out. Maybe with her gone, it wouldn't.

Darren had been researching alternative ways of keeping the kids under control. While watching TV one evening, after the boys were finally put to bed, he watched a show about miniature horses. A mini horse was essentially a horse shrunk down in size. A 1000-pound horse was reduced to a 100-pound animal. They were about 2 feet tall and 2 feet around. It seemed like a cool little creature. Darren wondered if such an animal would be useful in the family toward controlling his wild boys. He wondered how they would react. Would they be afraid of it? There was only one way to find out. Darren had a long talk with the boys about buying a mini horse. They loved the idea. The condition of buying the horse is that the boys would have to feed, water and clean up after the horse. The boys said it would be no problem.

Darren found a ranch outside of town that raised mini horses. He wanted the boys to see a mini horse up close to determine if they really wanted one. The ranch had many varieties of horses, including the mini. Darren had never seen so many horses in one place before, even at the horseracing track. The owner of the ranch would only sell a horse to a potential owner if they could properly care for it. Darren told him the house had a large fenced backyard for the horse to romp and stretch its legs. Horse guy said that would be fine. Darren gave the specifications of the large house, which was important. Horse guy liked the idea of the big house. A mini likes to have a lot of room to run, indoors and out. Horse guy sells the minis complete with a saddle, special indoor horseshoes and a 1-month supply of specially formulated mini horse food. Horse guy also sold a special mini horse flap-door to install in the back door of the house, so the horse would have easy access to the backyard. Horse guy recommended the flap-door, because the mini likes to go outside to go the bathroom many times throughout the day and night. It was essential to the mini's happiness. Because of the large amount of food and water the horse

consumed each day, there was a lot of poop and pee involved.

Larry, Mack and Basil instantly fell in love with the brown and white mini named Palmer. Horse guy said Palmer would be a perfect choice for the 3 boys. Palmer was unusually intelligent, calm with kids and was an incredibly fast runner. The horse learned very quickly and could be taught any trick they could think of. The boys petted Palmer through the railing of the horse's corral. Palmer whinnied. The boys laughed. Darren petted Palmer's head by reaching over the top railing. The horse just stood there, seemingly gladly accepting the attention. Palmer whinnied again. Then he did that mumbling purring sound that horses do. The sounds Palmer made were of a higher tone than a typical horse, which made it sound funny at first. Darren fell in love with the horse. Horse guy asked if the boys wanted to take a ride. They all screamed, "Yes!" Horse guy said Palmer was so strong and solid, that he could carry an adult man on his back. Any kid riding him would be no problem whatsoever.

They went to a riding area where each boy took Palmer for a ride around the track. On the first ride each boy took, Palmer trotted slowly to let the boy get used to riding. On the 2nd ride, Palmer ran at full speed around the track, making the boys hang on for their lives. The boys loved the horse and wanted him back home that very day. Horse guy took pride in his operation and only wanted the best for the horses he sold and the customers who bought them. He insisted on seeing Darren's house and yard before he would sell Palmer to Darren. Darren said it would be fine and they all headed to Darren's house in the minivan. Horse guy took a quick look around and approved the site. They went back to the ranch and filled out the paperwork. Horse guy wanted Darren to sign a document saying various legal liability mumbo jumbo, to protect horse guy from lawsuits. Darren didn't think he would have any problems with the mini horse and signed the document.

The ranch manufactured their own all-natural horse food made from ingredients grown on the large property. Horse guy recommended that Darren continue to feed Palmer the same food he had been raised on, which was made and sold at the ranch. Horse guy sold the food at a reasonable price to anyone who bought horses from him. He wanted only the best for his horses. He wanted happy customers as well. After years of perfecting his horse breeding and horse food manufacturing, the horse returns had been reduced to zero. Horse guy's customers were 100% satisfied with their horses and that is the way horse guy wanted it to be. He truly loved horses and cared about their welfare. He had a horse therapy program at the ranch that he provided free of charge for use by the county. Volunteers from all over the county ran the program. He supplied the horses.

Much to the joy of Larry, Mack and Basil, Darren bought Palmer and the associated items. He signed up for horse guy's food delivery program, where the food was delivered each month when paid for ahead of time. The food was the correct amount for the size of the horse to prevent

overfeeding or underfeeding. Bales of hay, which were inexpensive, were included free with the program. Complete feeding and watering instructions were included in the purchase. Horse guy had a veterinarian at the ranch to provide any necessary annual shots for Palmer. It seemed to Darren like a very efficiently run operation and he felt confident that everything would work out fine. Darren thanked horse guy for being so caring and thorough. Horse guy shook Darren's hand and said, "Take good care of Palmer and he'll take good care of you." Horse guy kissed Palmer on the forehead and said goodbye. Palmer whined and mumbled his high-pitched horse sounds.

Palmer was easily loaded into the back of the minivan. He simply jumped in! The mini horse lay down on the blanket on the floor. They loaded up the rest of the stuff and headed home. The boys looked at Palmer in the back of the van the whole way home. They were so excited. They couldn't believe how beautiful the horse was. Darren felt that he had done the right thing buying the horse. It may be what he needed to get his family in line. He hoped. At the house, Palmer jumped out the back of the van and ran to the backyard. Darren opened the gate and Palmer ran into the fenced area. He started running as fast as he could around the rectangular-shaped yard. He ran a lot faster than the ranch with the boys on his back. Horse guy said Palmer was fast, but it was unbelievable how fast.

Darren had been to the racetrack years ago with his wife before the kids came and had seen racehorses run up close. That crazy little mini horse seemed to be faster than a racehorse. The boys ran into the yard to play with the horse. Palmer was really like a big dog. Except faster. Much faster. He ran to the left and ran to the right. None of the boys could catch him. It was hilarious! Darren hadn't had so much fun watching his kids play like that in a long time. Palmer seemed to be enjoying playing with the boys. The boys definitely loved playing with him. Even though Palmer would be an added expense to the household, it would be worth it. The boys' mother would be essentially paying for the horse anyway. Palmer ran into the corner of the yard, stopped and took a huge poop. Darren went back to the van and retrieved the shovel and scoop for Palmer's poop. He gave the tools to Larry. Larry without hesitation cleaned up the poop.

Darren dug a hole in the ground in a treed area of the property in which to put the poop. Darren showed Larry the hole, where Larry then deposited the poop. The boys would have to take turns cleaning Palmer's poop. It was part of the deal. Amazingly, the boys had no trouble with the idea. Palmer pooped 4 more times in the yard that first day. Darren thought that the horse guy wasn't kidding when he said Palmer generated a lot of poop each day. Mack and Basil took their turns cleaning and the schedule went around to each boy in order. Palmer really loved running in the yard. That little horse was born to run. It was no wonder that he was so fast. He was incredibly agile as well as fast. The boys set up an obstacle course in the yard composed of various toys and bicycles, etc. Palmer ran through the course with flying colors. Man, that horse was fast! When Palmer ran through the course, the boys threw water balloons at him. Each time

a water balloon broke and splashed him, he whinnied. The boys laughed. Darren laughed. The horse was unbelievable! As the days went by, and the level of play with the horse increased, the boys stopped fighting altogether. Darren's plan had worked.

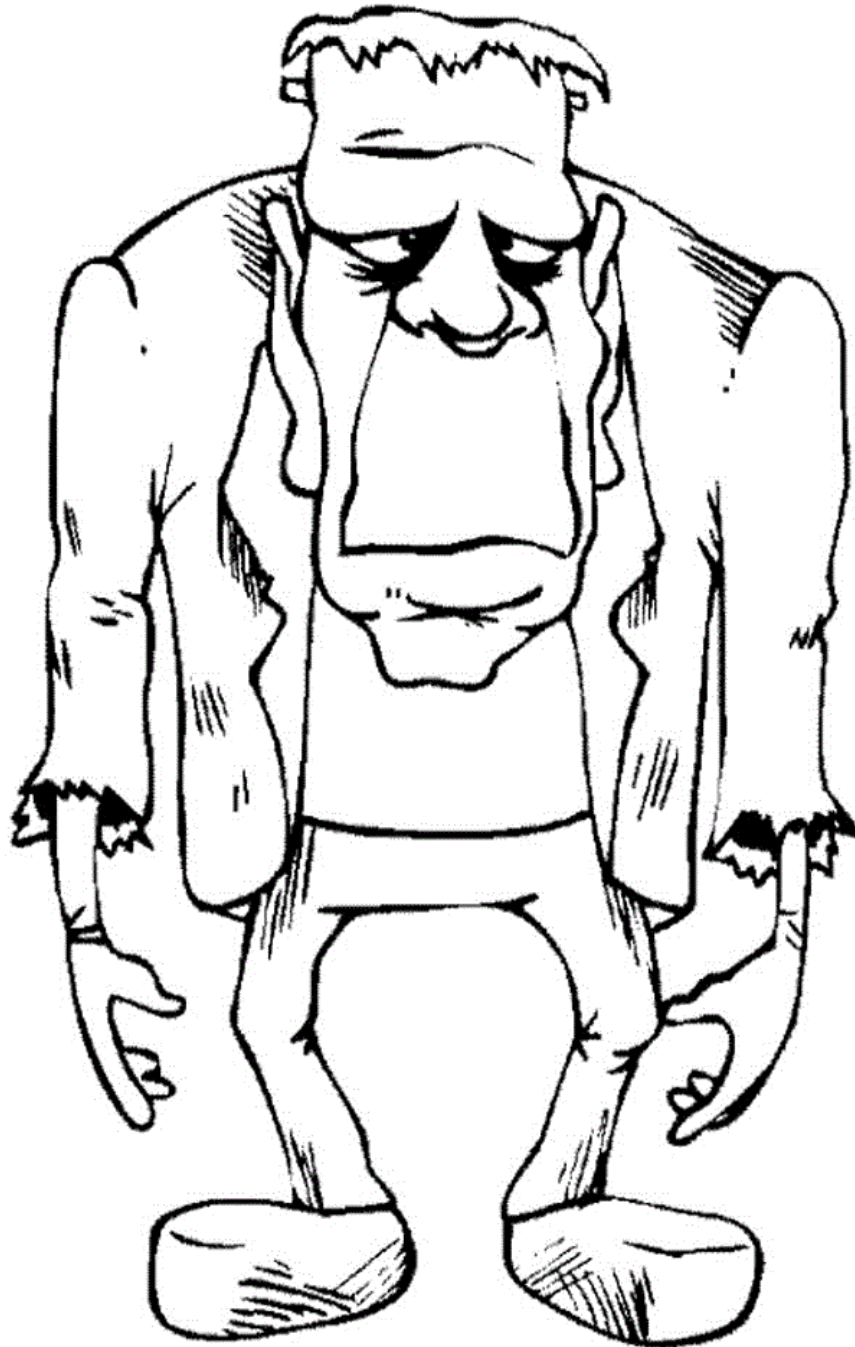
Darren never would have imagined that buying Palmer would have such a drastic change in the family. The boys, though still young seemed to have matured in the past month. The horse gave the boys a plaything and a responsibility to take care of the horse at the same time. Larry, Mack and Basil weren't the same wild characters. They were growing from the experience. Darren wondered if kids who grew up on a farm taking care of animals had a similar demeanor. There was something about interacting with animals that brought out the best in kids. Darren didn't think buying a dog would have had the same effect on the boys. Maybe it was the extra care that was required with Palmer that was the factor. The horse really wore out the boys when they played with him and rode him.

Larry, Mack and Basil each had their own perfectly fitting helmets bought from the horse guy, so they were as safe as they could be when riding Palmer. They only had 2 feet to fall to the ground, but the helmet prevented being kicked in the skull. Palmer really kept the boys on their toes. He didn't take any guff from them. If they smacked him on the butt, he nipped them in the butt. The horse wouldn't let them dominate him, as hard as they tried. It was as if the horse were in charge. Palmer was actually more of a babysitter to the boys than their pet. They couldn't stop playing with the horse. After each meal, they couldn't wait to get back outside again to play with him again. Palmer had more energy than they did. The boys always went to sleep early each evening, being so worn out from horseplay with Palmer.

Basil had a sleeping problem before the introduction of Palmer to the family. The sleeping problem disappeared. Larry was always a little lazy and a slow mover before they bought Palmer. Larry runs like the wind with Palmer. Mack stopped sucking his thumb and wetting his bed. It must be that the boys became too busy constantly thinking about Palmer to be concerned with their own former issues. The boys became skilled riders on Palmer's speeding back. The horse ran full speed around the large yard, probably attaining speeds in excess of 30 mph. Darren was so pleased with Palmer that he told all his friends about the horse. People came from all around to see the little horse in action. Darren's friends brought their kids over to ride Palmer, only if they brought their own helmets. Darren's boys were surprisingly tolerant of other kids riding their prized possession.

The mini horse seemed too good to be true. Horse guy occasionally checked in to see how things were going with Palmer. One day, during one of horse guy's visits, Darren wanted to demonstrate one of Palmer's tricks. While Darren was feeding a carrot that he held in his mouth to Palmer, Palmer bit off the tip of Darren's nose. Palmer then sped away as fast as he could, leaped over the fence, ran across the field and disappeared into the woods.

29. Malcom's Grief



29. Malcom's Grief

Malcom awoke to tremendous noise, blinding flashes of light, intense pain and the smell of burning flesh, most likely his own. His ankles, wrists and neck hurt tremendously from the hot metal bands that encased them. The deafening cacophony continued. He couldn't see anything but glaring light. He could only smell and feel his flesh burning. It was a wholly unpleasant smell. He reckoned that it was the most disgusting smell he had ever encountered. Where was he? The last thing he remembered was walking down the street from the college at which he just finished teaching his evening Physics class. He detoured down the alley as he usually does, to reduce the walking time, when he felt a painful blow to the back of his neck. He remembered becoming dizzy and passing out. Now he was here on this table apparently in the middle of a war.

The elements annoyed him for another 14 minutes and he lost consciousness on the table. When he awoke again, he was staring into the eyes of a man wearing a white surgical cap and white surgical smock. The smiling man screamed, "Eureka!" for some reason. "I've done it!" he yelled. A shorter hunched-over man dressed similarly said, "Yes you have master!" "Master? What type of arrangement did those guys have where one called the other master?" Malcom thought. Malcom said to the man staring him in the face, "Who are you and what have you done to me? Why am I on this table with metal bands on my ankles, wrists and feet? What happened to me? Why is my skin burned? What was all that noise and light before?" Malcom had more questions than the man could answer all at once.

The man said, "I am Dr. Frankenstein and this is my assistant Diamond. I created you!" "You created me? What are you talking about? You didn't create me! What happened to me? I was walking home from college and was knocked out and then I was here!" said Malcom. "I can explain," said the doctor. "You better!" said Malcom. Frankenstein told the story of how he had been working for 23 years on the method of creating life from death. First, he worked with small animals and worked his way up to larger animals. Then he moved onto humans. "What do you mean humans?" said Malcom. Frankenstein related, "Diamond and I removed dead bodies from freshly buried coffins in the cemetery. There was no harm done. The people were already dead." "Then what?" said Malcom. "Then we assembled the best parts of the bodies that we exhumed to create a perfect human form. No one person has a perfect body, you see. There are always imperfections. We wanted perfection. The perfected bodies were then placed on the table where you are lying and raised through the top of the castle." "And then?" said Malcom.

"Then we waited for the lightning to do the work," said Frankenstein. "What does lightning have to do with it?" said Malcom. "Ah, lightning is the magic, my friend," said Frankenstein. "I'm not your friend, Frankenstein. My name is Malcom, by the way!" said Malcom. "Very well, uh, Malcom," said Frankenstein. "We tried 12 times, without success. You were lucky number 13!"

said Frankenstein. "Lucky me!" said Malcom. Diamond laughed. "What are you laughing at, you butcher?" said Malcom. "Calm down, Malcom!" said Frankenstein. "Don't tell me to calm down, you criminal!" yelled Malcom. "I'm not a criminal. I've done nothing wrong, legally!" said Frankenstein. "You robbed graves and desecrated bodies, you freak!" said Malcom. "It depends on how you look at it!" said Frankenstein. "There is only 1 way to look at it!" screamed Malcom. Diamond mumbled something. "Please calm down, Malcom! You'll hurt yourself. You'll tear the stitches," said Frankenstein.

"You're right! I'll calm down when you unshackle me!" demanded Malcom. "I'm afraid we can't do that just yet, Malcom. We must run some tests first," said Frankenstein. Diamond mumbled something. "Since you were the first successful experiment with a human, we must find out why," said Frankenstein. "I see," said Malcom. Diamond mumbled something. "Why does that guy keep mumbling? It's annoying!" said Malcom. "He can't help it. He's nervous!" said Frankenstein. "He's nervous? I'm the one who should be nervous! Look at me! I'm lying here shackled to a table, waiting for 2 demented scientists to finish performing their tests on me before they will supposedly unshackle me!" said Malcom. "I see your point!" said Frankenstein. "I have to take a poop! Let me go do that at least!" said Malcom. "He's right, Diamond. Unshackle him," said Frankenstein. Diamond mumbled something and produced the key from his pocket. Diamond unlocked the ankles, then the wrists. Before he unlocked the large shackle on Malcom's neck, Frankenstein said, "No funny business, Malcom!" Malcom said, "Just do it! I have to go real bad!"

When Diamond unlocked the neck shackle, Malcom smashed him in the head with his right fist, knocking Diamond across the laboratory. "Wow, I feel a lot stronger than I used to be!" said Malcom. "You can thank us for that, Malcom. We gave you the body of a superman of sorts!" said Frankenstein. Frankenstein injected Malcom in the neck with a hypodermic needle. "You will sleep now Malcom," said Frankenstein. Malcom passed out instantly. "Are you ok, Diamond?" asked Frankenstein of Diamond, who was rising from the floor. Diamond mumbled something and walked over to the table. He re-shackled Malcom's 5 shackles. "That ought to hold him!" said Frankenstein. Diamond mumbled something. Frankenstein knew Malcom was lying when he said he had to poop. Malcom's previously dead body couldn't have had any poop in it. Frankenstein was just testing Malcom to see what he would do if he were unshackled. Frankenstein figured that Malcom would go ballistic, which he did.

Frankenstein was glad he had the needle ready. Malcom was so strong that he could easily kill the 2 of them without batting an eye. Frankenstein and Diamond ran their tests on the sleeping Malcom, but were unable to determine why the experiment with Malcom had worked. What was the trick? Frankenstein went over his notes as Malcom slept for the following 2 days. "Of course!" shrieked Frankenstein. Diamond mumbled something. "It was because of his brain!" said Frankenstein. For the previous 11 human experiments, Frankenstein had used the brains that

came with the heads of the corpses. At the time, he had only been concerned with creating a perfect body. When Frankenstein and Diamond had retrieved Malcom's body in the alley that night, they had obtained an intelligent brain, the brain of a professor. That had to be it. It must be that the first 11 bodies were from people of average or below average intellect.

In the future, Frankenstein and Diamond would make sure to obtain brains only from people with above-average intelligence. It was a great feeling for Frankenstein to have achieved the impossible. He had done it. He had created life from death! Think of the possibilities! When people die, he can bring them back to life! He had discovered the secret of immortality. He would be able to live forever! Everyone would be able to live forever! Once Frankenstein documented his findings, any scientist would be able to apply his methods and perform the same feats. What a great day it was indeed! Diamond mumbled something. "Yes, you're right, Diamond. You are absolutely correct!" The test wasn't complete, however. Malcom had only just been reanimated. It was too soon to have conclusive results yet. They would have to wait to be sure Malcom was ok. Initially Malcom was unnerved, but soon he would see the beauty of the genius.

Malcom awoke screaming at the top of his lungs, "You tricked me! Let me go! Let me go now!" Diamond mumbled something. "Ok, Diamond, let him loose." "Please, Malcom, no violence this time?" said Frankenstein. Diamond freed Malcom. Malcom sat up and ran to the nearest table. He picked up the mirror from the table and looked at himself. "What have you done you monster? This isn't my face!" cried Malcom. "No, I'm afraid it isn't. We only used your brain. When you fell in the alley, you landed on your face and damaged it beyond the repair that we were capable of performing. Diamond and I aren't exactly plastic surgeons!" said Frankenstein. "So you demons did kill me then?" said Malcom. "It appears we have!" said Frankenstein. Diamond mumbled something. "Why is he still mumbling?" asked Malcom. "He must still be nervous!" replied Frankenstein. "I'll give him something to be nervous about!" said Malcom, swinging his fist at Diamond. Diamond ducked just in time.

"So, you bloody murderers killed me, took my brain from my skull and put into another person's skull?" said Malcom. "Yes." said Frankenstein. Looking in the mirror, Malcom said, "I lost my identity!" "It was necessary," said Frankenstein. "For you! Not for me!" said Malcom. "No, it was necessary for you, because your face was so damaged when you fell," said Frankenstein. "Damaged by you 2 idiots!" yelled Malcom. "Yes. Sorry," said Frankenstein. Looking in the mirror again, Malcom asked, "Whose face is this anyway?" Diamond mumbled something. "We don't know," said Frankenstein. "Great, so now I have to walk around looking like somebody else! What if somebody recognizes me?" said Malcom. "Oh, you're not going to be walking around anywhere just yet, Malcom!" said Frankenstein. "Why not?" screamed Malcom. "We have to make sure you are completely fine first. We want to make sure there aren't any, uh, difficulties or unexpected occurrences," said Frankenstein. "What are you babbling about now?"

said Malcom.

"Please Malcom, you have been through an awful lot. You must rest and be calm. Your body is still healing. Please look at it from our point of view!" said Frankenstein. "Your point of view? You savages killed me and brought me back to life with a different face and body!" cried Malcom. "Yes, our point of view. You see, Malcom what we have accomplished with you is nothing short of a miracle. We have reanimated dead tissue. We have created life from death. Don't you find that incredible?" said Frankenstein. "You murdered me!" yelled Malcom. "In a way. Now you are alive again, much stronger than before. You can't die now. You are immortal! Don't you want to be immortal?" said Frankenstein. "Not looking like somebody else, you moron!" said Malcom. Diamond mumbled something. "That guy better speak up or I'm gonna kick him 'til he's dead!" said Malcom.

"Please Malcom. Poor Diamond is very nervous in your presence. He is dumbfounded that you are actually alive!" said Frankenstein. "He better be nervous! You should be nervous as well! What would stop me from snapping both your necks right now?" demanded Malcom. "Quite simply, your civility dear Malcom!" said Frankenstein. Malcom thought about Frankenstein's loaded remark. "You're right. I'm above murder, unlike you guys. It would be easy for me to justly claim an eye for an eye and lay waste to you buffoons. I'm better than that, much better," said Malcom. "Now then, please let's discuss this situation rationally as men of science," said Frankenstein. "Ok," said Malcom.

"Imagine the possibilities, Malcom! Immortality! No one would die and stay dead! We could extend the research to replacing lost or otherwise missing limbs!" said Frankenstein. Malcom began to think that Frankenstein actually had something. Malcom's background in theoretical physics constantly dealt with what might be. Frankenstein had achieved the "what might be" with his research. Frankenstein was right! Imagine the possibilities! Malcom didn't like his current situation, but had no other choice but to accept it and deal with it. If he learned Frankenstein's secrets, he could be a part of history as well. Malcom began wondering if the process that had brought him back to life had somewhat altered his thinking. He couldn't believe he was actually considering going along with Frankenstein and helping him with his research. Malcom had to admit to himself that he was a true man of science and should embrace Frankenstein's knowledge instead of shunning it.

Malcom looked at Frankenstein and said, "Count me in!" Diamond mumbled something. Frankenstein said, "I knew you'd see it our way! Thank you, Malcom!" Malcom said, "Tell me how you did it!" "Ok!" said Frankenstein. Frankenstein returned from his library with dozens of documents handed down to him by his grandfather. Frankenstein explained how he had studied the documents for years, repeatedly, but couldn't figure out the final step. Frankenstein's grandfather had come very close to the reanimation of dead tissue, but never succeeded. When

Frankenstein hired Diamond and showed him the documents, he suggested using lightning. It had been known for years that electricity could be used to shock a fibrillating heart into returning to its correct beat. Diamond's great genius was to apply a large enough amount of electricity to a dead body to spark it back into life. The difficulty lay in determining just the correct amount of voltage and current. If too much or too little power were applied, nothing would happen. The corpse would continue to lay there or be burned to a crisp. Diamond's unusual genius for Math, Chemistry and Physics, enabled him to calculate the amount of power necessary for reanimation. Only lightning could provide the power. The lightning had to be passed through specially modulated equipment to be able to control the flow.

"So it was Diamond who solved it, huh?" asked Malcom. "Yes!" said Frankenstein. Diamond mumbled something and took a bow, smiling. Frankenstein patted Diamond on the back and said, "He's the man, alright!" Diamond gave 2 thumbs up, smiling his funny smile. "It really is an interesting and almost unbelievable concept," said Malcom. "I know!" said Frankenstein. "What made you think that any of this would begin to be possible? It is a really farfetched idea," said Malcom. Frankenstein said, "When I started reading my grandfather's notes, I became so engrossed that I believed it had to be possible. The missing element was the electricity. Only Diamond's great genius was able to figure it out!" Malcom said, "You're right. I would have never thought electricity was the missing piece of the puzzle. That Diamond doesn't say much, but when he does, it's important!"

Frankenstein said, "Diamond's limited speech is typical of super geniuses. They usually think faster than they can speak. Their thoughts are so complex, that they stutter while trying to get their thoughts out through speech." Diamond mumbled something. Frankenstein said, "I agree." "What did he say?" asked Malcom. "He said, you are better looking now than you were before the experiment!" said Frankenstein. "Thanks a lot! I had to die to get this new face!" said Malcom. Diamond laughed. Frankenstein laughed. Malcom finally gave in and laughed. Malcom suddenly thought of all the people they could help by giving them new limbs or helping paralyzed people walk or giving sight to the sightless or hearing to the hearing impaired/deaf. Their research could help the world!

Malcom pleaded with Frankenstein and Diamond to begin without delay on expanding the research to reanimating limbs, nervous systems and eyes, etc. Frankenstein explained to Malcom that for the time being, he and Diamond were investigating the reanimation of dead bodies into live people. Malcom was the initial proof that it could work, but time was necessary to ensure the longevity of the method. Frankenstein explained that it would be better to wait and see if Malcom survived before they went any further. Malcom hadn't looked at it that way. Malcom didn't want to wait. He wanted to start immediately. Diamond mumbled something. Malcom picked up Diamond and threw him into a large rack of test tubes and vials, impaling the man in multiple places. Diamond was silent. Frankenstein screamed, "What have you done?"

30. Quinton's Treats



30. Quinton's Treats

The year was 1969 and it was a good year to be a bear in Yellowstone. It was an even better year to be a raccoon named Quinton. The garbage dumps were still located within the park and the tourists were more than eager to watch the park's animals feasting on the refuse. The park became a global attraction. Folks from around the world planed, trained and automobilized to the park to enjoy the show. At the dumps, visitors could watch the animals rummaging through the garbage eating the edibles they found. In addition, tourists with good throwing arms could lob other tasty treats for the animals to catch in their mouths and eat. Quinton had grown up in the park and for the past 12 years had feasted at the dumps. He had grown to an enormous size for an American raccoon, weighing a hefty 96 pounds, rather large for a raccoon, but by no means the largest in the world. There was a species of raccoon in the Himalayas that reached 240-250 pounds.

When Quinton was born, he was the only raccoon of his litter and his parents took him to the dumps to eat on his 2nd day in the world. He soon figured out what he liked to eat and didn't like. The bears pretty much dominated the dumps and always put on a good show for the tourists, because the bears were good at catching snacks in their mouths. The bears were the largest animals at the dumps, which also helped them get most of the better snacks from the tourists. Although there was always plenty of good food to eat in the piles of garbage, there was nothing like fresh food from the visitors. Quinton observed the bears over the years to see how they did it. Quinton and the other smaller animals always had to hang back in the trash, unable to get the good stuff tossed from the visitors. The bears were incredibly aggressive to all the smaller animals, easily being capable of killing them. The pecking order was obvious.

The bears were way at the top of the food chain at the garbage dumps. They were able to eat whatever they wanted first. They got to eat all the treats thrown by the tourists. Occasionally a visitor would make a bad throw and something would come Quinton's way. Unfortunately, that didn't happen too often. Quinton didn't like the way things were. When he became full-grown at 11 months, he started to act like the bears. It didn't seem difficult. The stupid bears could do it. So could he. He started to stand on his back feet and nod his head as the bears did to the tourists, who thought he was so cute. He stood far enough away from the line of bears to avoid being attacked. He started getting some good things tossed to him. His favorite food immediately became hot dogs. He made it known to the visitors who were throwing the food which food he preferred. If someone threw him something other than a hot dog, he caught it and tossed it back to his mother in the garbage pile. The tourist would then understand what he really wanted and throw it to him.

Perhaps campers bought too many hot dogs to eat while camping and saved the leftovers to throw at the dump animals. Maybe the campers bought hot dogs at the camping retail store for the

express purpose of feeding to the dump animals. Whatever the case, a great deal of hot dogs were dispensed at the garbage dumps by people. Quinton started to get bigger and bigger from all the protein supplied by the hot dogs, growing much larger than his mother. In addition to increased body size, Quinton became strong and agile. He had to be quick to avoid the bears that were beginning to become annoyed with his antics. The bears had dominated the garbage dumps since the opening of the park. The dumps had acquired the name of "bear dumps" for that very reason. When Quinton began horning in on the action of the bears, they began getting nervous and jerky. One bear in particular named Agustin, by far the largest bear in the park, became Quinton's mortal enemy. Agustin located himself in the center of the view of the visitors. He realized that was the best place to get everybody's attention. He really put on a tremendous show.

Quinton began mimicking Agustin's movements. Quinton would stand on the end of the line of bears just far enough away for safety. Whatever Agustin did, Quinton did. The tourists loved it. Agustin and Quinton received the majority of the treats thrown. Of course, Quinton only ate the hot dogs, tossing his mother the non-hot dog snacks. Quinton not only preferred the taste of the salty hot dogs, but he felt there was something in the hot dogs that made him get bigger, stronger and faster than the other raccoons. Quinton was actually correct in his assumption that the hot dogs were making him bigger and stronger. Agustin had been the primary recipient of the hot dogs thrown by tourists for the previous 22 years, and he was an enormous bear, much larger than the others were. As time passed at the dumps and Quinton became bigger and faster, he became bolder.

He began to time the tosses of the hot dogs. When Quinton saw a hot dog being tossed to Agustin, Quinton ran and leaped into the air, just in front of Agustin, stealing the hot dog from the bear. Needless to say, the bear became furious and attacked. Quinton was too quick for the bear, laughed at him and ran just far enough away to avoid him. Agustin acknowledged that his enormous size and strength kept him at an advantage with other bears that feared him. Quinton was another story. Most raccoons wouldn't go near Agustin, not being as agile as Quinton. Quinton took full advantage of his hot dog-induced size and speed. Quinton's increased size gave him confidence and his increased quickness made him cocky. He was content just knowing he could steal a hot dog from Agustin, but he didn't do it all the time. Quinton hoped that by only stealing 1 hot dog per day from Agustin, that eventually the big bear would vacate that dump and go to another one.

Quinton preferred that dump because it attracted the largest number of hot dog tossing tourists. Quinton hoped to badger Agustin enough to make him leave. Agustin preferred that dump to the others for the same reason that Quinton preferred it. That dump provided the most goodies. Agustin didn't plan to leave anytime soon. For a year, Quinton stole 1 hot dog per day from Agustin, with the bear holding fast. The bear didn't appear to want to leave the dump. It seemed that the bear began to tolerate Quinton stealing that 1 hot dog. Quinton decided to turn it up a

notch. He started stealing 2 hot dogs from Agustin per day. Again, the bear didn't budge. Then Quinton upped it to 3 hot dogs, then 4, then 5 per day. Quinton realized he was tempting fate by stealing any hot dogs from the giant bear, much less 5, but Quinton wanted that bear out of there.

Quinton tried something else. The next time he snatched a hot dog from Agustin, Quinton spat the hot dog in the bear's face. That action so enraged the bear that it ran after Quinton and followed him out of the dump. Quinton looked back at Agustin chasing him. The bear was foaming at the mouth. Quinton ran up a tree and looked down at the bear, laughing at it. Agustin was too large to climb trees and stood there at the base of the tree looking up at Quinton. Quinton spat on Agustin. The bear growled. Quinton pissed on Agustin. The bear roared and clawed the tree. Quinton pooped on Agustin. The bear bellowed such a loud sound that it shook the woods. Agustin began pushing on the tree, trying to break it down. Quinton continued laughing at the bear and spat again in its face. The bear soon left the tree, unable to get even with Quinton.

Quinton waited, then followed the bear back to the dump. Quinton noticed Agustin having a huddle with the other bears. Agustin growled then another bear growled back. Agustin roared at the bear that had growled back at him. The tourists at the fence jumped back in fear from the sound of Agustin's roar, thinking the giant bear was verging on attack. Agustin growled again. The other bears appeared to nod to each other in agreement. Agustin marched out of the garbage dump with the 6 other bears following him in single file. It appeared to Quinton that he had won! Agustin left the dump and took his stupid bear buddies with him! Now the dump would be all Quinton's to share only with his raccoon relatives and no bears.

The next day, Quinton went to the dump early to start in on the monopolized snacking. To Quinton's surprise, no people showed up at the dump. What happened? Was the park closed? Was there a new rule he didn't know about, prohibiting animal feeding? He was starving! Quinton had to settle for eating food scraps from the dump with the other raccoons until he figured out what had happened. After 3 days of eating garbage, Quinton had enough. He missed his fresh choice hot dogs. He needed them to keep getting bigger and stronger. Those hot dogs were a part of him. They were a part of his culture. He could not go on happily without his beloved hot dogs. He could taste the saltiness on his tongue. Ah, sweet nectar! Quinton snapped his fingers as a thought came to him.

The people must have followed those stupid bears! Admittedly, the bears were still the main attraction at the garbage dumps in the park. Quinton had just been capitalizing on the popularity of the bears for his own gain. With the bears gone from his favorite dump, the people refused to show up there. Quinton followed the trail the bears had taken when they vacated. It led to a nearby garbage dump that was the 2nd largest in the park. When Quinton got there, he saw that brute Agustin standing there catching hot dogs! His crony bears were lined up on either side of

him as before at the old dump. Quinton seethed as he sat there observing the scene. Agustin had won! He had defeated Quinton at his own game. Agustin took Quinton's hot dogs right out of Quinton's mouth. What to do? Quinton went back to his old dump and ate some garbage while he pondered.

The next day Quinton awoke to the idea. He would steal the show away from the bears! He ran to Agustin's dump and waited for the moment. Quinton waited to get the timing correct. Just as a hot dog was tossed to Agustin, Quinton ran and leaped at the hot dog. Instead of eating the hot dog, Quinton landed with the hot dog in his mouth out of reach of the last bear in the line. Quinton ran back and forth between the legs of the bears. The people were laughing hysterically. The bears couldn't catch the shifty Quinton. He ran back and forth a few more times, and then ran out of the dump back to the old dump. Quinton did the same thing on the next 2 days. On the 3rd day, when he got back to the old dump and proceeded to eat the garbage with his brethren again, a tourist showed up. Apparently, the person had assumed that Quinton had returned to the old dump after leaving the dump at which he stole the hot dog from the bear.

Quinton started putting on his show, standing on his back legs and nodding his head. The tourist had 1 hot dog, which he tossed to Quinton. Quinton did a back flip and the applauding tourist left. Quinton thought his plan might have finally started working. For the remainder of the day, he taught all the other raccoons how to stand on their back legs and nod their heads like the bears. They caught on right away, since they all had been watching him do it for years. That tourist came back the next day with a lot more hot dogs and a few friends with many hot dogs of their own. Quinton lined up his raccoon relatives on either side of him like a chorus line and they started their act. The people loved it. Quinton did back flips and front flips when he caught his hot dogs. Some of the other raccoons did flips and tricks as well.

The next day, more visitors came with more hot dogs. Quinton wanted to get all the tourists to leave Agustin's dump and come to his instead. Quinton and the other raccoons were really raking in the hot dogs. Quinton had a trick where another raccoon stood on his shoulders and they both caught hot dogs simultaneously. Quinton kept thinking up new tricks to make an overall better act than the bears had. All the bears did was stand there nodding their heads. Each day, more and more tourists showed up at Quinton's dump. Quinton knew that eventually Agustin would catch on that the tourists were being drawn away from him by Quinton. After a solid month of eating as many hot dogs as they could handle, Agustin sneaked into the dump roaring his unmistakable roar. The other raccoons ran out of the dump, fearing for their lives.

Quinton stood his ground all alone, still catching hot dogs. He had a plan up his sleeves. The people stared in awe as Agustin ran at the fearless Quinton. Quinton caught 1 more hot dog and ran out of the dump with the savage drooling Agustin close behind. Quinton climbed the first thick tree he encountered. He didn't want to climb a tree that Agustin would be capable of

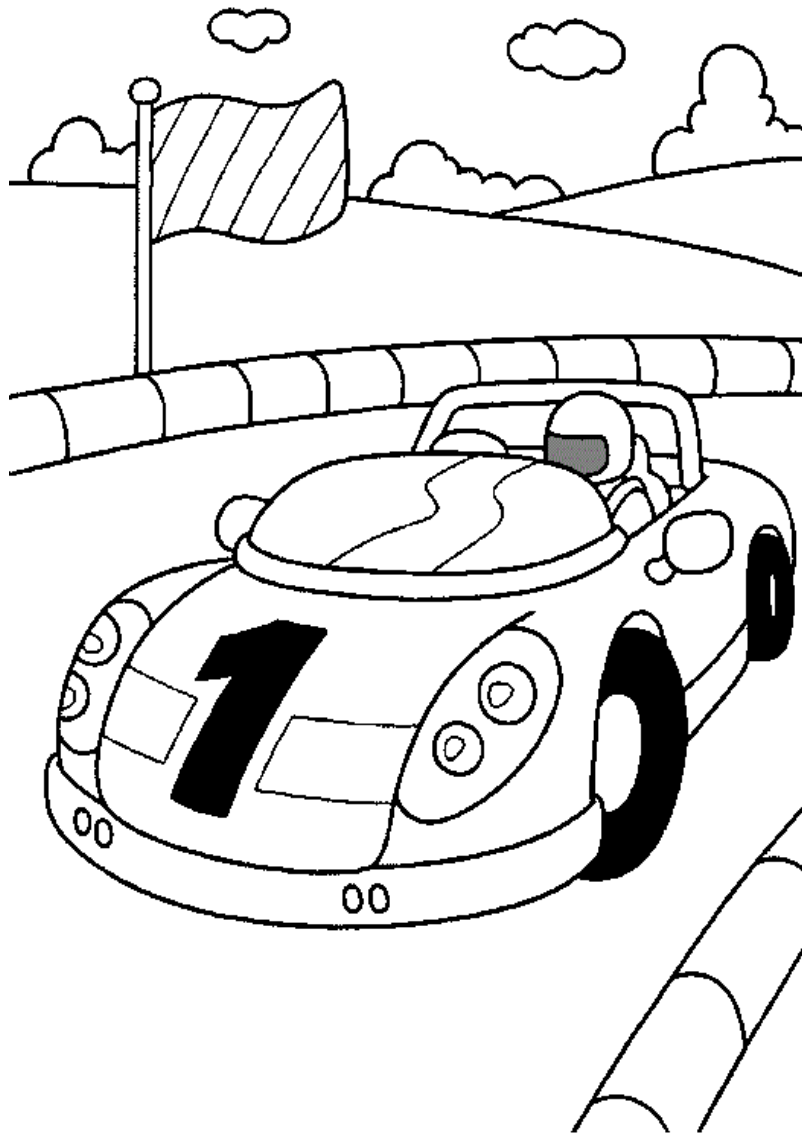
pushing over. From the top of the tree, Quinton looked down at Agustin, who apparently had forgotten what happened last time they met that way. Without a moment's hesitation, Quinton vomited the 40 or 50 hot dogs that were in his stomach from that long day of hot dog catching. Agustin's face, head, shoulders and part of his back were covered with the barf. As Quinton laughed, he spat, pissed, then pooped on Agustin. Agustin was so infuriated by the insult that he tried climbing the tree. His raw anger managed to propel him halfway up the tree until he fell to the ground again. Quinton continued laughing at Agustin.

Agustin stood at the tree growling and looking up at Quinton. Quinton continued looking down and laughing at Agustin. Quinton held his breath, pressurized his gut and managed to squeeze out about a pint of runny, smelly diarrhea onto Agustin's snarling, vomit and poop covered face. Agustin was livid. He roared and roared. There was nothing Agustin could do to get back at Quinton. The big raccoon was too quick and apparently too smart for the bear. Agustin couldn't admit to himself that he had been bamboozled by Quinton. Agustin was the king of the park. Everyone knew it. Quinton never felt superior to any other animal, but he knew he was smarter than the big bear. Agustin waited another 20 minutes for Quinton to come down from the tree, which was not going to happen. In that time, Quinton had worked up more piss and diarrhea, which he let fly on Agustin's face again.

Agustin finally gave up and left the tree. After a safe hour, Quinton climbed down from the tree. As Quinton's feet touched the ground, he heard a stampede coming through the woods, which had to be Agustin. Quinton ran through the woods just far enough ahead of Agustin to stay clear of the jaws and claws. Normally a bear would be faster than a raccoon and be able to apprehend the raccoon. However, Quinton was faster than any bear alive. He took the bear on a long chase, which went on a course that circled back to Agustin's dump. When they arrived at the dump, the few people who were there were throwing hot dogs to Agustin's cronies. Quinton paused at the line of bears just long enough to run and leap to intercept one that was tossed to the one in the middle. Agustin roared at the outrage. Quinton started running circles around the bears. The people started laughing and throwing more hot dogs.

Out of hunger and habit, Agustin stood up in the middle of the line of bears to do his act to get some hot dogs for himself. The visitors and the other bears wondered why he was covered with some kind of filth. Quinton laughed, knowing it was he who made Agustin into the filthy, smelly beast that he was. As Quinton laughed, he intercepted only the hot dogs that were thrown to Agustin. Quinton allowed the other bears to catch theirs. Agustin began roaring out of frustration, making the tourists nervous. Quinton continued running back and forth and between the legs of the bears. Quinton started leaping on Agustin's head and bouncing off it to intercept the hot dogs that were thrown to Agustin. The bear standing in line next to Agustin began timing Quinton's leaps off Agustin's head. On Quinton's 3rd leap, the bear managed to latch onto Quinton's left back foot with his teeth.

31. Raleigh's Fever



31. Raleigh's Fever

Raleigh's father Adolph was a car nut and always wanted to be a racecar driver himself, but was too uncoordinated, had slow reactions and had limited vision. Adolph had to be contented with living vicariously through his only child. Raleigh's mother had died when he was 1 year old and his father never remarried or even had another girlfriend. Raleigh was a lucky boy who started to drive vehicles at the age of 3 with a nice 3-hp go-kart. Raleigh's father loved his son and wanted him to be happy. Raleigh loved his father as much as a young boy knew how to, but when Raleigh climbed into that go-kart, he discovered an even greater love, the love of speed. Raleigh couldn't get enough of that kart. All he wanted to do all day long was drive that kart around the track his father made. The kart didn't go that fast, but for a little kid, it was a blast to drive. As Raleigh got older, the kart's got faster.

Soon Raleigh was racing karts and winning every race he entered. It may have been somewhat of an unfair advantage the way Adolph started Raleigh so young, but any father could have done the same with their kids. Raleigh was a natural driver, as so few racecar drivers are. The best drivers in the world were born to drive. Not everyone could drive the way some of those guys drove. It always required just the right amount of speed on the verge of losing control, combined with the preservation of the vehicle. Any fool could drive a car at full speed, brake hard, shift hard, push the car too hard through corners, etc. The car had to be utilized as a precision instrument. The average driver used a steak knife. The best drivers used a scalpel. Raleigh was one of those best drivers.

Raleigh advanced to dirt track racing at the minimum age allowed for drivers. Adolph found a job for Raleigh, working as a garage helper for a mechanic friend of his. Raleigh earned money to help pay for the cost of racing. First, he started sweeping and unpacking/stocking parts. Then he started doing tire changes/rotations and oil change/lubes. Raleigh's skills in the garage gradually increased until the mechanic had him doing more and more complex repairs. Raleigh's garage work was valuable toward tweaking the cars he raced. The mechanic allowed Raleigh to work on his racecars in the garage, in lieu of some wages. Adolph saw to it that Raleigh wasn't being ripped off by the mechanic, helping Raleigh to demand higher and higher wages for his work. Raleigh was as natural as a mechanic as he was as a driver. He was able to diagnose the mechanic's repair vehicles by listening to the engine and smelling the exhaust.

The mechanic was surprised at how quickly Raleigh learned about fixing cars. Adolph told the mechanic that Raleigh seemed to be a natural at everything. He was a really sharp young man. The mechanic agreed. Raleigh worked long hours in the garage to make as much money as possible for racing. Adolph wanted to make sure that Raleigh did well in school first, then concentrate on the job and then on racing. Raleigh's grades proved to Adolph that Raleigh was a natural at learning. He always got straight A's. The guy seemed to be able to do it all. Raleigh

really made his father proud.

Adolph asked Raleigh one day what he wanted to do with his life when he graduated high school, knowing full well what Raleigh would say. Raleigh always had always wanted to race cars and would like to do it for a living if possible. Even if it weren't possible, he still wanted to race cars in some fashion. Raleigh was a practical guy and would never put all his eggs in 1 basket. Racing was one thing. Living comfortably was something else.

After graduating high school, Raleigh decided to go to tech school in the evenings, while still working for the mechanic. He wanted to go to an automotive technical school to gain a certificate. In 18 months, Raleigh received his certificate and moved out of Adolph's house into a really cheap apartment with a guy he met at the tech school. He continued working for the mechanic and racing on the side when he could. Raleigh lived in South Carolina, where they raced year round. He was always able to go to the local dirt track to race now and then. Raleigh tried to save as much money as he could to save up towards a real racecar some day. He wasn't able to become a real racer yet, due to lack of experience and finances. He loved the speed of driving. Dirt tracks only permitted so much speed due to the shortness of the tracks and the dirt itself. Driving on a dirt track was basically going straight for a short distance, then spinning the rear tires around the curves while trying to keep in control.

Raleigh craved to drive a car at 200+ mph on a high-speed paved track. He found a track an hour from his apartment where a driver could rent a NASCAR type of car and drive the heck out of it. It cost \$900 to do it. The driver had to sign a waiver. The driver had to have a clean driver's license and car insurance. The driver had to possess their own helmet and fire-resistant racing suit, gloves and shoes. Raleigh borrowed the helmet, suit, gloves and shoes from a guy he occasionally raced against on the dirt tracks. The guy bought the gear in anticipation of someday racing in the big time, but was injured in an accident and was recovering for a while. The doctors didn't know when he would be able to race again. The guy hoped it would be within a year. The guy let Raleigh use the gear in exchange for free repairs on the vehicles of his relatives. The guy couldn't work on the vehicles due to his injury. Raleigh agreed to do the repairs for the use of the gear.

The car Raleigh was going to drive was specially equipped to be driven by novices. It was like a high-speed Driver Ed. car. It had 2 steering wheels, brakes and gas pedals. The engine had a rev limiter to prevent someone from blowing the engine. Otherwise, it was similar to a NASCAR vehicle. The car was capable of 205 mph on the straightaway. Typical NASCAR cars can reach 240 mph on a longer track. Raleigh was ready for the ride of his life. The car came with a professional driver who would keep the car and occupants from hitting the wall or other mishaps. Raleigh didn't care if they put 4 other people in the car, as long as he was the one driving. The car had a 4-speed transmission, which no problem for Raleigh, since his daily driven '69 Camaro

also had a 4-speed. The pro driver went over a few track rules. The drive was to last 20 minutes. That would be sufficient time to get in enough laps to gain confidence and get to the top speed if the driver wanted to. The gas tank only held enough gas for the car to run for 20 minutes, so no one could cheat the timer.

Raleigh left the pit and accelerated onto the track, going through the gears. Raleigh and the pro were able to communicate to each other via radio headsets in their helmets. The pro talked Raleigh through the track, telling him how to take the curves, etc. Raleigh was in heaven! The car was so powerful and fast. It handled insanely. It was loud in the car. It was hot in the car. It smelled like various petroleum products and rubber. Raleigh loved it! With each lap around the track, the pro coaxed Raleigh into going faster and faster within his comfort zone. Raleigh felt the increasing vibration of the car as they went faster around the track. The steering wheel became more and more difficult to hold onto as they increased speed. It was incredible! He never realized what those drivers were going through in those cars. The noise of the high-revving V-8 engine was music to his ears.

Raleigh had never heard an engine of that size whine the way it did. He was used to V-8's revving lower. It must be a combination of the cam and the transmission. The car was more of an animal than a machine. It did whatever he told it. Soon, he was reaching the maximum speed allowed, indicated by the 205 mph on the speedometer. He had to be careful going into the curve from that ridiculous speed. It all seemed too easy. The pro stopped talking after a while, letting Raleigh do his thing. Raleigh did his thing expertly. It appeared he had added another skill to his list of easily acquired abilities. He could feel the sweat on his fingers through the gloves. He was barely gripping the steering wheel. He felt so confident. The car became his slave to do with what he pleased. He wanted to faster, but the car wouldn't let him. He wondered what it would be like to race the car against other drivers. It would have to be the thrill of a lifetime.

When the timer went off, the pro signaled Raleigh to return to the pit. They got out of the car and stood there. When Raleigh took off his helmet, the pro asked him what the matter was. Raleigh said he didn't know what he was talking about. The pro asked Raleigh why he was crying. Raleigh removed a glove and felt the tears under his eyes. He didn't realize he was crying. Raleigh told the pro he was happy. The pro gave Raleigh a high five and they went back to the building. At the building, the pro told the owner of the track what a quick study Raleigh was. Raleigh said he had been driving dirt tracks for a while. The pro insisted that he had never seen anyone max the speed of the car on that short track. The pro was barely able to achieve max speed himself without wrecking. Raleigh didn't realize that what he had done on the track was such a big deal. It all seemed very easy and natural to him. The pro asked Raleigh if he had any plans of racing professionally. Raleigh said he would love to race in the big leagues, but lacked the money to get started.

Racing professionally required sponsors more than anything else. The sport was so expensive between the cost of the cars, fees, transportation, fuel, expendables, etc., that no average Joe could do it without sponsors. The only way to get sponsors was to be a successful driver. It was the classic catch-22. The big drivers worked their way up the ladder. They started the same way Raleigh started. Somewhere along the way, a break has to occur. Someone has to see something in a certain driver and be willing to take a chance on that driver. The pro had explained how he knew somebody who knew somebody who sponsored him years ago as a NASCAR driver. He never finished in the top 3, which was the key to keeping sponsors. It didn't help that the person he knew had died along the way. The pro found the job at the track as a pro driver only after years of searching for such a job. He had been through some hard times.

The pro insisted that Raleigh had a special talent for driving at high speed. The pro acknowledged that it had taken him years to be able to drive the way Raleigh just did. Raleigh was dumbfounded. He didn't really think he was that good. He felt he was average. The pro wanted to help Raleigh. The pro knew some people from his past who may be able to help Raleigh. The pro always liked the story of the little guy who made good. He thought he was that little guy years ago, but couldn't cut the mustard. In Raleigh, the pro saw himself, except possibly a better version, driver-wise. The pro bade farewell to Raleigh and said he would make some phone calls. Raleigh was ecstatic! He drove home as carefully as he could, because he was so nervous, he was shaking. It could be the break he had been waiting for! He might be on his way!

At his apartment, Raleigh told his roommate the news and instructed him to help wait for the call from the pro, in case Raleigh was at work at the time of the call. Raleigh waited for the pro's call and continued his job working for the mechanic, earning a higher wage due to his recent certification. The mechanic was impressed with Raleigh's story. He knew Raleigh was a great talent. Raleigh could do anything he put his mind to. Three weeks passed and Raleigh became bewildered. The pro hadn't called and Raleigh felt he was wasting valuable time. He had patience, but it was running out. Two months passed and Raleigh had all but given up when the pro finally called. The pro found a rich guy who was looking for young drivers to fill out his crew. The pro instructed Raleigh to bring his driving gear to the track in 2 days and get ready to earn his wings.

Raleigh arrived at the track more nervous than ever. He had to calm himself down. He could do it. He had to get focused and stay focused. Raleigh had to compete with another young hotshot driver for the position on the crew. Whoever had the lowest average time for 10 laps on the track would win. There were stipulations. Each competing driver drove their own identically prepared Driver Ed. car. The tires and brakes were measured to determine the amount of wear and tire the driver put on the car. A limited amount of gas was in the gas tank as well. The driver had to be fast and efficient. The preservation of the car was of utmost importance. By following the

stipulations, the contest most closely simulated actual race conditions, with the absence of other cars on the track, of course. Each competing driver drove their own Driver Ed. car with the pro in the car as per track rules.

The other driver and Raleigh flipped to see who would go first. Raleigh won the toss and chose to go 2nd. The other driver drove the 10 laps and his lap times were recorded and averaged. The brakes, tires and gas tank were measured. Then it was Raleigh's turn. Raleigh started out too careful. He felt he wasn't going fast enough. What he didn't realize was that his initial hesitation to get up to speed quickly had actually benefited him. When the results were tallied, it was determined that the other driver had arrived at the finish line with a lower average lap time, but the wear and tear on Raleigh's car was lower. The competing drivers didn't know it, but the wear and tear factor was more important to the rich guy. The rich guy knew that in actual racing, most of the drivers were equal in their ability to drive fast. The drivers who were able to finesse the cars around the track, with minimal wear and tear and fuel consumption were the ones who won the races.

The rich guy wanted Raleigh to be on his crew. The rich guy told Raleigh the news and Raleigh fell to his knees and burst into tears. The other driver laughed at Raleigh's crying. The rich guy knew that Raleigh's crying must mean that he really wanted the opportunity. The fact that the other driver laughed at Raleigh, indicated that the other driver couldn't relate to Raleigh's greater desire to want to race and win. The other driver conceded and shook Raleigh's hand. The track owner hugged Raleigh. The rich guy shook Raleigh's hand while also holding his wrist. Raleigh thought that must be the way rich people shake hands. Raleigh couldn't believe his good fortune!

Raleigh signed a 2-year contract to start out as the back-up driver to the seasoned primary driver. Being back-up driver didn't yield any glory right away, but it still made for a good paycheck. When Raleigh told the rich guy he was a certified mechanic, the rich guy said it was all the better. Raleigh would get to drive the cars around the track and assist the mechanics in tweaking the cars. Raleigh said goodbye to Adolph and packed his things. He was off to Florida. The rich guy hired Raleigh to help prepare for the Daytona 500 the following season. Raleigh was so excited. It was just a matter of time that he would be the man behind the wheel. He would get to hobnob with all the good ol' southern racing boys. He would eventually become one of them. Maybe in a year, the rich guy would let him be the primary driver.

It was a month before the Daytona 500 and the rich guy's 3 cars needed to be equalized in performance. Each car had to accelerate and handle equally to be capable of being driven by the primary driver without unnecessary corrections. Raleigh's job was to take the cars out on the test track and drive them at full speed to tweak the engines and suspensions. Car #3 had a sloppy rear suspension, which required final dialing in. Raleigh maxed the car out to 240 mph on the straight and expected the car to turn easy into the left-hand curve. It didn't turn.

32. Sixta's Chamber



32. Sixta's Chamber

Sixta was a large fruit bat already, but he wanted to get larger. When people imagine bats, they usually think of the scary vampire bats of stories. In fact, the majority of the bats of the world are insect eaters. They are really just birds with fuzzy bodies. Bats aren't as cute as birds, though. Their large nostrils throw off their otherwise average looking faces. Sixta was a fruit bat. Fruit bats are the largest bats in the world, due to their diet of fruit, which gave them the greater potential for growing larger than the insect-eating or vampire bats. Apparently, the size of the food determined the size of the bat. The vampire bats were the smallest, because of their diet of mere trickles of blood.

Sixta grew up in his Borneo cave with his millions of relatives. He had to compete for food on a daily basis. It wasn't easy at first. Everybody wanted the same things to eat. The fruit trees of the forests were ravaged by all the bats to the point of not being able to provide enough food for all the bats to eat. Sixta was getting tired of the competition. Even though he was already large compared to the other bats of his family, he still had a hard time getting to the fruit without butting heads all the time. He had to think of a strategy. How could he make himself bigger and stronger so that he would be able to outmuscle the other bats while feeding?

Of course! He would do the unthinkable! He would supplement his fruit diet with blood. It was unheard of for a fruit-eating bat to drink blood. There was no way that a typical fruit bat with a sweet tooth for fruit would ever consider sucking down the warm salty blood of a living animal like the vampire bats did. It was disgusting! The fruit bats always considered the vampire bats to be the lowlifes of the bat species. The vampire bats always had bad breath. They always had dried blood on their lips. The vampire bats made a strange muted panting sound that no one really understood. The vampire bats had those creepy teeth. It was unfortunate that all the bat species had to live together in the cave with each other, but those were the breaks. At least the different bat species hung from the roof of the cave in their own bat neighborhoods.

Sixta considered all the negatives of sucking blood like a vampire bat, but had to try it anyway. Since he didn't possess the means of puncturing an animal with his teeth like the vampire bats, he decided to wait for a vampire bat to puncture an animal and suck the blood first and then he would move in. Sixta waited for nightfall. When he and the 10 million other bats flew out of the cave that night, the fruit bats turned left to feed in the fruit tree groves and he turned right to follow the vampire bats to the sleeping herds of wildebeests. Sixta stayed in a tree while a vampire bat drank from 1 of the wildebeests. When the vampire bat was done, Sixta flew down to the sleeping animal. When Sixta first started sucking on the blood, he choked on the foulness and had to stop. He couldn't believe those vampire bats drank the stuff. How did they stand it? They had no choice, he supposed. He tried again and stopped again.

Sixta had to make himself do it. He tried again and sipped it down. He found that if he clung to

the animal with his feet and held on with 1 wing tip, he could pinch his nose with the other wing tip. That way he couldn't smell the blood when he drank it. It worked! He was sucking it down. The lack of smelling it definitely helped to limit the taste. There was still the issue of the warmth of the liquid. He resigned himself to considering the blood to be like the warm fruit he sometimes ate on really hot days. That was it then. He could do it. He committed to try drinking blood for a month and see what happened to his body as a result. He would still eat the fruit as his main food, since his physiology required it.

The next night Sixta drank blood for a while then flew over to the fruit trees for fruit. Night after night, he did the same thing. His family was wondering what was going on. He told them not to worry. He was busy. His parents had put up with his antics before and they considered his latest diversion to be something to keep him out of trouble. His relatives didn't exactly know what he was doing. He didn't want any of his bat species to know what he was doing. If his experiment were successful, he would emerge as the victor. Since the different bat species never conversed with each other, Sixta didn't have to worry about a vampire bat squealing on him to his parents back in the cave. He made sure that after he drank blood, he washed off his face and rinsed his mouth out, before he flew to feed from the fruit trees.

A month passed and Sixta had definitely started to see a difference in his body. He was bigger and stronger. He could fly faster. His parents wondered why he was getting bigger. They thought he was full grown already. Another month passed and he found himself to be 40% larger than the biggest bat in the cave. He kept up the blood drinking for a while. After 6 months, he was twice as big as any bat in the cave. An average fruit bat weighs 2 pounds. Sixta weighed 4 pounds. His parents wanted to know what was going on. He refused to tell them. He was able to push the other bats aside at the fruit trees and feed from the best fruits. He loved being big and strong! He had become the king of the bats!

Sixta kept drinking the blood. In addition to increased body size, other changes were taking place in his body. He began to notice his teeth altering. He was beginning to grow fangs like the vampire bats! He found that he could puncture the animals by himself before drinking. He was actually starting to like the taste and temperature of the blood! What was happening to him? He had stopped his practice of pinching his nose. His body was too heavy to hold onto the animal with only his back feet and 1 wing tip. His ever-increasing bulk required the use of both feet and both wing tips to hold onto the animal while drinking its blood.

Sixta grew bigger and bigger. After a year of blood sucking, he had reached the weight of 6 pounds! His parents noticed the fangs and huge body size and demanded answers. He refused to tell them. He had to keep his blood drinking a secret. He had full reign at the fruit trees. The other fruit bats stepped aside when he showed up. Sixta only allowed his parents and other close relatives to feed in the same tree from which he fed. They all benefited from his increasing size.

Sixta was getting worried. He was feeling different mentally. He was beginning to lose his taste for fruit! He was really surprised at that evolution. He had grown up eating fruit. It was what he was born to do. What was happening? Should he be concerned? Should he stop the blood drinking? No! He would not stop the blood drinking! He would never stop the blood drinking! It was part of him. He needed it.

Sixta wanted to get bigger. As big as he was, it wasn't enough. He was addicted. After another 6 months, he weighed 9 pounds! His parents were gone, having passed away of natural causes. At least he didn't have to worry about them asking questions anymore. He would always miss them though. He wondered if he could get any bigger. He kept drinking the blood. After 2 years of blood, he seemed to have finally reached a peak body size of 10 pounds. It still wasn't big enough. He definitely felt that his brain had transformed over the past 2 years, along with his body. He had become something else. He had stopped eating fruit altogether. He had become a full time bloodsucker. He had become a gigantic vampire bat! The fruit bats had stopped talking to him, finally discovering his disgusting blood sucking practice. One of the fruit bats followed him out of the cave one night and discovered him sucking on a wildebeest.

The fruit bats got together and voted him out of the fruit bat colony. Sixta had committed a crime by drinking blood. He had violated the fruit bat creed. Sixta didn't care. The vampire bat colony and insect-eating bat colony also voted. They all voted Sixta out of the cave. Sixta no longer belonged to any species. The other bats were afraid of him. He was way too big to live with them. He had gotten too bossy and pushy. The other bats had enough of him. He had to exit the cave. He had no choice. He had been banished. When he flew back to the cave one evening, the other bats had blocked the entrance. He couldn't get back into the cave. He tried and tried, but they resisted. He considered it a blessing. He didn't need those stupid bats. He was better than they were. He was bigger and stronger. So be it. He flew away from the cave, never to return. He was mad. Now where was he going to sleep?

Sixta flew around for a while thinking. While hungrily eyeing a herd of sleeping wildebeests below him, he noticed a dark patch on the ground. He flew down to investigate. It was the entrance to a cave! He entered and the cave opened up into a huge chamber. It would be his new home. He flew around in there for a while, checking it out. There weren't any bats anywhere. It was perfect. There was no stench of millions of tons of bat poop like there was in the other cave. His new cave was beautiful and fragrant. There was a nice stream running through the middle of the floor. There were many decorative stalagmites and stalactites. It was dimly lit by the light streaming through the entrance hole. Wow! The mineral deposits had created some very interesting works of art. It was so fresh down there.

He flew toward the back of the cave. As he flew, the cave narrowed until at the very end of the cave there was a hole through which to exit.

He flew out of the cave through the hole and ended up in a valley. He turned and flew back to the other opening and went back in. The 2 openings in the cave provided a nice airflow. His old cave was always smelly and stuffy. There was only 1 way in and out of the old cave. Sixta's new cave was vastly superior. It wasn't as big as the old one, but it was way nicer and fresher. Even if a million bats were packed into his new cave, the air would still be more pleasant, due to the better airflow. He was home! In a way, he wished he could gloat by showing the cave to the bats in the old cave, but then he would lose his privacy.

The other bats were right about him. He had changed. He was no longer a bat of any 1 species. Technically, he was still a fruit bat. Because of his vampire bat tendencies, he was also a vampire bat. The blood drinking had altered his mind. He no longer cared to be a part of a flock. He had become a solo bat. He was a super bat. As big as he was though, he still wanted to get bigger. Why had he stopped growing? He thought for sure that he would continue to increase in size forever. However, he had stopped growing. Why? What did he have to do to increase his size? He had to get bigger. It was all he had. He was alone, not that it bothered him, but he was alone with no one to talk to anymore. He used to enjoy talking down to the other smaller bats. Ha! He didn't need them. What was he thinking? He would figure it out somehow. He would show those other bats. He would get bigger, go back to them and really show them something.

The next night, Sixta resumed his blood drinking and gorged on the blood of 37 wildebeests. He always made sure to only take a little blood from each animal, so as not to weaken the animal. The animal had to live to be able to provide the vampire bats the blood they required. It was a relationship of mutual survival. While Sixta was there, he saw some of the vampire bats from the old cave who had voted him out of the cave. He laughed at them. He pushed them all off the animals they were sucking on to take the animals for himself. All the bats that Sixta had kicked off animals had to find new animals. The bats were pretty enraged by the end of the night. Sixta had the last laugh. That became his new thing. He harassed the vampire bats.

When Sixta flew home each night, he waited long enough for all the bats - fruit, vampire and insect-eating - to return to their old cave. Then he flew to his new chamber. He didn't want any bat to know about his new place. It was all his and would always remain that way. He continued drinking blood as before, getting no larger. He immersed himself in thought. How could he make himself any larger? Of course! Maybe he had to try drinking blood from another type of animal. The wildebeests were by far the most plentiful animals in the area. The vampire bats had chosen them as their food source for an eternity. It seemed only natural for Sixta to drink as the vampire bats drank. It worked a little while for him, but it was time for a change.

Sixta tried to think of another animal's blood that would be capable of increasing his size. He considered the following: elephant, giraffe, hippo, rhino, lion and tiger. Maybe the way to do it was to start from the biggest animal and work down to the smallest. All the new animals he was

considering were certainly larger than the wildebeests. He would start with the elephant. He wanted to proceed efficiently by staying with a new animal long enough to prove the theory. He would find an elephant herd and drink their blood for a month. The closest elephant herd was a 1/2 hour flight from his new chamber. The wildebeests had been convenient because they were so plentiful and close to both the new and the old caves. He had to try.

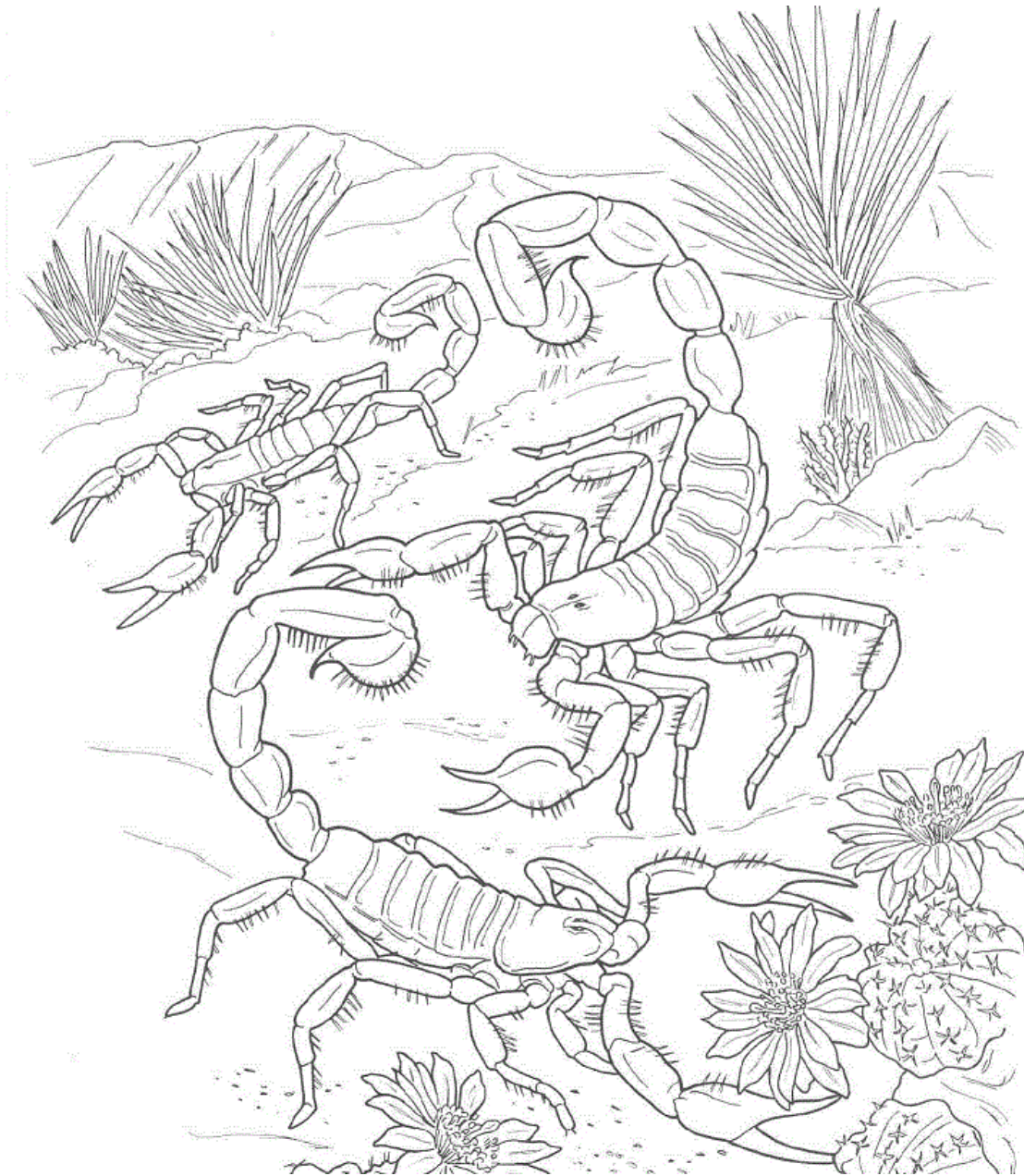
Sixta drank the elephant blood for a month, with no increase in size. Then he switched to the giraffes. The nearest giraffe herd was 45 minutes from his new chamber. He tried giraffes for a month and had actually gained a 1/2 pound in weight! Maybe that was the trick. He had to do so much flying back and forth though, that he burned a lot of calories that may have been adding body size. The giraffe blood had a weird taste. He switched to the hippo for a month. He lost weight and went back to his previous 10-pound size. Then he tried the rhino. The rhino blood was really foul tasting and he could barely stand drinking it for a month. He lost weight. He switched to the lion. The closest lions lived an hour away, which was really a hassle. After a month of drinking the lion's blood, he noticed no gain. The last animal to try was the tiger.

The nearest tigers lived in the jungle 2 hours away. It was a 4-hour roundtrip! Sixta reluctantly tried the tiger blood, which was the tarest tasting of all the new animals. He lost weight and reduced to 9 pounds. The long flying times were probably a factor. Sixta grew depressed. He went back to the wildebeests again. He gained weight back to his 10-pound bulk of before. At least the wildebeest blood had a pleasant flavor. It must be a result of what they ate. Whatever it was, at least he didn't lose any body size. The wildebeests were close and convenient. He had to stay with them for a while. It wasn't good enough! He wanted to keep getting bigger!

When Sixta went out to the wildebeest herd one evening, he saw a human! Sixta had heard other bats talking about humans while he was growing up. They were funny looking creatures with no fur. They walked on their back legs. Sixta wondered why humans didn't walk on all 4 of their legs like all the other animals. It seemed inefficient to only use the back legs. The human was trying to catch 1 of the wildebeests. The human threw a vine at the wildebeest's neck. The human then seem to have control of the animal. The human walked away with the wildebeest attached to the vine. Sixta flew over to the human and the wildebeest to get a closer look. Just to mess with the human, Sixta schemed to fly at the wildebeest and bite its neck while it was being towed by the human! As Sixta swooped in for a landing on the wildebeest, the human turned suddenly and Sixta accidentally bit the human's arm. Sixta tasted the blood of the human. It was delicious!

Maybe that was the avenue to pursue! Sixta attacked the human's neck and bit into it. The human tried to fight off Sixta, but couldn't. Sixta drank the blood. He liked it! Sixta drank the blood until the human fell to the ground.

33. Tristan's Sand



33. Tristan's Sand

Tristan awoke with the blinding sun in his face. Man, it was hot! He felt the skin on his face was burned and getting more burned as he continued to lay there. His arms, chest, legs and feet also felt burned. As he lay on his back, he looked down toward his feet and noticed that the only article of clothing he was wearing was underwear! No wonder he was getting so sunburned! Where was he anyway? He thought for a minute. He was at the blackjack table in Vegas and was winning big. He was up to \$101,000. It was the best day he ever had there. The guy playing next to him kept cheering each time he got a 21. That guy seemed like a nice enough fellow. The guy said he was from Reno. Tristan told him he was from Las Vegas, born and raised. Tristan thought the guy sounded like he was from Kentucky and was attempting to conceal his heavy Southern accent. Tristan didn't mind the minor deception. People do that sort of thing all the time for their own reasons.

Tristan had played for 3 successful hours and was on his way home, when the guy offered to buy him a nice steak dinner. The guy seemed friendly enough. They had been talking easily for 3 hours. Tristan felt he was a good enough judge of character to determine that he would be safe with the guy, so he took the guy's offer. Tristan cashed out and left with the guy. They had a nice dinner, for which the guy paid. Then the guy suggested they go to his friend's house where a real shindig of a party was going on, just inside the city limits. It sounded good to Tristan. At the party Tristan met the guy's friend who offered Tristan a drink. Tristan only wanted a Coke. The guy disappeared into the kitchen to get the Coke. Tristan remembered that there were tons of nice looking girls at the party, who seemed very friendly. The guy gave Tristan the opened can of Coke and he took a drink from it. That is all he could remember.

The next thing he knew, he was waking up in the desert! Tristan concluded that the guy had drugged the can of Coke. Something happened between the time he sipped the Coke and when he awoke in the desert. He lost his clothes, his money, his ID, everything. He had been robbed! They must have roughed him up a little, because his body ached all over. He still couldn't move. The sun was cooking him like a cat on a hot tin roof. He had to try to get up and get his bearings. He still had no idea where he was. After another 10 minutes of roasting there, Tristan managed to sit up. Then he got to his knees. Then he stood up. The sun was blinding. He shaded his squinting eyes with his hand and turned in a circle, trying to see something, anything. He saw nothing. The only thing he saw was the barely distinguishable tire tracks of probably a 4-wheel drive truck or jeep-type vehicle. The sand out there was deep and squishy. He didn't think a car would have made it way out there, wherever he was.

The wind was blowing but it didn't cool him off. Instead, it whipped the sand against his body. The windblown sand hurt like the dickens. The guy and the guy's friend robbed him and deposited him out in the middle of nowhere. At least they didn't kill or maim him. Tristan

supposed it could have been worse. He only lost some money and things. He had been robbed before of his winnings, not that way though. When he was robbed before, a guy pulled out a gun, asked for the money and moved on. The robber wasn't psychotic enough to throw him in the desert as casually as someone throws an empty soda can out a car window. Yeah, it could have been worse. He still had his health, not much more though. How was he supposed to get out of the pickle he was in? Man, was he thirsty! He needed something to drink in the worst way.

Tristan thought back to his Boy Scout training. He remembered something about constructing a device to collect water. First, dig a flat rectangular hole in the ground and place a container in the center. Then, drape a cloth or similar sheet-like thin, flat object over the hole. Hold down the corners of the sheet with rocks or other weights. Push down the center of the sheet so it is above the container in the hole. Each morning, the dew that results from the temperature changes drips into the container, creating drinkable water. Tristan had built a working device when he was in the scouts, but all the stuff was readily available. He didn't see anything out there. He became depressed. He started walking. He tried to shield his head as much as he could. He walked in an easterly direction with his back to the sun, which was arcing downward to the west. It was afternoon.

After an hour of the brutality, he finally spotted something. He came upon the remains of a deer. The skin was dry and intact with the fur still on it. The skull was intact. The carcass was totally dried out and mummified. He found a sharp rock and split the deer's hide down the belly. He had his sheet! Then he removed the skull. He had the container! He cracked a hole in the skull so the dew would be able to drip into the skull. He found a bunch of rocks for the corner weights. He used the antlers to dig the rectangular hole. Hmm, not bad, Tristan thought. His Boy Scout leader would have been proud! He assembled the water catching system and then looked around for something to eat, anything. There were no cacti or bushes. He squinted and looked close at the ground. Of course! The desert bulb! There was a particular species of plant that grew in the desert. The root of the plant grew in the shape of a bulb, like a potato.

He knelt down and carefully pulled the pale green plant from the sandy soil. Yes! It was the desert bulb! He immediately bit into the bulb and when the piece of bulb touched his tongue, he spat it out. It was super sour! He remembered that the bulbs were ok to eat. They were just sour. He tried to bite the bulb again, a smaller piece. Wow! It was so sour! He tried to swallow it. He waited a few seconds. He felt his stomach not liking the bulb and he barfed. He took another bite and swallowed it. That time it stayed down. He would have to get over the sourness of the bulb. It was a psychological thing that his body was trying to reject the foreign plant matter. Soon, he was eating more and more bulbs with no problem. The bulbs seemed to be growing all over the place.

He was able to dig up 78 of them. He ate 14 and saved the rest for later. He was hopeful that the

bulbs would provide his body with much needed moisture for his survival in that desert. The only thing about the sourness of the bulbs was that they made him really thirsty. His mouth watered each time he took a bite. It was like eating lemons! He would have to wait for the water contraption to hopefully give him his first drink of water. As night fell, it got cold. Tristan couldn't believe the contrast in temperatures between day and night. Normally when living in Vegas, it was always possible to get comfortable via air conditioning in a building or vehicle. Out there, Tristan had neither. He dug a large hole with the antlers, lay down in it and covered himself with the sand. In the morning, he would try to figure something out.

When he awoke, the sun was shining. He didn't know where he was. It was hot. He was adding sunburn to his sunburn. Oh yeah! He thought. Oh no! I'm still in the desert! He had hoped he was just dreaming. No, it was no dream. He was in a hole in the ground in the desert. The water! He jumped up from the hole and trotted to the water contraption. It worked! When he carefully lifted the deer hide from the hole, he saw the gleam of the water in the skull. Yes! He didn't know why he was so excited. He was about to drink water from an old, rotten, dried-out deer skull! At least it was water. He lifted the skull to his nose and sniffed it. Hmm, not bad smelling. The skull was totally dry and devoid of any brain matter. He took a sip. Well, all he could say about it was that it was water. It definitely had a funny taste, but it was water.

Tristan decided to save some of the water for when he ate the sour desert bulbs. That way, he would have something to counter the extreme sourness of the bulbs. He tightly corked the hole in the skull with 1 of the bulbs to prevent spillage. Tristan took the sharp rock that he used to split the deer hide and cut 2 strips of the hide to use as foot coverings. He removed just enough of the main hide to allow enough for the shoes to be tied securely around his feet and ankles. When he walked during the day, he could use the main piece of hide to cover his head and body from the sun. Things were looking up! At night when he didn't need sun protection, the deer hide resumed water collection duty.

Assuming the robbers had deposited him in the desert near Las Vegas, Tristan figured he would walk in a westerly direction and eventually hit California. Tristan had underestimated the deviance of his robbers. They had actually driven south from Vegas and dropped him off in the middle of the Mohave Desert! He was 60 miles from any civilization in each direction! If he walked 12 hours per day at a pace of 1 mph, with luck he could reach help in 5 days. Tristan was only walking at a pace of 1/2 mph. He was at least 10 days from anywhere! The deer hide he was using to cover himself during daytime walking was still wet from the water creation process. The hide was becoming rehydrated and was starting to stink. Tristan didn't notice the smell because his nose had adapted to it and dulled the smell of it. The flock of buzzards that was 20 miles away had caught a whiff of the hide.

It was part of a buzzard's physiology to have a keen sense of smell to be able to detect rotting

animals a long way off. The survival of buzzards in a desert environment was dependant on their noses. As Tristan walked, he pondered his fate. The buzzards were closing in. Tristan realized the water he collected might not be enough on which to survive. He ate all the bulbs he could find and finished the other half of the skull of water, but he was still thirsty. He had falsely hoped the bulbs would provide his body with more moisture than they apparently did. He was beginning to weaken. After a couple of days of walking and drinking the limited water, he was becoming dizzy. He was protecting himself from the sun, but the heat was tremendous. He was accustomed to the heat of Nevada, but he was never outside for 24 hours a day. He felt himself withering.

The flock of buzzards spotted Tristan and descended to see what was creating the succulent smell. Tristan heard a flapping of many wings and looked up to the sky. The buzzards landed. Tristan looked around and saw big ugly birds everywhere. He had seen buzzards feeding on road kill before. He had never seen the birds up close. They were hideous! Were they after him? He always thought buzzards only ate dead bodies. Why were they looking at him with that hunger lust in their eyes? There must have been 2 dozen of the birds surrounding him. Why were they looking at him? He wasn't dead yet. Did those birds know something that he didn't? Did he smell dead to them? Tristan was unaware that his stinky sun cape was what had attracted the birds. Tristan had found an old gnarled tree trunk the day before that he had been using as a walking stick of sorts. The trunk wasn't straight by any means, but it steadied him a little against the hot heavy wind that seemed to constantly blow.

Tristan swung the stick at the buzzards that had been moving closer and closer to him. He had to do something to keep the beasts at a distance. They were getting too close for comfort. Tristan kept walking as he swatted at the buzzards. He wondered what he was going to do when he stopped walking to go to sleep at night. Would the ugly birds still be bothering him? Tristan walked and walked with the buzzards keeping him company. Eventually, more buzzards arrived. It was hard for Tristan to get an accurate count because they were constantly bouncing around him the way those buzzards bounced. They didn't walk. They hopped and bounced. It would have been funny to Tristan in any other circumstances. At the time, it wasn't. As he had the previous couple of days, he walked until it got dark and stopped. The buzzards stopped and their circle tightened. They got closer. Tristan kept swinging the stick.

He realized he wouldn't be able to keep it up all night. As it grew darker, he began to set up his water collection system. He dug the rectangular hole and placed the skull in the center. As soon as he removed the deer hide to lay it down over the hole, the buzzards moved in for the attack. One of the buzzards grabbed the deer hide and tried to hop away with it. Other buzzards immediately followed the buzzard that was dragging the hide. Soon, all the buzzards were hopping and bouncing after the buzzard that was dragging the hide. Tristan laughed. "So that's what they were after!" he thought. He was glad that it wasn't him they were after. Tristan heaved

a big sigh of relief. "Whew!" he said. He felt relieved. Then he realized that they were stealing part of his water machine and his only covering against the sun! "Wait!" he screamed. The buzzards didn't listen.

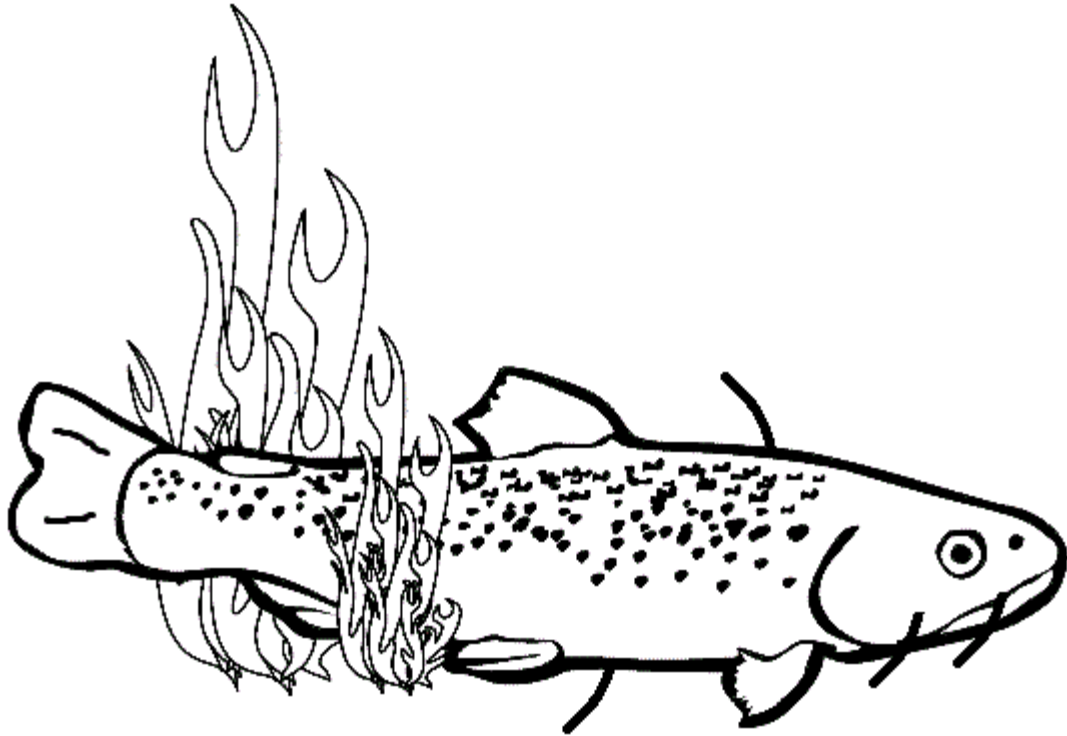
In the near darkness, he ran after them. He caught up to the one that was dragging the deer hide and beat it with the stick. He had to hit it 3 times before it dropped the hide. Then, another buzzard grabbed the hide and started bouncing and hopping away with it! Tristan ran to that buzzard and hit it until it dropped the hide. He kept hitting it. Tristan put his foot on the hide to keep any other buzzards from grabbing it and running away with it. He kept beating the buzzard until it appeared to be dead. Luckily, the stick was sturdy enough to withstand the stress he put on it. Upon seeing one of their kind apparently bite the dust, the buzzards backed off, but continued bouncing and hopping around. The buzzards regrouped. In Tristan, they saw an aggressor. They had thought that he would be an easy victim, but he wasn't. Tristan was weak from lack of water, but his survival instincts buoyed him. He couldn't allow the buzzards to take away his only possession by taking that deer hide.

He was weak and a little lightheaded, but he had enough and swung the stick at the buzzards. The buzzards dropped like flies. As the unhit buzzards realized what was happening, they moved in to eat the dead buzzards. Tristan kept hitting home runs and the buzzards kept falling. Some buzzards were knocked down as they were eating a dead one. Tristan was crazed. He wasn't going to be happy until they were all dead. He kept knocking the buzzards down in spite of his dizziness. Tristan was crying and screaming. He was insane. He kept swinging at the buzzards. They squawked and squeaked until there was no more squawking. Tristan had killed all the buzzards. He passed out. When Tristan awoke, the sun was blazing in his face. It was hot. He looked around him and saw piles of dead birds. It was about noon. The stink of the dead birds was unreal. Tristan had never smelled anything so horrendous.

He barfed and passed out again. When he awoke 5 minutes later, he barfed again. He had to regain his composure. He had exhausted all the remaining energy he had in his body when he went on the buzzard-killing rampage. He was exhausted. He was hungry. He tore into the closest buzzard with the sharp rock and ate the breast meat. Then he ate another and another. He counted 45 dead buzzards. He took his sharp rock and carved out all the breast meat and leg meat from the buzzards. Then he spread the meat out on the sand to dry. He would make himself a nice supply of buzzard jerky! He felt himself becoming energized. He didn't realize how much he had been missing meat! After removing the meat, he cleaned out the skins of the buzzards and made buzzard skin bags in which to carry the jerky.

Tristan gathered his heavy, clumsy load of food and resumed walking. It was difficult to watch where he was walking with the bags of jerky hanging off his back. He finally began gaining some momentum when he tripped and fell into the nest of scorpions.

34. Yute's River



34. Yute's River

The Amazon River had loads of animals living in it, some big, some small. The ones that were small prospered in their high numbers. Some of the animals that were big were really big, requiring a large intake of food. The food for the big ones was supplied by the high numbers of the small ones. Nature had a way of balancing everything out. Without excessive interference by man, nature's machine was capable of operating perfectly. Even when man stepped in, say, to obtain some fish to feed his hungry family or to trade at the daily market, the system stayed in balance. As long as the rivers weren't over-fished, the big fish survived. Due to their higher need of calories, sometimes the big fish suffered losses in their numbers. When the small fish refused to cooperate by breeding for whatever reason, the big fish didn't always get enough to eat.

Yute always got enough to eat. Some of the catfish in the Amazon were like small whales. The river had so much water in it and so many hiding places, it was possible for fish to survive for decades and grow to enormous size. Many fish stories were told at the fish markets each morning where the local fishermen traded their catch. The subject of the majority of the stories was the gigantic catfish. One guy would say he saw one swimming that was bigger than his boat. Another guy would say he had one on the line, but the line snapped. Some guys claimed to have hauled one of the giants halfway into their boat when the fish slipped back into the water, being too heavy to pull all the way into the boat. With all the stories of the claimed sightings, none of the guys was ever able to produce one of the fish.

Everybody seemed to agree that the fish were there. The fish were just too big to catch. Claims of catfish 10-12 feet long were common. The fishermen estimate that there were catfish weighing 1,000 pounds swimming in the Amazon. Some of the older guys always had the best stories. One guy, who still fished at 81 years old, told a story of a catfish that he was pulling into his boat that suddenly leaped and tried to swallow him whole. The man said he was halfway into the fish when his screams were finally heard by a passing fisherman who saved him. Of course, the passing fisherman wasn't currently alive to corroborate his story. Some believed the story. Some didn't. The men who believed the story wanted to believe it because of the mystique of the giant catfish. Catfish were mysterious. The bigger ones rarely jumped out of the water, simply because they were too big to launch their bodies. Occasionally a large one was seen at the surface momentarily. They seemed to tease the fishermen. The biggest catfish were never seen.

The monster catfish always found a nice tributary and stayed there. The fishermen typically fished the main branches of the Amazon, because of the ease of transportation. They could catch fish and ferry the fish to the market or back home in the same body of water. It was the most common means of fishing. Because of the practice, the biggest fish had been fished out of the main branches. The big ones had to find less traveled water to live and hide in or be caught, or almost be caught as the many stories told. Yute had found his tributary long before. He was very

happy there. He never saw any fishermen. He always got plenty to eat. He had found his water by accident. He had been living in the main branch for the first year of his life contentedly, until the big rains hit. That year it rained and rained. The residents had never seen so much rain. Everything was getting flooded. The Amazon was at its highest level in decades. Yute had been swimming along the main branch as usual when the river surged and carried him against his will. He ended up miles away from the main branch. When the waters receded days later, he found himself in a much smaller tributary, more of a stream. The stream was tremendously deep. He liked it better.

The smaller fish were more abundant in the deep water. Yute had more food available to him than he ever imagined was possible. The stream was full of fish. The depth of the stream provided more underwater hiding places for the smaller fish to breed and hide in. All Yute had to do was swim around in the stream with his large mouth open like some whales do, and the fish just swam right in. Yute's stream was just the right place for a catfish to grow huge. It was off the beaten path. No fishermen frequented it, due to its inconvenience factor. The ecosystem provided the correct balance required by the smaller fish to thrive. The stream's origin was many miles inland. Numerous springs fed into the stream, which poured gallons of clean fresh water into it. Nature had placed Yute in the best possible location for a 1,000 pound 12-foot long catfish to grow and be happy. Yute lived in his stream for many years, unseen by man.

Brador had learned to fish from his father. The boy was only 11, but he was more knowledgeable about fishing than many of the men-folk of the village. He fished with his father each day and obediently did whatever his father said, out of respect for his elders. The village people were strict about elderly respect. Everyone got along with everyone else as long as neighbors truly loved each other, not just say they did. The phrase "Love thy Neighbor," didn't make sense unless it was practiced. Brador was very industrious. He had to be because his 3 siblings were all girls, who contributed nothing to the daily fishing ritual. Fishing was everything to the village people. The industry provided food and barter capital. There was no system of money. Goods were purchased with goods. If a villager had no goods with which to trade, he starved. Nearly all the villagers worked in one way or another. The villagers who owned land raised crops for barter purposes.

Brador was more than industrious enough for his own family. He was so much of a go-getter that he wanted more. He didn't know how to get it though. Brador's grandfather Ardith was the 81-year old storytelling fisherman whose tales everyone knew and enjoyed. After the long morning of fishing, Brador's father allowed him to hang out with Ardith. Brador loved listening to Ardith's fish stories. Brador seemed to be the only listener who believed the stories. Ardith claimed the best way to catch a really big catfish was to fish in one of the side shoots of the river. The other fishermen always dismissed the claim. The fishermen felt there couldn't be enough nourishment in the side streams to support the small fish that the big fish required to survive.

When the fishermen boated up and down the main branch of the Amazon, all they had to do was glance down one of the tributaries to see how overgrown and probably shallow they were. No one would waste time going down one of those streams to likely find nothing.

The water of the side streams always looked brackish and oxygen-poor. Clear, oxygen-rich water was necessary for fish survival. Yute's stream was perfect for fish survival. His stream immediately angled off the river's main branch. It was impossible for a passing fisherman to cast an eye down the stream. From the river, Yute's stream appeared to be a small creek, overgrown with jungle. There couldn't possibly be any fish in it, maybe snakes and turtles at best. The geography of the area is what made Yute's stream untouched by man. The village fishermen needed guaranteed fishing waters each day to maintain their minimal existences. It was difficult enough to fish the main branch of the river for many hours, 7 days a week. There was no time to be wasted fishing in the likely unproductive streams.

Brador listened intently as Ardith told his stories. Brador wondered if there were still some monster catfish out there somewhere. Where would they be? Was his grandfather correct or just trying to impress everybody with his alleged fishing prowess? Brador asked his father about Ardith's stories. Brador's father couldn't remember Ardith ever bringing home any 1,000-pound catfish. Brador's father didn't outright say Ardith was lying about the fish. Brador's father just couldn't remember seeing any enormous catfish. The average size of a catfish caught daily was about 30 pounds. Sometimes a guy would bring in a 100-pounder. Once per month or so, someone would catch a 200-pounder. The giant catfish of all the stories were all either gone or just stories. Brador was intrigued. Was there something to the stories or not?

Yute continued his life as if he lived in a bubble. Sometimes he swam upstream as far as he could go to see what was there. The stream still had good depth for miles. It was a perfect environment to conceal his gigantic body. He gingerly swam along inhaling fish as he went. Toward the source, the stream began to get shallower. He didn't want to swim in too shallow of a water to avoid bottoming out and to avoid the warmth of the water. He had grown accustomed to the coolness of the deeper water. He turned around and swam downstream to the deeper cooler water again. Yute never considered going back into the main branch of the river. He loved the privacy of his stream. He felt his stream was unique by being fed by so many fresh cool springs. The water of his stream was even fragrant.

Yute felt the best place to be in his stream was the 2-mile stretch near the connection to the main branch. Fish swam out of the main branch into the side streams seeking slower currents. The activity provided Yute with a constant supply of fresh fish. Yute didn't want to exhaust the fish supply of any one section of the stream. Even though he preferred that 2-mile piece, he still swam upstream to feed. He needed to eat so many fish each day that he had to spread out his feeding. His 1/2 ton bulk needed the approximate daily intake of at least 100 pounds of fish to

maintain. Yute was still growing. As big as he was, he was still getting longer, thicker and heavier in weight. It wouldn't be long before he was 15 feet long and 1,300 pounds. He was glad that no people knew where he was, because life would become a hassle. He didn't want to leave that stream, but if he were discovered, he would have to. He vowed to never be caught by the villagers. He felt it was somehow his destiny to be placed in that stream by the storm. He was meant to be there to grow bigger and bigger. Nature would protect him.

Brador was getting restless. The more he listened to Ardith, the more he wanted to investigate the possibility of the existence of a giant catfish in the area. He had no means to do it however. He was just a young man trapped in a day-to-day life. He had no way to go off boating on his own. The river was large and dangerous, only navigated by experienced boatmen. His father would never entertain any foolish wanderings to look for a non-existent fish. Brador's father forbade him to do anything stupid. Brador was the 2nd man of the family. The family relied on Brador to learn and be ready to take the fishing reins from his father. That is the way life was around there. There were no choices of what to do. There was only fishing for the majority of the villagers. Few people owned the expensive land to engage in agriculture. Farming was more difficult than fishing. Many more risks were involved. Some farmers experienced heavy losses at times due to a host of unpredictable weather factors.

Brador was born a fisherman and would always be one. He would fish the way his father told him to fish and that was final. Brador fully realized his importance to his family and would of course do nothing to change his role. He was itching to catch a big fish or at least prove there was such a thing. It was difficult for a young man with an active imagination to listen to so many men tell stories about something that supposedly didn't exist. Big catfish must have been in the river at one time. Maybe they were all caught a long time ago. Maybe they died of old age. Maybe the fishermen saw and caught the giants, but were always unable to bring them into the boats. That must be what happened. The fish did in fact exist. They were seen and caught but were too big. The only proof of the gigantic catfish was the stories. It was up to the listeners to believe the stories or not.

The rains started falling, lightly at first. It rained almost everyday in the Amazon River basin. Some days it rained a lot. Some days it rained a little. The people were accustomed to the rain. The rain was the lifeblood of the river world. Without rain somewhere, there could be no bodies of water. Then the rains got heavy. It rained continuously. The fishermen had to fish in the pouring rain. It rained so hard that the boats had to be baled to prevent sinking. The farm fields were flooded and the crops were all ruined. That was one of the hazards of farming. The fishermen struggled. The monsoon-like rains eroded tons of soil into the river, making the river cloudy. Fishing was always more difficult when the water was cloudy. The fish couldn't see the bait. It rained for days.

Yute's stream became cloudy, making it more difficult for him to eat. A catfish's feelers on the side of its face helped it to find the fish. The water tasted muddy when he swallowed a fish down. He hated when it rained so hard. It was really noisy on the surface of the water. He found it difficult to get much sleep. So many fish were pouring into his side stream from the main branch that the 2-mile stretch at the connection was full of fish. He was able to gorge for a while at the connection, and then when he was full and drowsy, he swam upstream to sleep in a deep pocket under a log.

The rain kept falling. It was a real storm. Brador's family was worried about the reduced fish take from fishing. They were unable to trade for all the supplementary foodstuffs, necessary for proper diet. It rained for weeks. There seemed to be no end in sight. After a meager day of fishing, Brador asked his father if he could take a walk with Ardith. His father approved. Brador took his fishing pole and bait with him. Ardith asked what the fishing pole was for and Brador said it was just for fun. Ardith and Brador followed the river upstream on a muddy trail that led to the next village. Ardith related his theory of the biggest catfish living in the side streams. Brador wanted to believe the story. Brador wanted to see one of those monsters. After a 1/2 hour of walking in the rain, the 2 reached Yute's stream. Ardith pointed to the stream, explaining how it was the type of stream that the big ones live in. It seemed logical to Brador.

They walked into the jungle along the stream bank. It was pouring rain. Brador baited the hook and cast the line into Yute's stream. Brador had baited the hook with a baby piranha. Yute had been in the area snacking on the fish that were swimming in from the main branch. Then he saw the baby piranha sink in front of him. He had never seen a fish like that in his stream. The piranha emitted an unusual flavor into the water. It smelled good to Yute. He sucked it in. Brador and Ardith had been intently watching the surface of the water where the line went in. Brador saw the line twitch on the surface of the water. Then he felt a tug on the line. Then he felt another tug. Ardith screamed, "Now!" Brador yanked the fishing pole to tighten the line and set the hook. Yute felt the piranha slip out of his throat and then get caught on his lower lip.

Alarmed, Yute turned upstream and started swimming at a rapid rate to loosen whatever was caught in his lip. He couldn't loosen it. Brador shrieked, "I got one!" Ardith said, "I told ya boy! Don't lose 'em. Loosen the bail!" Brador listened to his grandfather. Yute swam like a torpedo. Brador held onto the fishing pole with all his might. The line was flying out of the reel faster than he had ever seen. "It's a big one!" said Ardith. "Yeah! It's gonna take all the line!" said Brador. "Follow 'em!" said Ardith. "Ok!" said Brador. They ran upstream along the bank in the pouring rain. Brador reeled in the line as they ran. Yute swam faster. The line kept flying out of the reel. Brador and Ardith couldn't run fast enough to keep up with Yute. "It's gonna get off!" cried Brador. "Keep runnin' Brador!" Ardith had to stop running. He was out of breath. "Ok!" panted Brador. Yute swam faster and faster upstream. Brador couldn't keep up. The stream began to get shallow. Yute had to slow down. Brador started to catch up.

35. Zoomo's Feet



35. Zoomo's Feet

Zoomo loved being a clown. He was really good at making balloon animals. In Clown College, he had won many awards for it. He had a way of twisting, stretching and pinching the balloons, so that he could create any shape. He was the only clown at the college who could create square corners. His most creative designs were the skyscrapers. The kids really loved those. When Zoomo worked at parties, his Empire State Building balloon sculpture was always a big hit.

Zoomo's feet were his only issue in life, due to their size. Zoomo had been born with average-sized feet, but as he grew, they became larger and longer, out of proportion to the rest of his body. He realized early on that he would have to come up with a way to live with those feet without too many hassles. That is when he got the idea to become a clown. Clowns make good money, they make people happy and he would have a way to conceal his feet.

Since most clowns wore those enormous clown shoes as part of their costumes, Zoomo's would be able to hide his giant feet inside the giant shoes. As a clown, Zoomo would have a profession at which he could make money and not worry about people always asking him questions about his feet. The problem was that the kids at the parties always wanted to stomp the feet of the clowns. It was something that kids had always done to clowns through the years and the clowns had gotten used to it. The only problem was that when the kids stomped Zoomo's clown shoes, they stomped on his feet, which was an obvious aggravation. Early on, Zoomo had gone to a shoe cobbler who had made his special clown shoes with steel toes and tops. The shoes protected his feet very well. They were a little heavy and clumsy to walk around in, but he had gotten used to wearing them.

When Zoomo had initially decided to become a clown to hide his feet, he didn't realize how it was actually the best decision he could have made. Being a good clown is like being a good doctor, in that both clowns and doctors really have to like what they are doing to be good at it. Kids at parties can always tell if a clown is being a clown just as a job or if the clown really loves doing it. Kids are very intuitive like that. It's the same with doctors. The best doctors appear to really care about their patients and it shows. Zoomo loved being a clown and the kids loved him. Part of the "Clown's Creed" that clowns learn in Clown College is the line, "Love it or leave it." It is a very bold statement. If a clown didn't completely commit to being a clown and truly love the profession, they should stop doing it. The phrase was constantly instilled in the prospective clowns every day while in college. It was the most important part of the training. The college had a reputation to protect.

The clown trainees had to wear full clown makeup and costume when in public. Each day in college, the clown trainees were followed around by was called an "enforcer clown" who would yell at them, "Do you love it? Do you love it?" The only acceptable response by the trainee had to be, "Yes, I love it!" If the trainee failed to give the correct response, they were slapped across

the face with a rubber chicken. Being slapped always caused their fake red noses to come flying off. The trainees then had the embarrassing task of trying to find the fake red nose that had been smacked across the room if they were indoors. If the trainee happened to be outside on the sidewalk when the fake nose was slapped, it sometimes landed in the grass, making it difficult to find. The "enforcer clowns" were all over the college campus. They hid behind trees, in the cafeteria and in the hallways. They hid everywhere. Sometimes they hid in the lockers of the trainees and would leap out of the locker screaming the phrase.

Most of the trainees learned to give the correct response in a short time. Some trainees realized that they didn't actually love the concept of being a clown after all, and would quit the college. The dean of the college was always sad when someone would quit, because the dean firmly believed in the concept of clowns and the importance of the pure humor that clowns bring to the world. Clowns were always the life of any party and could make any party better. Clowns were happy, goofy and full of fun. They were animated, colorful and constantly trying to please. Who didn't love a clown? Those were the aspects of clowning that the dean lived by. The dean was proud of the popular expressions that had been created at the college: "Stop clowning around! Don't be such a clown! You clown!"

Bronze statues of the 2 greatest clowns of all-time had been erected in the college courtyard. Bozo and Ronald McDonald were cherished entities and worshipped at the college as if they were religious figures. Each day at 5:00 pm, when the flag was lowered at the courtyard, all the clown trainees had to report in full costume to salute the flag. The clowns in attendance played their kazoos and saluted until the flag was down. The trainees actually had a ball at the college, constantly playing tricks on one another. They honed their skills of juggling, joke-telling, balloon making and makeup applying. Once graduated, the trainees could then be officially called clowns. What the clowns did with their diplomas was up to them. Most of the clowns immediately went to work.

Zoomo couldn't wait to get started clowning after graduating 2nd in his class of 295 clown trainees. He had his diploma and proudly displayed it in his apartment. The college provided a placement service for the graduating clowns, which involved helping to get the clowns gigs as soon as possible. The final and most important part of the clown training was the first party for kids. Once a clown had survived that first party, it was all downhill after that. The first party was the biggest challenge in the lifetime of a clown. The first party would definitely make the clown, but never break them. Any clown who successfully graduated from the college, was a solid clown. Clowning had to have been in people before they even entered the college, or else they wouldn't have been able to graduate. The dean of the college closely scrutinized the trainees while they were at the college to ensure their pureness. Only a true clown could graduate from the college. The dean would have it no other way. The dean could always tell if someone was pretending. After 45 years of being the dean, he became almost able to see into the minds of the

trainees.

Zoomo was a pure clown and had been born a clown. He was always a jokester growing up. He was the best at remembering and telling jokes. He could remember every joke that was ever told to him. He was a natural juggler. He was so good at juggling that he could juggle children if the parents would let him. Zoomo's first party was for a kid's 4th birthday party. The kid's parents had wanted to hire a clown to add that old school humor and fun to the party. The kid's father had always liked clowns. Zoomo brought a large supply of balloons, kazoos, funny horn, squirting flower and other items. When Zoomo arrived at the party, the birthday kid ran up to him and stomped on Zoomo's clown shoe. Zoomo pretended that it hurt and said, "Ow!" The kid laughed and ran back to the party. Zoomo chuckled to himself.

Zoomo had always been a fast runner, even with his big feet. His first act was to start running around the yard in a big circle, while playing his kazoo and squeezing his funny horn. Soon all the kids were following him. Zoomo looked hilarious running with his big feet. They looked liked flippers! The adults were surprised at how fast he could run with those big clown shoes on. Around and around the yard they ran, until the kids began to get tired. Zoomo then proceeded to the main party area and began making balloons. He had been practicing blowing up the balloons for a week before he went to the party. A real clown didn't use an air tank to inflate the balloons. A real clown had to inflate the balloons by blowing them up by mouth. It looked funnier that way. Zoomo was a tall guy with big lungs and was able to inflate the balloons with 1 breath of air, which was no easy feat.

The adults were surprised at Zoomo's lungpower, even the birthday kid's father who had been a lifeguard. Zoomo's first balloon creation was an almost exact replica of the birthday kid's face. The kids and adults were amazed at the sight of the sculpture. Zoomo then created balloon sculptures of the faces of each kid at the party. The guardians of each kid posed for pictures with each kid standing next to their balloon faces. It was impressive. Zoomo had brought a boom box to the party that he had set up in the main area. He was able to control the device with the remote control in his clown costume. On the boom box, he had an assortment of music to play during his various acts. He choreographed his performance to the music on the boom box. After creating each balloon sculpture, Zoomo did a gymnastic tumbling act around the yard. He did that backward tumbling that was always so fascinating. He had his boom box music playing as he tumbled. The party attendants cheered each time.

Zoomo was a huge hit! While creating the balloon sculptures, he told jokes. He was continuously entertaining. He was in his element. He loved it. He was so glad that he decided to go to the college and get all the training. While at the party, he began to understand why the college training had emphasized certain things. Zoomo ran to the huge aboveground pool and climbed the aluminum stairs up to the long aluminum pool deck. He got a good running start,

jumped into the pool and surfed on the water on his clown shoes across the pool! When he reached the edge of the pool, he jumped out onto the lawn, ran back up to the deck and did it again! No one at the pool had ever seen that done before. It was only because of Zoomo's huge feet that he was able to perform the stunt. Another trick that Zoomo had been working on was his ballet. Zoomo activated the boom box that had started playing classical ballet music. He threw his hands up over his head like a ballerina and started doing ballet while standing on the tips of his clown feet! It was so funny that the adults became hysterical with laughter. The kids screamed approval.

No one could understand how he was able to stand on the tips of those clown shoes like that. They thought that the shoes must have been specially reinforced or something. Of course, only Zoomo knew the secret was that his feet extended the full length of the shoes to the tips. Since the shoes were already steel toed, steel topped and padded inside, it didn't hurt his toes at all. It was still a little uncomfortable on his calf muscles. Zoomo respected those ballet dancers who could stand on their toes the way they did without wearing specially reinforced shoes like his. After the ballet number, Zoomo clicked off the music. Everyone at the party roared with laughter, cheers and applause. Zoomo took a bow, blowing the funny horn.

Then, Zoomo started juggling. He began with the standard Indian club-type objects that all jugglers start with. They were really just a variation of bowling pins. He juggled 3, then 4 and 5 to everyone's delight. He started taking requests from the partygoers for objects to juggle. Zoomo claimed he could juggle anything. He instructed the adults and kids to toss objects to him while he was juggling. He would then drop 1 object and substitute the object thrown to him. When done properly, the act was guaranteed to impress anyone. First, someone tossed a football, which he easily incorporated into the juggled objects. Then, someone tossed a tennis racket, which added a little bit of difficulty. The birthday kid then somehow launched a folded up lawn chair with the help of a friend. The crowd gasped at the sight of the chair. Zoomo chuckled, handily accepted the chair and successfully juggled it with the other objects. Since the birthday gifts hadn't been opened yet, the birthday kid and his uncle tossed the largest wrapped gift to Zoomo.

The gift was a large box containing a fully assembled bicycle! It was a challenge, but Zoomo managed it. The crowd chanted, "Zoomo! Zoomo! Zoomo!" The birthday kid's father and father's friend excitedly ran to the Weber charcoal grill. They hadn't yet fired up the charcoal grill, so it was still cool. They hoisted the grill, brought it the clown and tossed it. Zoomo caught the charcoal grill, juggled it with the lawn chair and boxed bicycle for a while, then instructed the men of the party to pick up the picnic table! The men all looked at each other and laughed. They cleared the picnic table of everything, putting the contents onto 2 smaller folding tables that were brought from the house. Four of the men picked up the table and were barely able to throw it through the air to the clown. Zoomo dropped the lawn chair, caught the picnic

table and successfully juggled it together with the boxed bicycle and charcoal grill! After a few seconds, he carefully dropped the table, then the grill and finally the boxed bicycle.

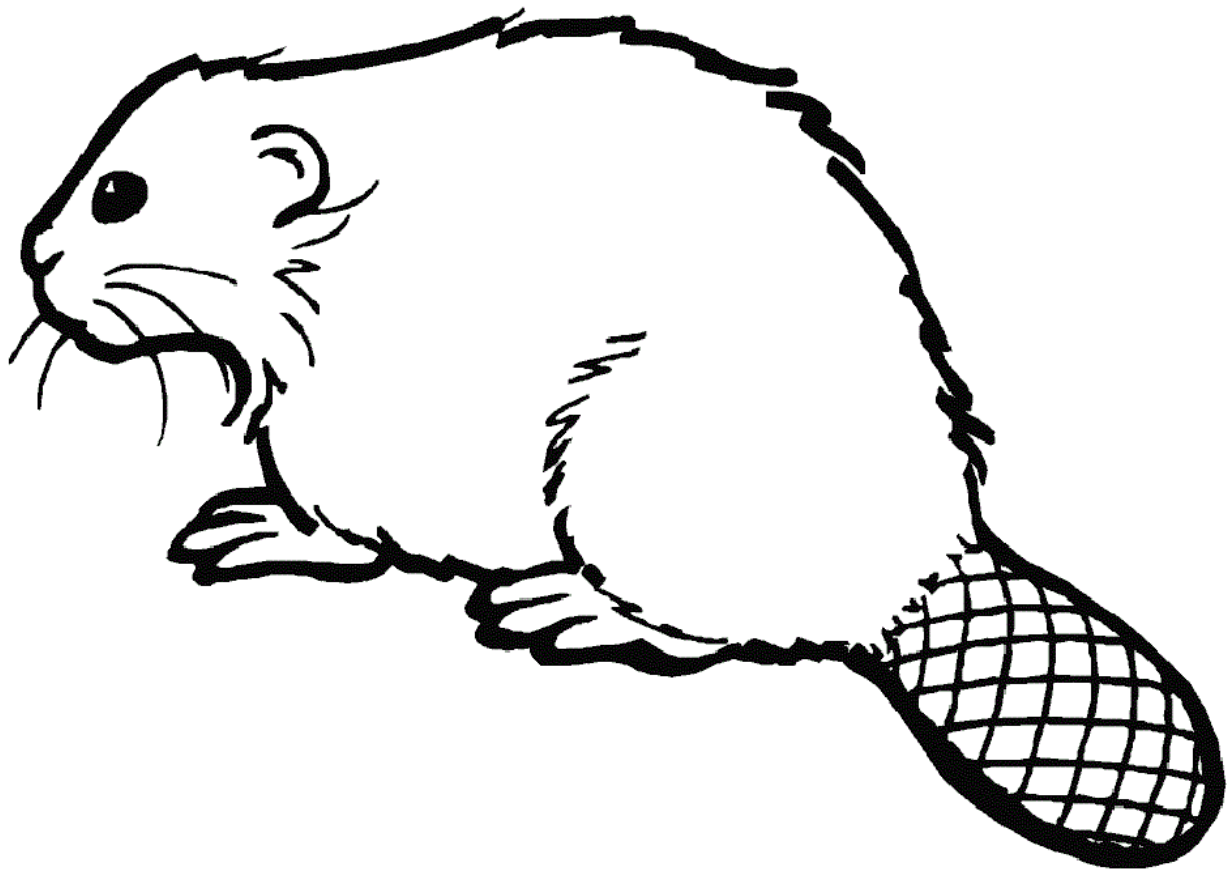
The crowd screamed approval. The birthday kid's parents were glad that they hired a videographer to record a video of the party. Zoomo's show was of such high quality that it was similar to a show at Las Vegas. For Zoomo's next act, he had to get permission from the parents of the birthday kid. Zoomo had assured the parents that he was a certified clown and had graduated with a diploma from Clown College. Part of his training involved the use of various fire tricks, including spitting flames, juggling burning objects, etc. After seeing Zoomo's show up to that point, the parents were so impressed at Zoomo's professionalism, that they approved his request for the fire act. Zoomo produced a legal document that the parents had to sign, which released Zoomo of all responsibility if something went wrong during the fire act. The fact that Zoomo was a certified clown relaxed the parents as they signed the document. Zoomo assured the parents that he would perform his act away from everything, out in the open.

Zoomo decided to go one step further by performing his fire act while standing in the middle of the pool. The pool was far enough away from the house that nothing could possibly happen. Zoomo brought his pyro kit to the pool deck and started the act. He climbed into the pool with the first objects to light on fire, the Indian clubs with which he started the juggling act before. Everyone was gathered to watch a safe distance from the pool. Zoomo lit the clubs on fire and juggled them, then spat flames in the air, while juggling. It was spectacular! The kids and adults loved it! Zoomo could do it all! The kids began cheering again, "Zoomo! Zoomo! Zoomo!" He retrieved a set of specially modified chainsaws from his pyro kit. Zoomo started the chainsaws and began juggling them. They appeared and sounded like real chainsaws, but with a trick. When the chain revolved around the bar of the chainsaw, the chain picked up lighter fluid from a reservoir and ignited. The chainsaws then shot flames as they were juggled! The crowd loved it!

How did he come up with such great ideas? When Zoomo was still at Clown College, he spent many hours at the library reading up on the history of clowns. Many clowns over the previous decades had devised dazzling tricks for entertaining at their shows. Zoomo had researched what he thought were the best tricks and wanted to use them as part of his show. Zoomo had consulted with the dean of the college on many occasions, since the dean's door was always open to the clown trainees. Zoomo asked the dean if he had used any special tricks in his previous days as a practicing clown. The dean revealed to Zoomo the flaming chainsaw act, which was the dean's best act in his clown days. Zoomo thanked the dean for his help and vowed to use the flaming chainsaw act as carefully and correctly as he could.

Out of nowhere on that hot summer day, a gust of wind from the approaching thunderstorm blew flaming lighter fluid from one of the chainsaws onto Zoomo's head and his orange clown hair went up in flames.

36. Afton's Dam



36. Afton's Dam

Afton was one dam building fool. It was all he thought about day and night. He barely slept at night, anxious to get back to the latest dam. Most beavers built dams for a reason. Afton built dams for the challenge. From the first day that he had helped his parents build that small dam across the creek 3 years ago, he had loved every minute of it. He had moved onto larger creeks and streams to build his dams. The fun in building a dam for Afton was the technique of doing it. It took a lot of planning, skill and material to build a dam. Building a large dam was a major effort, requiring the labor of many beavers. Most beavers were content building a small dam in a creek to create a small pond. Afton preferred to dam larger and larger streams that resulted in more substantial ponds in which to live.

Once the dam was built, it had to be maintained. Afton didn't really concern himself with the upkeep of the dam. He really just wanted to build the dam and move on to a new beaver colony and convince them to build a larger dam under his leadership. Afton had gotten so skillful at building dams that the dams rarely leaked and never collapsed. The dam repairs to Afton's dams were usually minor. Afton had earned a reputation among the beavers in the area as the best dam builder around. Some beaver colonies couldn't wait for him to arrive to have him supervise the dam building show.

Afton didn't care much for glory. He just wanted to build dams. He had a hard time convincing each new colony to build big dams. No one believed big dams could be built across the larger streams and certainly not across the rivers. Afton had many ideas for constructing dams. With each dam building project that he supervised, he learned something new to apply to the next dam. He was constantly perfecting his craft. The main concept he was working on was the way the logs were interlocked with the branches. If a dam were built to Afton's exact specifications, it would actually require very little mud to seal it from leaks. He had a hard time convincing the other beavers of the concept. Most beavers felt that a large amount of mud was always necessary, no matter what. Afton wanted to create perfect dam structures to last for years, not the typical several months of the average dam built by average beavers.

Afton built dams that a crew of beavers would be proud to have been a part of building. He wanted to dam a river in the worst way. He knew it could be done. He tried to convince every colony of beavers that he came across of the benefit of a dammed river. A lake would be created! A dammed river lake could support hundreds of beavers. A city of beavers would be able to live and work together. Damming a river would indeed be a challenge, but Afton had a strategy for how it could be done. He discussed his ideas with each colony he went to, but no one understood what he was talking about. As much as Afton explained the concept, they just didn't get it. Afton's idea was to create a number of mini dams up river of the intended location for the dam. At the intended location, the largest trees in the area would be cut down and be put

in place. Then the mini dams would be released from their upriver construction sites and allowed to float downriver. The beavers would ride atop the mini dams to ensure their precise placement downriver. At the intended location, beavers would be waiting on the trees that were in place already. Those beavers combined with the mini dam riders would assemble the mini dams into one complete dam! It seemed like a simple concept to Afton. None of the beavers he explained it to was unable to understand.

Afton remained frustrated as he wandered from colony to colony, encountering the same close-minded beavers everywhere. No one was able to see the big picture that he envisioned. Everybody was happy in their little creek and stream ponds wasting a lot of time. One afternoon, Afton found a different area with a beaver colony on a stream that fed into the river. The colony was far from the area in which he had lived for years. The leader of the colony was an old gray-faced beaver named Cameron. Afton and Cameron talked about dams in general, then Afton broached the topic of a river dam. Out of excitement, Cameron slapped his big tail on the stream bank where they were talking. The other beavers of the colony stopped what they were doing and all jumped into the pond. The sound of a beaver's tail slapping was the alarm sound that signaled danger. When beavers heard the alarm, they were taught to take to the water and go under. Cameron announced to the other beavers that it was a false alarm. Cameron had always wanted a river dam, but no one would listen. They all said it was impossible to build.

Afton explained his strategy to Cameron for building a river dam and Cameron wanted to hear more. Afton outlined what had to be done. Cameron agreed with the idea. The most important concept of constructing a dam on the river was picking the right location. Ideally, the dam would be placed in the narrowest part of the river. Tall trees had to be growing close to the shore so that when cut, they would fall across the river and interlock with each other in the middle of the river. Large rocks on the riverbed would help to lodge the interlocked trees and mini dams in place. The ground near the trees on shore had to be sloping upward, to be able to create the bowl that would become a lake. The more that Afton and Cameron talked about it the more the idea seemed possible. It would take many beavers from several colonies working together to accomplish the feat. The main problem remained of convincing all those other beavers to cooperate. Somehow, Afton and Cameron had to sell the idea to everyone that it could work. The 2 of them were apparently more intelligent and/or adventurous than the other beavers in the area.

Most beavers were content living on small-scale establishments. They figured as long as everyone was eating and breeding ok, then why try to do the impossible? Afton told them all repeatedly how it was possible, but no one ever listened. Perhaps when Afton and the wise old Cameron start traveling around, explaining the concept, people would finally listen. As Afton found out when they took their campaign on the road, the other colonies considered Cameron to be an old crackpot with farfetched ideas. However, when they heard Afton explaining the same

thing that Cameron had been babbling in the past, they started to listen. Afton had a way of explaining things that made them sound feasible. Afton laid out the plan on the ground and scratched the design into the dirt. When the plan was visualized in that manner, the other beavers were able to see it better and understand it more clearly. The way Cameron had been explaining it for years had only confused them. The picture that Afton drew in the dirt was worth a thousand of Cameron's mumbling words.

It was decided then. The beavers would try to build the river dam. Many things had to be considered aside from the location and mini dams, etc. When the lake was created as a result of the construction of the dam, large areas would become flooded upriver of the dam. Many of the beaver colonies that existed on feeder creeks and streams too close to the river's edge would be eliminated and be covered by water. The final location hadn't been determined yet, but all the beaver colonies up and down the river, needed to approve the idea. The beaver colonies that were potentially in the flood zone took a vote and decided that the resulting new lake would be worth the huge effort. Beavers were accustomed to working all their waking hours, repairing and rebuilding dams anyway, so they figured, what the heck.

A sequence of construction had to be devised and a committee was formed to work out the details. Afton and Cameron were the committee leaders who picked 5 additional eminent beavers from the various flood zone colonies. The 7 beavers walked up and down the riverbank looking for the location for the river dam. The necessary criteria were difficult to meet. They would find a spot with sloping ground, but without big trees. Then they would find a spot with big trees, but at the widest part of the river. Then would find a narrow part of the river with a smooth rockless river bottom. They were running out of options. After 2 weeks of scouting, they managed to locate some potential sites, but the sites all lacked one of the necessary ingredients. On the 2nd day of the 3rd week of scouting, they found the spot. It was perfect! They had to go a few miles upriver to find it, but they finally found it. All 7 members of the committee agreed it was the place to build the dam. Upriver of the location were numerous riverside pockets where the mini dams could be safely constructed and materials stockpiled.

Other considerations involved in constructing the monstrous river dam included having an enormous supply of logs and branches precut and available to interlock the mini dams together. An additional supply of logs and branches would be necessary to add to the top of the dam as the water level rose, to increase the desired depth of the lake. As the committee went over the numbers, everyone except Afton was getting nervous about the project, even old Cameron. Afton assured everyone that he had been planning the design for a giant dam for many years and had meticulously worked out all the details. Building a large dam across a river is very similar to building a smaller dam across a creek, except with a multiplier. The multiplier isn't necessarily based on the width of the intended body of water to be dammed.

For example, if you built a dam across a 20-foot wide creek, it would be incorrect to assume you would only require twice as much material to build a dam across a 40-foot wide river. The multiplier is closer to 4 times, due to the increased height of the dam. Just for safety's sake, if they allow a multiplier of 5 times, they should be ok. All the committee members had built dams of 20 feet in width and they knew the amount of logs, branches and mud that was required. Since their river was 40 feet wide, they would require 5 times as much material. It was simple math. The committee agreed with Afton's mathematical explanation. It was his concept of the mini dams that had them wondering. Afton again drew a diagram to explain it to the committee, pausing as he explained to allow for questions. After an hour, they all finally felt comfortable with the idea.

It seemed to the committee that it would be a little risky for the beavers riding on top of the mini dams, but there appeared to be no other way to do it. The beavers waiting at the interlocked trees would also have to be very attentive. The committee determined that the mini dam riders and the beavers at the interlocked trees would be the youngest and strongest of all the beavers in the area. None of them would have any wives or children, in case something untoward happened to them. Those beavers would be selected from a list of volunteers. None of the committee members wanted to take responsibility for an unfortunate accident. Accidents always occurred during dam constructions and the construction of the river dam was bound to have more than a few. The committee estimated that it would require 2 months of continuous round the clock work by all the able-bodied beavers in the area to amass the necessary materials for the giant dam.

Afton relayed to the committee his method of sequential interlocking of different sized branches in the mini dams, which would minimize the need for a lot of mud. Afton had always disliked using mud to patch leaks in dams because the mud kept getting washed away, requiring constant maintenance. That's why he perfected his special construction method. The committee was impressed with the idea and couldn't wait to see it in practice. Cameron didn't have a lot to say at the committee meetings, other than simply agreeing with everything Afton said. Cameron was just excited that his idea finally seemed to come to fruition. Even though the river dam idea was also Afton's, Cameron liked to take credit for it. The idea just needed Afton's expertise to get off the ground. The committee held a community meeting at the location for the dam. Everyone was invited to attend. The general idea of the dam was explained and the volunteers were requested to start signing up for the 2 risky jobs. A surprising number of young stud beaver volunteers signed up, considering the risky jobs an adventure they had been waiting for.

The remaining beavers grouped together to begin constructing the mini dams and stockpiling the remaining material. When the list of material was posted, many beavers protested at how much work it would take to get all the stuff. The committee emphasized it would be a group effort, in which everyone involved would benefit from the result. With everyone pitching in, the work would be accomplished with only average effort from each beaver. All the work must be of the

highest quality to ensure the extra strength that was required by the large dam. Only the strongest trees were to be cut down for the construction. The material stockpiles were to be inspected by the committee members to guarantee top performance when the materials were in the dam. Afton would be available to assist in the construction of the mini dams, which were his creation. Extra numbers of mini dams would be built, in case of damage when they were floated to the interlocking trees and attached to them.

Work was underway on the largest beaver dam attempt of its kind. There was a buzz in the air. For the first time, different beaver colonies had come together to work as a team toward a common goal. The beavers were excitedly talking about how nice their new lake was going to be. There would be unlimited space for everyone's lodges. They would have a vast area from which to derive food and supplies. Why didn't someone think of the idea sooner? Actually, Cameron locally had suggested and Afton from afar had suggested the great idea, but everyone was too foolish to listen to them. All that was in the past and good things were just around the corner. As the work progressed, the beavers instinctively increased the quality of their work. The dam would be a majestic structure, which emphasized the ingenuity of the beaver. The dam would make all the beavers involved in the construction proud.

Everyone felt the need to perform the best work that they had ever done. They found themselves cutting down trees and then rejecting them as not being good enough to go into the dam. They didn't even have to be told by the committee members to reject the inferior materials. They did it of their own accord. It was a beautiful thing to behold so many proud beavers. Nature had done well when it created those beavers that were about to try to control the flow of nature. As the mini dam supply and materials supply had been completed, the all-important sequence of construction had to be reviewed and rehearsed. The mini dams were ready in the riverside pockets on both sides of the river. Some material stockpiles were on shore just behind them. Additional material stockpiles were located at the dam site. Afton and the committee gathered the mini dam riders and the tree interlockers together for drills.

The tall trees on either side of the river would be cut down just before the mini dams were released and ridden down from the upriver side pockets. When the tall trees hit the water, the tree interlockers would swim out to the center of the river and carefully lock the tops of the trees together and to the rocks of the river bottom. When the tree locking beavers were done, they would climb on top of the locked trees and signal the mini dam riders to float downstream. When the mini dams arrived, they would be interlocked with the tall trees, rocks and to each other. Additional beavers would float down from the side pockets with extra locking material as needed. Once the initial dam structure was complete, beavers would continuously float down more and more material, carefully interlocking everything together as discussed. As the water level rose, more material would be added as necessary. Beavers on shore would add material to the dam from the material stockpiles at the dam site. They were ready to begin.

37. Dario's Passion



37. Dario's Passion

Dario Fabrizio was a passionate man who wanted to do more than just help people; he wanted to empower people in order that they could help themselves. He built a village for people to live, free of charge. Then, he built a tuition-free university and stocked it with some of the world's finest professors. He created a fund to support the university for infinity, so that it would serve humanity long after he had passed on. He located a group of people that had for years been exploited by an unscrupulous man who had died, leaving the people unsupported. The group was comprised of, "Edmond the world's tallest man," "Felipe the world's shortest man," "Gabriela the world's heaviest woman," "Harley the world's lightest man," "Imogene the bearded woman," "Jacques the rhino man," Kareem the man with the world's largest head" and "Lamont the wolf man."

Dario talked to the group of destitute people and easily convinced them that they could live much better lives and be in control of their own destinies, possibly for the first time in their existence. The people would come to live with Dario in his village, free of charge. He would provide them with free college in the degrees of their choosing. He would then help them create businesses in line with their college educations.

Dario brought the people to his village where they would begin their new lives. None of the people was able to read, so the first step was to help them become literate. After a literacy crash course of 6 months duration, the people were able to read and write sufficiently enough to consult with the university's guidance counselors to discuss their futures. The counselors would carefully help the people to decide on the courses of study that were ideally suited to their interests.

Edmond had decided that he wanted to attain a degree in business. He wanted to open a clothing store that catered to big and tall men.

Felipe also wanted to acquire a business degree with the hopes of opening a clothing store for little men.

Gabriela wanted to go to college for the purpose of learning everything there was to learn about physical fitness. She hoped to open a fitness center to help herself and other people lose weight and keep it off in a healthy way.

Harley craved to gain a degree in nutrition, to help himself and others safely gain weight and get fit. He wanted to open a nutritional wellness store.

Imogene was interested in learning about the field of cosmetology. She wanted to create a line of cosmetics, trimmers and shaving needs for both men and women that could be sold in her store.

Jacques hoped to become a cosmetic surgeon to alleviate the suffering of people with facial issues. His clinic would help him restore his face and help others as well.

Kareem's large head and brain had given him the gift of genius. He sensed that if he could get started in the academic world and earn a degree in science, he would be able to find cures for the major illnesses of the world. He would work with scientists in one half of the research laboratory.

Lamont had been born with his body covered from head to toe with fur like a wolf. His DNA had one of the rarest forms of mutation on earth, which resulted in his lycanthropy. He wished to learn as much about DNA, genes and lycanthropy as he could to be able to correct his own malady and others similar to his. Lamont was willing to try anything to be able to look just like everybody else. He was the most desperate of Dario's people. He planned to work with geneticists in the other half of the research laboratory.

Dario met with the counselors and the people and talked about everyone's hopes and dreams. The people were excited to get started. While the people earned their college credits, Dario would go to work constructing a mall adjacent to the university that would house all the stores, research clinics and centers that his people desired. Dario planned to consult with his people to get their exact specifications for their future businesses. The site of the university, mall and village was on a piece of land that was the size of Disney World, so there was plenty of room to add more buildings and expand as time went on.

Dario's people all completed their degrees early, since the courses were taught year round. In 3 years time, his people were prepared to start their businesses.

Edmond's big and tall store would provide all the clothing necessary to clothe a tall or portly man from his feet to his head, including socks, shoes, sneakers, boots, pants, underwear, long underwear, tee shirts, dress shirts, ties, vests, suits, blazers, sport jackets, tuxedos and all manner of objects for covering the scalp. Dario loved the store and referred some of his portly friends. Edmond thanked Dario profusely for the opportunity.

Felipe's store for little men would be located next to Edmond's store and would supply the same items, except in smaller sizes. Dario loved Felipe's concept and hoped his business would prosper. Felipe jumped up and hugged Dario around the waist, crying as he thanked him.

Gabriela had lost weight while gaining her college degree and at 5'8" weighing 135 pounds, she had become quite a looker. She had taken up walking on a treadmill for hours a day, burning thousands of calories, which when combined with her nutritional plan, resulted in her dramatic weight loss. She was really happy with her new body and outlook. Her fitness center would help many people. Dario loved Gabriela's new look and became a member of her center. Gabriela

thanked Dario with a big hug and a long kiss.

Harley learned a lot about proper nutrition in his classes, helping Gabriela to customize her diet. He had gained a healthy amount of weight and started working out with weights during college. He was 6'3" tall and weighed a solid 210 pounds. He planned to join Gabriela's fitness center to maintain his new manly physique. He opened his nutritional wellness store next to Gabriela's fitness center. He was a happy man. Dario really approved of Harley's new look. He had been so thin before that he looked like a scarecrow. He looked like an NFL wide receiver. Harley was so thankful to Dario that the guy broke down in tears.

Imogene applied her college learning to the world of razors and face creams. She was able to figure out how to shave her mysterious beard extremely close with her patented razor and after applying her patented cream, the beard wouldn't grow back for a week. It was a huge improvement from before when she had to shave twice a day if she wanted to keep her face smooth. She sold all her patented products in her store. Dario was proud of Imogene's dedication and patents. Imogene thanked Dario and hoped to help many people in his honor.

Jacques worked extremely hard at college and worked closely with the surgeons that had smoothed his facial features. The cosmetic surgery was so successful, that Jacques was almost unrecognizable. He ended up so handsome that he became the poster child for his clinic. He began working on children who had been born with facial issues, and treated them all free of charge. His clinic was located on the north end of the mall. Dario didn't recognize Jacques the first time he saw him after surgery, but he remembered Jacques' calm voice. Dario felt Jacques' work with the children would help to improve many lives. Jacques cried so much when he saw his new face in the mirror that he called Dario on the phone the entire next day, thanking him.

Kareem proved to himself and others what having true genius could accomplish. His state of the art research laboratory was located on the south end of the mall. He and his crack staff had found some cancer cures and his cure for AIDS was getting closer by the day. He hoped to have a cure for the Zika virus that was spread by mosquitoes by the end of the year. He was also working on influenza immunizations for the CDC. Dario couldn't believe how quickly Kareem had been solving so many of the world's major medical issues. He expected Kareem to win a Nobel Prize sooner or later. When Dario arrived at the lab to visit, Kareem was so cerebral and calm that he thanked Dario the best that he could and continued working. Dario understood.

Lamont had graduated with flying colors from the college and had begun genetic research in his half of the laboratory building that he shared with Kareem. Lamont was mainly concerned with curing his lycanthropy condition. When he found a cure, he could then apply the results to similar illnesses. He and his fellow genetic scientists had spent weeks going over previously documented material, but were unable to break any new ground relating to his affliction. After 6 months of no success, he began to get depressed. All of his friends from the colony were happy

and successful, but all he had was a college degree. It wasn't enough. He wanted to be happy and the only way to be happy was to look normal without all the fur on his body.

The fur was incredibly uncomfortable and itched all the time. Even with the application of some of Imogene's patented creams, the relief was only temporary. Imogene had come up with a cream that would eliminate all the hair on his body for a week or so, but it always grew back. Harley's nutritional supplements hadn't done anything to eliminate the fur. Lamont did feel a little healthier inside. All his friends were trying to help him physically and emotionally and he appreciated their effort. He had known those people for many years and they had been through a lot of hard times together.

Lamont considered asking the genius Kareem to help him with his genetic research, but Kareem's work seemed more important to the world that was waiting for his cures. Lamont consulted with Kareem and Kareem said that he would be able to look at Lamont's work in 3 months if he could just wait. Lamont told Kareem he could wait and went back to his work. When the 3 months had passed, Kareem true to his word, passed the torch to his fellow scientists to continue the cancer, AIDS, Zika and flu work. Kareem walked over to the genetic research side of the laboratory to help his old friend Lamont.

Upon studying Lamont's research to date, Kareem had noticed some mathematical errors. He pointed them out to Lamont who then verified the numbers for himself. Kareem had been correct, but the errors didn't lead to any new insights. Kareem told Lamont that he would work with him as long as it took, until they found something solid. Kareem's other work was in good hands with his scientists. Lamont's work seemed very intriguing to Kareem and he really wanted to help Lamont find the cure for his lycanthropy.

Dario had been concerned about Lamont from the very beginning. The other people seemed to have had relatively simple problems to solve and deal with. Lamont's lycanthropy on the other hand, appeared to be incurable and Dario felt bad for the poor guy. Dario had been keeping close tabs on all his people over the years. He consulted with the therapists who had been available to the people anytime they needed them. All Dario's people except Lamont had emerged from the university happier and better adjusted toward life. Life had dealt Lamont a tough hand of cards and he wasn't able to do much with the cards. He had accomplished just as much as his old friends had at college, except they were all blissful and he wasn't.

Dario talked to Kareem about his work with Lamont in the genetic laboratory. Kareem was optimistic about finding the cure for lycanthropy. Dario had no doubts about Kareem's genius and his incredible ability to solve problems. He hoped Kareem would be able to find the cure for Lamont. Dario wanted all his people to be content. That's why he created his village and university for the people in the first place. It hurt Dario that Lamont was so unhappy and he hoped that Lamont would be able to hang in there. Lamont had to trust in Kareem and if they

worked really hard together, they should be able to crack the code.

After 2 months of experimenting with DNA and genetic material, Kareem and Lamont found what they thought may be the solution to Lamont's problem. Kareem had invented a process that Lamont hadn't heard of in college whereby the DNA from Lamont's blood would be mixed with the DNA from a wolf's blood, and then the mixture would be manipulated. The resultant combination when fed intravenously into Lamont should cure him of his lycanthropy. The other geneticists in the lab hadn't heard of the process either. It was because of Kareem's superior intellect that he had figured it out. Lamont was willing to try anything, but his fellow geneticists didn't think it would work, because they couldn't understand it.

It didn't make sense to them how it could work. Kareem presented his theory in detail on dry erase boards with drawings of the DNA strands and interactions. It was indeed a complex process, but they began to understand how it could work in theory. It just didn't make sense that it could work in reality. No one had ever heard of such a bizarre combination. Kareem harkened them back to the early days when DNA and polio research were mysterious. Few people understood what was going on. People could understand the theory, but not the reality, because the reality hadn't been proven yet.

Kareem maintained that there was no way to prove anything until it was experimentally carried out. Lamont didn't want to wait for the typical trial and error methods of testing, which would take weeks. He had been waiting his entire lifetime and had become impatient. Everyone around him had a piece of the pie except him. It was his time. He wanted the serum put into his body immediately. Lamont signed any waivers necessitated by such experimental practices. Dario gave his approval the next day. Kareem set up the IV in Lamont's arm and the serum was dripped into Lamont's blood very slowly. Lamont fainted. Kareem continued the drip for an hour.

The next day Lamont awoke on the table with clumps of his fur falling out! By the end of the day, he was hairless. It worked! He was ecstatic. Kareem smiled. Dario cried. Lamont cried. They had found the cure! After 2 days, Lamont started getting shivers and a high temperature. Then his blood pressure began to increase at an abnormal rate. He started twitching uncontrollably on the table and required straps to hold him down. Kareem monitored Lamont closely. What had gone wrong? He was hairless, indicating that the serum had seemed to work, but something unforeseen had happened to his physiology. Kareem left Lamont on the table with 2 nurses watching him in shifts and exited the building for the night.

The next morning, Kareem entered the lab and saw the 2 nurses unconscious on the floor. Their throats had been scratched violently. Lamont was gone! The straps were broken! What happened! Where was Lamont? Shredded bloody scraps of the clothing that Lamont had been wearing were on the floor trailing out the back door.

38. Dagmar's Revenge



38. Dagmar's Revenge

Dagmar was an extraordinarily intelligent rat; it was unfortunate that he had been placed in his cage in the laboratory with all the other lab rats. In the short time that he had been in his cage, he had seen many strange things going on. He had seen his fellow lab rats in various stages of discomfort and he didn't like what was taking place. Nothing had happened to Dagmar yet, but he had been preparing himself for the worst. He decided the first time that the doctor reached into his cage, he was going to bite the doctor as many times as he could, as fast as he could operate his jaws. That wouldn't accomplish much. He thought long and hard about the problem.

Dagmar had a better idea. The cages appeared to the average rat to be escape-proof, but Dagmar had been observing how the doctor had been opening and closing the cages. It would be tricky, but Dagmar figured he would be able to operate the latch on his cage if he could only reach far enough between the thin bars. That evening, when the doctor turned out the lights and left the lab, Dagmar tried to escape from his cage. He climbed onto the front wall of the cage, reached his right front foot between the bars and was able to just barely grab the latch. The latch required an upward and sideways motion to cause the door to open. Dagmar thought the latch was really an ingenious device on the cage. He could see why it worked so well at keeping the average rats in their cages.

He did it! The front door on his cage swung open and he headed over to the shelf against the wall with the test tubes. Dagmar had been watching the doctor removing something from one of the test tubes with a yellow label on it. The doctor placed a glass and metal device up to the test tube for a few seconds, and then he placed the device up to one of the rats 3 cages down from Dagmar's cage. The day after the doctor had performed the procedure on the rat, the rat appeared to be asleep in the bottom of the cage, not moving. The doctor then removed the apparently sleeping rat and placed another one in the cage. The doctor had repeated the process 3 times, replacing the sleeping rats with new ones each time. Dagmar wondered what happened to all the sleeping rats. Where was the doctor putting them?

Dagmar's plan was to carefully extract some of the liquid from the test tube with the yellow label on it and bring some of the liquid back to his cage. He would then wait for the doctor to come to his cage with the metal and glass device, which he was bound to eventually. When the doctor reached into Dagmar's cage, Dagmar would bite the doctor's hand and wipe some of the liquid into the bite wound.

When Dagmar escaped, he brought some scraps of bedding with him. He opened the test tube with the yellow label on it and inserted the bedding pieces into the liquid. He thoroughly saturated the bedding pieces. He capped the test tube, went back to his cage, locked himself in and slept very little as he perfected his plan for the next day.

The next day, the doctor approached Dagmar's cage with a clipboard and wrote something on the clipboard after first reading the tag on the front door of Dagmar's cage. The doctor then walked over to the test tubes and placed a glass and metal device up to the test tube with the yellow label on it. Dagmar watched as the doctor approached his cage with the device. Dagmar reached under the food dish and grabbed one of the pieces of bedding. The doctor unlatched the door to Dagmar's cage and reached in with the device in one hand. The doctor reached his other hand to grab Dagmar. Dagmar bit the hand that was holding him and before the doctor knew what was happening, Dagmar wiped the bedding into the bite wound. The startled doctor immediately dropped Dagmar and locked the cage. The doctor put the device on the counter and wrote something on the clipboard. The doctor turned out the lights and exited the lab early that day. He was gone for 2 days.

While the doctor was out for those 2 days, Dagmar had escaped from his cage and stocked up on the liquid from the yellow-labeled test tube. He thoroughly soaked more pieces of bedding and scattered the pieces around his cage. He could tell which pieces were which by the slight discoloration. Dagmar had noticed how the doctor always used the same coffee cup each day. The doctor drank coffee all day long from the large coffee machine and never rinsed out the coffee cup.

While outside of his cage, Dagmar carefully removed the yellow-labeled test tube from the rack of tubes and carried it to the counter on which sat the doctor's coffee cup. Dagmar poured a little of the liquid from the test tube into the doctor's coffee cup. He then picked up the cup and swirled the liquid around to ensure a good coating on the bottom of the cup. He took the test tube back to the rack and went back to his bed to sleep.

When the doctor returned, Dagmar noticed that the doctor's bitten hand had a large white bandage wrapped around it. The doctor seemed to be walking around the lab sluggishly, occasionally bumping into the cages. The doctor's face was really red and had patches of flakiness. The doctor poured himself some coffee and drank it down. Then he poured another cup and drank it down. Dagmar observed the doctor closely. The doctor seemed to get dizzy and sat down on a stool. The doctor left the lab for some reason.

Dagmar waited for 5 minutes, then escaped and ran to the test tubes. He removed and carried the yellow-labeled tube to the doctor's coffee cup and poured some in. He swirled the cup, put the test tube back and went back to his cage. In another 15 minutes, the doctor returned with a pastry from which he had already taken bites. The doctor put down the pastry, poured another cup of coffee and drank it down. He sat down on the stool again. In a few minutes, he collected himself and left the lab. Dagmar waited for 5 minutes to pass, then escaped and quickly retrieved the yellow-labeled test tube. He poured some of the liquid on the pastry after first taking a few bites and then poured some in the coffee cup. He returned the test tube and ran back to his cage.

The doctor returned to the lab with his red flaky face covered with sweat. He was exasperated and breathing with some difficulty. He stumbled to the coffee machine, poured some coffee and drank the coffee while finishing the pastry. In a few minutes, the doctor tried to get up from the stool and fell over onto the floor. Dagmar laughed at the doctor's foolishness. Dagmar had been determined to get even with the doctor who had made so many of Dagmar's fellow rats so uncomfortable.

Dagmar waited 5 minutes, then escaped from his cage and climbed down to the floor. He ran over to the passed-out doctor and walked up onto the doctor's face. Dagmar pooped and pissed on the doctor's forehead, eyes, nose and mouth. Then he ran back to his cage and waited for the doctor to wake up. In 3 hours, the doctor awoke and discovered the foulness on his face. He screamed aloud. The skin on his hands and arms had begun to flake and redden. The doctor turned off the lights and left for the day. Dagmar was loving it.

The next morning, the doctor arrived at noon. He looked horrible. He poured some coffee into the cup that Dagmar had again laced with the test tube liquid after the doctor had left the previous day. The doctor sat on the stool looking over some reports and drank the coffee. He left the lab for about 20 minutes. While the doctor was gone, Dagmar again laced the doctor's coffee cup. The doctor returned with a submarine sandwich, which he started eating as soon as he walked in. He poured and drank some more coffee and finished about 1/2 of the sub. He suddenly rushed out of the lab. Without hesitation, Dagmar escaped, ran to test tube, brought it over to the sub and poured some liquid on it after first eating some of the sub. Dagmar was careful to eat the sub neatly, so the doctor wouldn't be able to tell. Dagmar poured some more liquid in the coffee cup, returned the test tube and went back to his cage.

When the doctor returned, he was wiping his face with a handkerchief. He walked slowly to the stool, poured some coffee and finished the sub. The doctor mumbled something and fell off the stool. Dagmar escaped and ran around the lab releasing all the rats from their cages. Dagmar made them promise to go back when they were done playing around. Upon release, all the rats ran over to the doctor, pooped and pissed on his face and body, from head to toe. Some of the rats wanted to also bite the doctor, but Dagmar cautioned them to wait. It wasn't time yet. He had a plan. When the rats were done taking their revenge on the doctor, they returned to their cages, where Dagmar locked them in.

The doctor awoke 6 hours later, stumbled to the door, turned out the lights and left for the night. When the doctor returned to the lab 2 days later, he walked with a cane and barely stumbled in. He drank his usual morning coffee from the cup laced by Dagmar. The man's face was redder and flakier than before and his hair had started falling out. The doctor made the rounds of the lab and checked the cages, which were all properly latched shut. The lab technician always made sure the lab animals were watered and fed whenever the doctor was out and on weekends. The

animals were well cared for, until they were experimented upon.

The doctor consumed his lunch of coffee and 1/2 of a sandwich, then rushed out of the lab. Dagmar escaped and poured an extra large amount of the yellow-labeled test tube liquid onto the sandwich, after first taking some bites out of it and he put the usual amount in the coffee cup. When the doctor returned, he staggered to the stool and took a bite of the sandwich. He mumbled to himself with a questioning tone, shook his head and finished eating the sandwich, washing it down with more coffee. The doctor started convulsing and fell on the floor where he continued to flop around like a fish. His eyes had rolled back in their sockets and the remaining hair on his head fell out of his scalp onto the floor. The doctor pissed and pooped in his pants, farting loudly and continuously. After 6 minutes of making of mess of himself, he lay there unconscious and unmoving.

Dagmar escaped from his cage and released his fellow rats. The rats descended on the doctor, pissed, pooped and bit every square inch of his body, then returned to their cages, where Dagmar locked them in. The lab technician who arrived that evening to maintain the food and water of the rats found the doctor on the floor lying unconscious in a small puddle of blood. Upon checking the doctor's vital signs and viewing the doctor's body, the tech immediately called for an ambulance. While waiting for the ambulance the tech nervously checked all the cages to verify that they were all locked. How did the doctor get all those rat bite marks on his body? Where did all that rat poop and piss come from? It was truly a bizarre scene for the lab technician to behold. She thought that she was losing her mind.

She felt bad for the doctor who was lying there so helplessly. She had worked for the doctor for many years and had witnessed his great experimental work. She was glad to have been a part of the doctor's work, though in a small way, only maintaining the rats, not performing the experiments. The doctor had always insisted on doing all the work himself, probably to get all the credit, she thought. The doctor had complemented her on her work many times though. He did acknowledge the importance of her work in maintaining the rats in a healthy environment. She had been going to college taking courses toward becoming a scientist herself someday. The doctor had always encouraged her to stay focused on the goal and not be sidetracked by petty things. With a lot of hard work, anything could be achieved by anyone. She appreciated his support.

As the lab tech waited for the ambulance, she tried to monitor the doctor's condition. He was still breathing, though very slowly and had a rapid heart rate. She didn't remember the doctor being bald and noticed all the hair scattered around on the floor. She wondered if all that hair were his. If so, how did it happen? Had he been attacked while he was alone in the lab? She decided to call the police. Where was that ambulance? She began to get nervous about being attacked herself. She ran to the container on the wall that housed a fire extinguisher and a fire

axe. She retrieved the fire axe, went back to the doctor and uneasily waited for the ambulance and police.

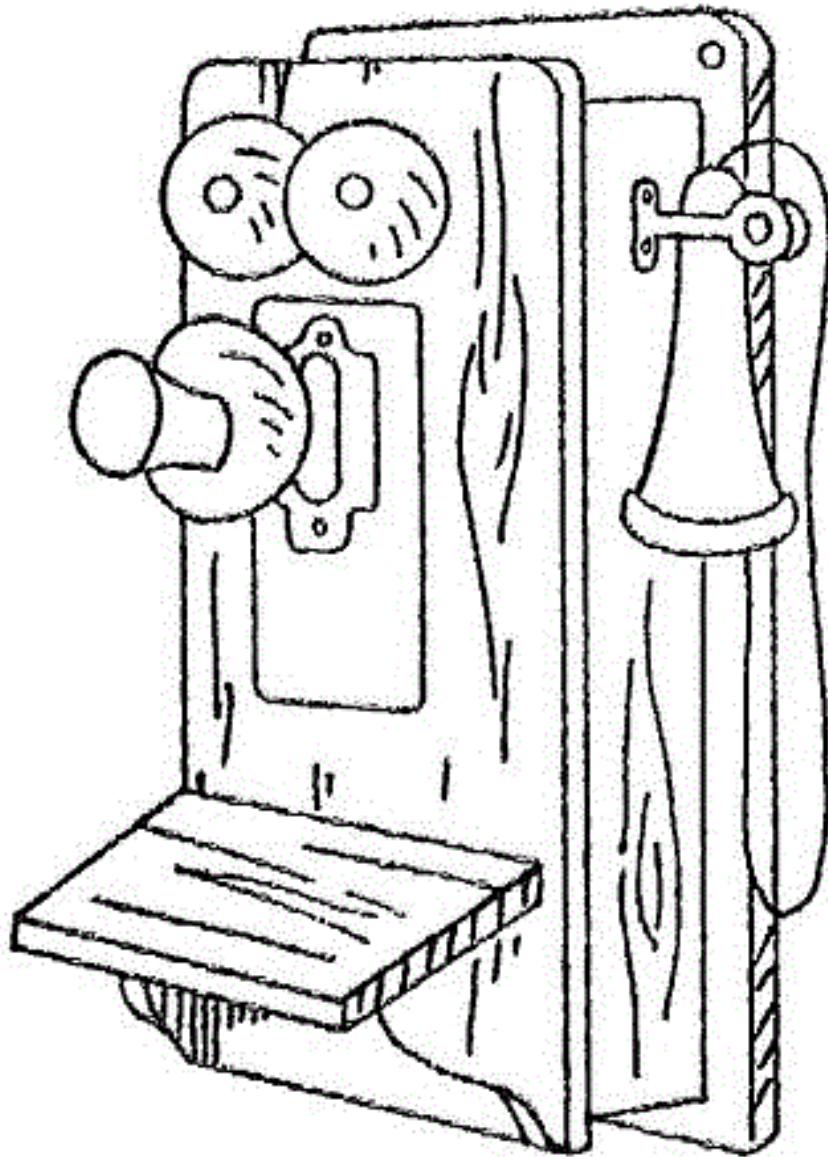
The lab tech wondered how the doctor had gotten those hundreds of horrible rat bites on his body. How did he get all that rat poop and piss on his body? All the rats were locked in their cages. Could the doctor have somehow let out one or more rats, which somehow bit him, pooped on him and pissed on him, and then he put the rats back in their cages? It truly was a strange scene. The lab tech began pacing back and forth, unable to sit still in the lab.

Dagmar snapped his fingers and per his plan, every rat in the lab began to screech the highest pitch sound that they were capable of producing. The noise so startled the lab tech that she dropped the axe onto the floor where it landed in the blood next to the doctor. The lab tech picked up the axe and began freaking out. "What's going on here!" she squealed. Dagmar snapped his fingers again and the rats got louder. Dagmar snapped his fingers twice and the rats began to jump up and down in their cages while screeching. Dagmar snapped his fingers 3 times and the rats began slamming their food dishes against the walls of the cages while screeching.

It was too much for the lab tech and she ran out of the lab with the fire axe in her hands. Now! Dagmar quickly escaped and released all the rats, who had continued screeching to keep the frantic lab tech out of the lab. Per Dagmar's plan, while still loudly shrieking, the rats ran to the doctor and bit his neck until he had so many bites that there was no way he would survive. Dagmar instructed the rats to bite the doctor's neck in a way that it would appear as if the doctor's neck had been cut by something. Once the rats were convinced that the doctor was a goner, they all ran back to their cages and Dagmar locked them all in. He returned to his cage and locked himself in. The rats continued their screeching while waiting for something that signaled the arrival of the ambulance and/or police. Since it was dark outside, the flashing lights of the police car through the lab windows had alerted the rats to cease their racket. They became silent. The lab tech was still holding the fire axe when she greeted a police officer at the front door of the building. The cop took the axe from her as she escorted him into the lab.

When the lab tech and cop entered the quiet lab, they spotted the doctor on the floor lying in a pool of blood. The cop knelt down next to the doctor to check for a pulse on his neck. Seeing the slash on the doctor's neck, the cop jumped up and asked the lab tech, "Exactly what happened here, Ma'am?" Before the lab tech could speak, the cop said, "I received a call to respond to this building where a woman found an unconscious doctor." She said, "Yes, I'm the woman who called and this is the doctor, except he wasn't dead when I found him. He was only unconscious! I swear!" The cop looked around the lab and saw all the rats sitting quietly in their cages, eating, drinking water and snoozing. The cop looked at the blood on the blade of the axe and looked at the wound on the doctor's neck. The cop said, "Ma'am, I'm afraid I'm going to have to place you under arrest!" She cried, "No, you don't understand!"

39. Earnest's Call



39. Earnest's Call

For years, Earnest's doctor had recommended that he quit smoking. The doctor always maintained that people who smoked were idiots. It was that simple; his patients could take the advice or leave it. The doctor didn't care if people were offended by his critical advice. He didn't care if his patients found another doctor. When the doctor had taken his Hippocratic Oath, he became completely devoted to healing people who were sick and helping people to prevent themselves from getting sick in the first place. The best way to be healthy was to not start smoking in the first place. If for some reason a person became an idiot and started smoking, they should try their hardest to quit.

Forty years of smoking can do a lot of damage to a person's body. Earnest had finally quit smoking on his 80th birthday the previous month. Earnest celebrated his birthday alone on his farm, since his wife had passed away 3 years before and he had no kids. He didn't have any friends left. Earnest felt himself getting healthier within that first month of quitting smoking. He used to get really short of breath while doing all the work around the farm. He had to stop to rest all day and it took him forever to accomplish the work each day. He used to cough all day long from lung congestion. His lungs were clearing up and his wind was coming back.

His health was improving; he wished he had listened to his doctor long ago. He was actually starting to feel as strong as he felt at 60 years old. He began doing some of the things that he had put off doing around the farm, such as repairing the barn. The barn was located the length of a football field from the house, 300 feet. The barn was 151 years old and was constructed of the finest timbers available at its time of construction. It was assembled using the most efficient and longest lasting means of construction of the time. Eventually, things require repair and upkeep. The slate roof was still intact and would likely last for another 151 years. The main supporting timbers were ok, as were the various upper trusses. The siding was the problem, having rotted through in many places, due to neglect. Earnest had never performed any maintenance on the barn, hoping that he would never have to. He probably didn't actually have to do anything to the barn; it was still standing after all. The act of quitting smoking had given him a new lease on life and he felt energetic enough to tackle the barn repairs.

Earnest had a stack of wood that was purchased years ago, that had been dedicated to eventually repairing the siding. The wood was in the shed next to the barn. It was a simple matter of taking out the bad wood and putting in good wood. He planned to replace the wood one piece at a time, because that way the ladder would be set up in the same place for removal and replacement. He began on the right side of the barn, which was the most damaged side from the blowing wind and rain. He stacked a repair piece of wood next to the ladder, which was leaned against the barn next to the rotten piece. He first removed the rotten piece with a hammer and pry bar, and then tossed the rotted piece to the ground. He then nailed the new piece in place at the top, then at the

bottom. He progressed along the side of the barn from left to right. Halfway across the barn at about noon, he was reaching for the next new piece to nail, suddenly felt dizzy and fell off the ladder onto the ground.

When he awoke 4 hours later, he found himself on the ground at the base of the ladder. He didn't know where he was at first, and then remembered he had been fixing the barn. He tried to get up, but couldn't. For some reason, his left leg and arm were numb and apparently useless. "What happened?" he said aloud. He noticed when he said the words that they were indistinguishable. He was aware of what he had said; he couldn't understand it though. He tried to speak again, "What the heck happened?" Again, his speech was garbled and indecipherable. He tried to lift his left hand to touch his mouth as he talked, to determine what happened to his mouth. He thought that he might have landed on his face when he fell off the ladder and his lips and tongue were swollen. He couldn't lift his left hand. He lifted his right hand and touched his face, noticing that the left side of his face felt as numb as his left arm and leg.

The way his face felt was probably the reason for his slurred speech. Earnest remembered hearing about the symptoms that he was having. The symptoms were the result of a stroke. He had friends who suffered from strokes - some had mild strokes; some had severe strokes. The way he felt at that moment felt like a severe stroke. The sun was beating down on him and was burning his face. He tried to crawl over to the hat that had fallen off his head when he fell off the ladder, but couldn't. It was too much of an effort. He managed to roll over onto his stomach to protect his face from the blazing sun. His bald head was still being burned by the sun, but he was able to shield it with his functioning right hand. How was he going to get out of the mess? He tried crawling in the direction of the house, but was too weak. He fell asleep.

The next morning, he awoke to the rooster crowing. When he opened his eyes, he remembered where he was and what had happened and mumbled something to himself. He noticed that he had gone to the bathroom in his clothing. That was unfortunate. He was hungry. He remembered the lunch pail in the barn that still contained the lunch that he hadn't gotten to the day before. He had to get something to eat to get some strength. He couldn't think straight. When he fell onto the ground, he ended up facing the opposite way from the barn door, so his first challenge was to get turned around. Since he only had use of his right hand, arm and leg, he had to rotate in a counterclockwise direction. He was lying next to the stupid ladder, which prevented him from rotating. First, he had to pull himself forward using only the body parts on his right side, to get clear of the ladder. Then, he would be able to rotate counterclockwise and crawl under the ladder between the ladder and the barn and then crawl toward the barn door!

At about 7:00 am, he began pulling himself forward to clear the ladder, inch by grueling inch. It turned out to be a much more difficult task than he thought it would be. At 80 years old, he was still strong and wiry from doing hard farm work for many years, but he was no longer a spring

chicken. Furthermore, he was partially paralyzed and depleted from hunger to boot! By noon, he had crawled far enough to clear the ladder, rotate counterclockwise and crawl to the corner of the barn. The door was just around the corner to the right. He was exhausted, thirsty and even hungrier than he had been when he started crawling. He struggled to crawl around the corner to his right, having to crawl in an arc that eventually led to the door opening. At 4:00 pm, he was in the barn! He crawled to where he put his lunch pail. He couldn't reach it! He forgot that he had placed his lunch pail on the railing to keep it away from the mice that were always on the floor of the barn! He looked around for a solution.

He saw some hay bales that could be arranged into a ramp that he could crawl up to get to the lunch pail. He got to work. By 7:00 pm, he was at the top of the hay bale ramp reaching for his lunch pail. When he opened the lunch pail, the smell of the tuna fish sandwich hit him like a brick. The sandwich had gotten really stinky sitting in the hot lunch pail for so long, but he ate it anyway. Since he had been so hungry, he devoured the sandwich as quickly as he could, followed by the apple and entire thermos bottle of cherry drink. Initially, he felt a lot better, finally getting something in his stomach, and then something happened. He began feeling queasy. He wondered if he had suffered a concussion when he fell off the ladder. He vomited the entire lunch onto the hay bale ramp. He cried and fell asleep, being too weak to crawl back down the ramp.

The next morning, he awoke to the rooster crowing. He was still up on the hay bale ramp. He was sick, thirsty, tired and hungry. He smelled the barf from the previous day and barfed again. He had to get off that stinking ramp before he barfed again! He rotated around and crawled down. If he didn't get something to eat soon, he was going to starve to death. Of course! The hog! Before Earnest had begun repairing the barn, he had hung a butchered 1/2 hog in the corner of the barn that he had intended to process into parcels for meals. He had planned to do the processing after he had finished that first side of the barn. The hog was still hanging in the corner; he could see it. If he could make his way to the hog, he could start eating it and gain some necessary nutrition. He began crawling over to the hanging hog. He was so weak, that he didn't reach the hog until noon.

The hog was hanging from a chain that was connected to a barn rafter. He couldn't reach it from his lying down position! He licked some of the blood that dripped on the floor to get anything he could for sustenance. He managed to raise himself up to a kneeling position with great difficulty. He felt dizzy and lay down again. He rose to his knees again and tried to tear a piece from the raw hog. It was impossible, so he bit into it. Since the hog had been split by the butcher from whom he bought the hog, Earnest was able to eat the hog from the inside. The hog was hanging with its head down, so he ate some of the neck meat. He waited for a few moments between bites to make sure he was able to keep the food down. After a 1/2 hour of eating, he felt better and took a nap. At 5:00 pm, he awoke from his nap and ate some more of the raw hog. Beggars

couldn't be choosers, he thought. He felt drowsy and fell asleep again.

The next morning, he awoke to the rooster crowing. It was unfortunate for Earnest that he had outlived his friends and wife, since no one would know of his predicament. He had to make his way to the phone in the house, or he would be facing some hard times. His stroke had definitely done some damage to him, but he was still alive and able to eat. The moisture from the raw hog supplied his body with some water, but he was still really thirsty. The water supply in the house was fed by a well. There was an old-fashioned hand-cranked faucet fed by the same well, located halfway between the house and the barn. Earnest supposed that if he started crawling to the house, he could stop off along the way at the faucet for water.

He recognized that his ability to move any real distance was severely limited. It would likely take him weeks to make it to the house. He had to try. Earnest's parents didn't raise any quitters. He had to be prepared for the journey. He looked around the barn for some necessary items. He found a dirty leak-free bucket that he would use to carry a supply of meat from the hog. He could fill the bucket with 5 gallons of meat. As he crawled, he would have food to eat on the way to the faucet. At the faucet, he could top off the bucket with water, so that he would have meat and water in the bucket. Then, he would be well stocked for his journey from the faucet to the house.

Earnest couldn't believe what he was planning to do! It was like a story out of a science-fiction book! He had no choice. It was either continue on his crazed quest or die in the dirt like a rat. He retrieved the bucket and filled it with hunks torn from the hog to the brim. He tied 1 end of a rope around the bucket toward the bottom, and tied the other end around his waist, so he could drag the bucket as he dragged his body. The bucket was heavy. Since Earnest didn't know how long it would take to get to the house, he wanted to bring along as much meat as he could physically drag. The full bucket of meat was definitely all he could drag.

He started crawling to the house. He had found an old tarp in the barn in which he wrapped his naked body. Earnest concluded that he couldn't stand the smell of his own stink any longer. Since he had been popping and pissing in his clothes the past few days, he had enough. He stripped bare and wrapped up in the tarp. His entire body would be covered from the blazing sun. The bottom of his body would be protected from being scraped on the ground. When he had to go the bathroom, he would remove the tarp, roll over onto the ground and do whatever bodily function he had to do. Then he would roll back onto the tarp and wrap it around his body again. He thought he had as good of a plan as he could muster under the conditions.

Dragging the bucket of meat as he crawled, turned out to be much more difficult than he estimated. He had enough trouble as it was awkwardly pulling himself along using only the right muscles of his dilapidated body. He thought that his crawling pace had slowed to a crawl! The thought sounded funny and made him laugh to himself. He was glad that he still had his sense of

humor. His sense of humor had gotten him through many tough times. He would really need that sense of humor during his latest tough time. As difficult as it was to drag the bucket of meat, he had to do it. He sensed that the bucket was the difference between life and death. Since a 5-gallon bucket of water weighs about 43 pounds, he had a good amount of meat there. He calculated that if he ate 1 pound of meat per day, which was adequate nutrition, he could crawl for at least 43 days, if necessary.

When he made it to the faucet, the water would provide him with an additional valuable substance that his body required. The worst-case scenario would be that he would have to crawl for maybe 2 months. The latter part of the crawl would have water involved for nutrition. It couldn't possibly take that long to crawl to the house, but at least he was prepared. As Earnest crawled, the mornings, days and evenings came and went. He napped often along the way, due to exhaustion. As the days passed, the meat in the bucket began to spoil. Earnest had predicted that would happen and didn't care. There was nothing he could do about it. His choice was to eat the foul hog and live uncomfortably for a while, or die a coward's death.

Earnest chose to live. He was no coward and he would never give up. The problem with the meat spoiling wasn't just the smell it was creating. Crows caught wind of the smell. Even though the bucket was covered to prevent flies from getting at the meat, the crows were still able to smell it. The crows began flying in a circle overhead. Earnest heard the crows, but continued crawling. He had to make it home. The crows began following behind Earnest on the ground.

After 3 weeks of crawling, he had reached the faucet and he still had plenty of meat in the bucket! He drank from the faucet on and off for hours. Then he ate some meat and drank more water. He felt so much better after drinking the water. He definitely knew he would make it to the house! He stayed at the faucet for 2 days, drinking water, eating meat and napping. When he felt fully hydrated again, he topped off the bucket of meat with water and headed to the house.

The smell of the rotten pork in the bucket was somewhat deadened by the water in the bucket. The crows had backed off and Earnest could see the finish line. He crawled for another 2 weeks and had made it to the front yard of the house! He continued dragging the bucket and crawling until he made it to the front door. At that point, he abandoned the bucket. It had served him well. He crawled into the house just as the thunder started rolling in from the east. Earnest heard the thunder, feeling safe in his house and crawled to the phone. The thunder became louder. Earnest picked up the receiver, dialed 911 and listened for the dispatcher to answer. The dispatcher said, "911, what is your emergency?" Earnest spoke into the phone as clearly as he could, "My name is Earnest. I think I had a stroke. Please help me!" The dispatcher said, "I can't understand you sir! Can you speak more clearly?" As Earnest tried to repeat what he had just said, he heard a loud thunder clap and the phone line went dead.

40. Ellsworth's Spark



40. Ellsworth's Spark

Ellsworth missed many things about his homeland of Egypt, but he mainly missed the heat. The zoo in which he was currently being held captive provided all the niceties of home such as food, water and a place to sleep, but it was never warm enough for his liking. Inside the camel paddock were a big wooden structure to sleep in, a water trough with fresh water and various foodstuffs to eat. Way back in the corner of the paddock was the area for storing the used straw. The used straw in the sleeping structure was cleaned out each morning and placed in the paddock corner, where it sat for a week. At the end of the week, the zookeepers removed the large pile of pooped on, pissed on straw. The stinky corner was far enough away from the front fence of the paddock that the visitors never smelled it. The camels couldn't smell it from the sleeping structure either. That corner served its purpose, at the convenience of the zoo.

One afternoon, Ellsworth was standing at the front fence of the paddock, eating carrots that were being fed to him by a woman and her children. The woman had purchased the carrots from one of the many carrot vendors in the zoo. Visitors could feed zoo animals with either bags of carrots from a vendor or with small handfuls of corn from one of those corn vending machines. Per zoo rules, no carrots or corn from outside the zoo were allowed to be fed to the animals due to possible contamination. Ellsworth loved the sweetness of the carrots and habitually stood at the fence all day gorging on them. He also ate the kernels of corn to humor the children, but preferred the carrot pieces for their larger size.

Ellsworth's lips had become unusually dexterous over the years at the zoo from eating those small pieces of corn. Normally the kids held out the palms of their hands with the corn in it and Ellsworth ate the corn from the hands. Some pieces of corn inevitably fell onto the ground. Sometimes nervous and jerky children threw the corn on the ground, too afraid to make contact with the camel in any way, which was understandable. It took a delicate feel for a camel to pick up the tiny corn kernels from the ground and not eat any dirt with the corn. The other camels didn't have Ellsworth's patience with trying to eat clean kernels; they simply ate the dirt with the corn. As a result of careful corn eating, Ellsworth's lips had the touch of a jeweler.

While Ellsworth was eating the carrots from the kids, one of the kids threw the last piece from the bag over the fence and it landed on the ground. The woman and kids walked away and Ellsworth bowed his head down to find the piece of carrot. Under some leaves next to the carrot piece, Ellsworth found the object that a visitor from the day before had dropped. Ellsworth picked up the object and walked to the back corner of the paddock and the big straw pile.

Ellsworth had observed how the man operated the object to create a small brilliant flash of light that he placed close to a white object in his mouth. The white object produced smoke of some sort that really stunk. When the man was done using the white object, he placed it into a metal can at the end of the fence. The man produced another white object from his shirt, put it in his

mouth and tried to operate the light-producing object again. The man tried numerous times, gave up and dropped the object to the ground where it fell on Ellsworth's side of the fence, out of reach of the man. The man knelt down and tried to reach the object on the ground, but was unable to. The man removed another light-producing object from his pocket, and operated it until the white object in his mouth produced smoke. The man walked away with the smoking white object in his mouth.

Ellsworth was alone at the corner of the paddock and tried to operate the light-producing object. He was determined to produce that fascinating flash. He held the plastic body of object in his teeth while rolling the metal wheel of the object with his upper lip. It was difficult. After 20 minutes, he finally got the wheel to make a spark, but no flash of light. What was he doing wrong? He kept trying to spin the wheel. Then as he spun the wheel, he accidentally held down on the tiny lever. Yes! It made the light! Ouch! Ellsworth dropped the object onto the ground. The light had somehow burned his lip. What a strange thing, he thought. He tried again after slightly repositioning the object. He spun the wheel, held the lever and he did it! He was able to hold the object just right so that it produced the light without burning his lips.

He wondered what he would be able to do with the light-producing object. He didn't have any white objects like the man had, not that he wanted to create smelly smoke anyway. Ellsworth wondered what would happen if he knelt down on the ground in front of the smelly straw pile and directed the hot light at the straw. He tried it. When he operated the device, something happened to the straw. One piece of the straw started smoking then another and another. Soon the pile of straw was producing clouds of smoke, light and heat. Ellsworth tucked the object in the long tangled hair on his neck where no one would find it. He casually walked to the sleeping structure where some camels were napping and joined them. Ellsworth pretended to be asleep on the ground, but had one eye slightly open to watch the straw pile produce huge amounts of light and smoke. It was really a spectacle! Had he caused that to happen?

Zookeepers ran into Ellsworth's paddock to retain the camels in the sleeping structure for their protection. Soon, alarms were sounding in the zoo and the fire department arrived to extinguish the flaming pile of smelly straw. The smell of the smoke that was pouring from the burning pile was horrendous. Ellsworth proudly watched the burning pile of straw, knowing he was responsible. In 15 minutes, the flames were out and all was quiet again. The next day, the zoo seemed to have a new arrangement for the straw that was removed from the camel sleeping structure. Each morning, zookeepers removed the pooped on and pissed on straw from the structure, loaded it into wagons and removed it from the paddock. The zoo had apparently realized that its laziness had led to the straw pile fire. Little did they know that it had been the crafty Ellsworth with his light-producing object.

Ellsworth didn't realize it, but his fire had improved the paddock somewhat by eliminating the

stinky pile of straw in the corner. The camels ended up with full use of the entire paddock to romp and play at will. He paused to consider the cause and effect of what had taken place. One day, he caused the straw pile to smoke and get hot and then the next day the straw pile was gone. What if he did the same thing with the sleeping structure? The structure had been there since the opening of the zoo, long before Ellsworth had arrived, and it had never been updated or modified in any way. Ellsworth decided to keep all his secrets to himself. He didn't want any of the other camels to know that he had the object stashed in his neck hair. Many of the camels were squealers, having been born at the zoo, never knowing the relative freedom that Ellsworth had in Egypt. The zoo-born camels didn't want any changes in their lifestyles and were content with whatever the zookeepers saw fit.

Ellsworth wanted a new sleeping structure for himself and the other camels. He would have to plan his next event carefully so as not to injure any camels in the process. He waited until the next morning when the zookeepers moved all the camels out of the sleeping structure into the paddock to clean out the used straw from the stalls in the structure. While the camels were still out of the structure and the zookeepers had exited the paddock with the used straw, Ellsworth would sneak back into the structure and operate the object. The zookeepers always left a little bit of straw in the stalls of the sleeping structure, because they were too lazy to rake it all. There was just enough left there for Ellsworth's light to take effect. He casually walked into the structure, knelt down and operated the object on some straw that he kicked into a pile next to the wooden support. He casually walked back out into the paddock to nonchalantly socialize with the other camels.

By the time that the zookeepers returned with the clean straw to put in the sleeping structure, the structure was in flames. The zookeepers hustled the camels to the far corner of the paddock and called the fire department. Ellsworth watched and laughed as the structure burned. By the time the fire department arrived, the dry structure had already burned to the ground and was only a large pile of glowing, smoking embers. Yes! Ellsworth had done it! He hadn't worried about where he and the other camels would sleep that night, because it was summer and they would be able to comfortably sleep outside.

Work began the next day on the new sleeping structure. The camels watched the workmen from the paddock and everyone was excited. Ellsworth wanted to take credit for the goings on, but decided to keep silent. He couldn't let the other camels know about the object that he was hiding. He began to feel empowered by the object and was really amazed at what it was capable of. He would never think that such a tiny thing could be so devastating. The people who had invented the object were probably proud of the accomplishment. The new sleeping structure was magnificent! It was much larger, breezier and fresher than before. The workers had finished the structure in a week and the camels were glad to go in and try it out. During the first night of sleeping in the new structure, Ellsworth was high-spirited. The other camels had him to thank

for their new digs.

Ellsworth thought about other changes he could make at the zoo. From his paddock, he could see some of the holding areas that the other zoo animals lived in and he wondered if he could do the same thing with those areas that he had done with his own. He was sure he could cause the same things to happen, but he would have to be able to escape from his paddock to do it. He wasn't that old of a camel, but since he had been born in Egypt, he had done a lot more walking and running than the zoo-born camels. Ellsworth was actually capable of great speed and he possessed a surprising ability to jump. The zookeepers never saw the camels do much running and jumping, only occasional trotting and sometimes skipping. The fence at the front of the paddock was designed to keep an average contented zoo-born camel inside the paddock.

Ellsworth was one of the few Egypt-born camels that the zookeepers hadn't accounted for. When night fell, Ellsworth sneaked out of the paddock and walked to the far corner, pretending to take a poop. He was confident that all the other camels were sleeping. The new sleeping structure had a low wall, which prevented camels that were lying down from viewing out into the paddock. Ellsworth used that to his advantage and started running toward the front fence. By the time he was at the fence, he was going about 35 mph. He leaped into the air, easily cleared the fence and landed on the sidewalk. He sauntered to the elephant paddock to see what he could accomplish there. He stood at the high fence and looked in. He saw that the elephants had a sleeping structure that was similar to the old structure of the camels. The elephant structure was probably built when the zoo was built.

The only problem was the high fence in front of the elephant paddock. He looked toward the back of the paddock where the fence was much lower. There was a concrete moat between the back fence and the paddock ground. Apparently, the elephants were too afraid to try to cross the moat. Ellsworth trotted around to the back of the paddock. He found a narrow trail in the trees that were growing behind the back fence that he would be able to use to start his run. He had to gain enough speed to clear the fence and moat to land on the ground of the paddock. He started running, knowing he would have to be going faster than he ran at his paddock. At the fence, he leaped into the air, cleared the fence, sailed over the moat and landed safely on the ground of the paddock with room to spare. That was easy! He would have to repeat the process the reverse way on the way out of the elephant paddock.

Ellsworth walked over to the elephant sleeping structure where there was much snoring going on. He thought the camels were loud snorers. The camels didn't have anything on the elephants! It was actually really loud in there! Ellsworth woke the elephant leader and told him the plan. The leader agreed to the plan and instructed the elephants to quietly exit the sleeping structure and go out to the far corner of the paddock. Ellsworth operated his object, making sure the straw was lit and ran out into the paddock. He looked over at the structure, observed the light from the flames

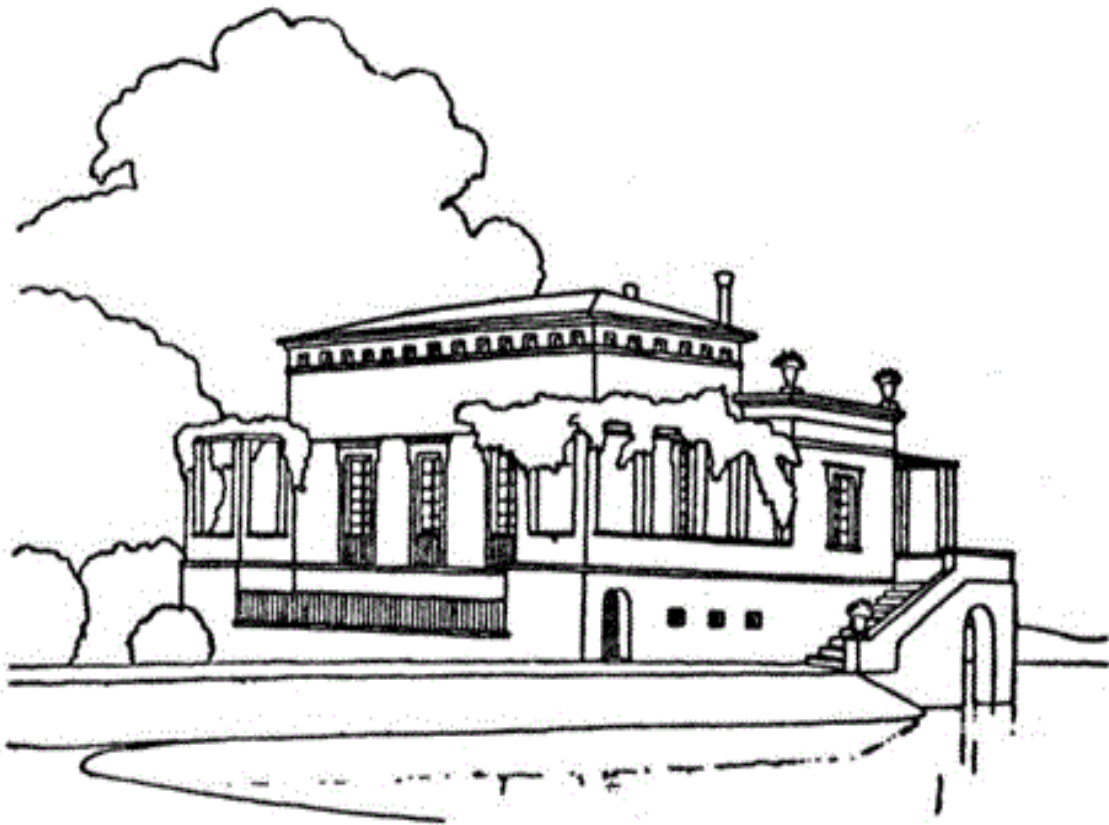
and starting running toward the back fence. It was trickier running out of the elephant paddock than running in because he had to clear the back fence and land on the narrow trail. He did it! He ran back to his paddock, jumped over the fence and slowly crept back into the sleeping structure. When he approached his stall, his neighbor asked him where he was. Ellsworth told his neighbor he had to take a poop. His neighbor mumbled something and went back to sleep.

From Ellsworth's stall, he heard the alarms going off and slowly got up with the rest of the camels to go out into the paddock to see what was happening. The camels watched the elephant sleeping structure quickly burn to the ground, the same way that theirs had. Ellsworth chuckled to himself at his latest victory for the zoo animals. The next day, work began on the new sleeping structure for the elephants. The elephants were overjoyed! Their new structure was state of the art and beautiful. It was much larger and fresher than before. Ellsworth looked from the front fence of his paddock at the elephant leader that was looking back at him from the front fence of the elephant paddock. The elephant leader gathered all the other elephants to stand in a line at the fence. At the leader's prompting, all the elephants raised their trunks high into the air at Ellsworth, giving him the trunks up gesture. Ellsworth was touched and tears came to his eyes. He lifted his chin as high as he could back at the elephants, indicating that he saw their gesture.

Ellsworth next planned to see about getting the giraffes a new sleeping structure. He couldn't see their paddock from the camel paddock, so he had to do some recon. He waited a week for everything at the zoo to settle down. He didn't want the zookeepers to get suspicious of his nocturnal activities. He picked a night, exited his paddock as before and walked to the giraffe paddock. The fences around the giraffe paddock were ridiculously high, including around the back, where there was no moat. It appeared to be trickier to get into than the elephant paddock had been. Ellsworth stood there for a while looking and thinking. He didn't want to give up and let down the giraffes. There had to be a way in there! He noticed a tree growing outside the paddock in the front and a similar tree growing inside of the paddock in the back. Both trees had branches sticking out of the tree from the ground level to the top. To get into the paddock all he had to do was climb the tree in front, jump over the fence and land on the ground inside the paddock. On the way out, he could climb the tree in the back and do the same thing in reverse.

It would have to work! The next evening, Ellsworth escaped his paddock, ran to the giraffe paddock and began climbing the tree in front. It was incredibly treacherous as he slipped on the bark. He thought it would be easier. He struggled to climb the tree to the height of the top of the fence. The higher he climbed, the more terrified he became. When he was finally high enough, he looked at the top of the fence and considered how he was going to jump from the tree, clear the fence and land safely on the ground. Ellsworth panicked. He was too afraid to jump and he was too afraid to climb back down. He couldn't move!

41. Felton's Mansion



41. Felton's Mansion

Felton had been a butler for 41 years at the mansion and thought he had seen it all, but his aging boss Garth had finally gone too far.

Since Felton had been trained in England at one of the finest schools for butlers, he had been psychologically prepared for the idiosyncrasies of the wealthy. When Felton had arrived at the mansion at the age of 21, he had been put in charge of the maids, wait staff and cooks. It was a lot of responsibility for someone so young. He was younger than most of his underlings. His training spoke for itself though and he took charge with authority and fairness.

Felton was permitted by Garth to hire and fire as Felton deemed necessary, without consulting with Garth. Garth was a billionaire who chose not to be bothered by the petty things involved in running his mansion. It was easier to have his English butler see to it all. In addition to the mansion, Felton was responsible for the staff involved in the maintenance of the grounds, horse stable, garden, motorcycle, boat and car collections and facilities. In all, Felton had 23 people working under him, including the chauffeurs and limousine mechanics. Felton earned a large salary, but Garth made him earn it.

Felton chose to not become involved with romance, which made his life at the mansion easier. There were too many potential temptations existing within the 23 people in his staff. The people under Felton could goof around among themselves, but he intended to never get involved with any of them romantically. Felton had a nice room at the mansion as part of his employment, which enabled Garth to beckon Felton at all hours of the day and night. Garth never married, so Felton ended up on the receiving end of a large amount of Garth's frustration over the years. When Garth had a bad day at the office, he shared it with Felton. Most of the time, Garth was tense when he came home from the office.

The evening ritual involved Felton giving Garth a neck massage while Garth sat in the chair in front of the fireplace having coffee. Then Felton removed Garth's shoes and massaged his feet. It was all part of being a proper butler. Felton was highly trained and skilled in many things. If Garth wanted to hear some funny jokes, Felton would tell funny jokes. If Garth wanted to hear a sad story, Felton would tell him a sad story. Many times Felton read Garth stories from the hundreds of books in the mansion's library. Felton kept Garth's hair neatly cut and shaved him every morning with a straight razor for the extra-close shave demanded by the billionaire. Garth believed in looking immaculate at the office. He wore his custom-made shoes with the beautiful shines applied by Felton.

Each morning, Felton had Garth's clothes laid out for him to wear. All Garth had to do was wake up, take a shower and dress in the pre-picked clothing. No decisions were necessary by Garth. He had enough to worry about at the office. The shirts, jackets, ties, belts, socks and shoes

matched meticulously by Felton. Felton prepared a widely varied diet plan that was approved by Garth. All Garth's meals at the mansion were nutritionally balanced and calorically checked. Garth had to eat properly or suffer the consequences of stress-induced poor health. Felton also ensured that Garth follow Felton's physical fitness regimen, which included walking on the treadmill for an hour each day. The estate that the mansion sat on had an extensive garden from which the chef procured fresh produce each day. Felton insisted on nothing but the freshest and finest for Garth. Garth could certainly afford it.

When Garth held parties at the mansion to shmooze his business contacts, Felton was in charge of making sure the guests had plenty of the best food to eat, the finest beverages to drink and the classiest music to listen and dance to. Felton arranged everything according to the varying themes as Garth required. Garth had given Felton had carte-blanche to buy the best wines, champagnes, caviar, and other exotic food and drink. Thanks to Felton, Garth had the reputation of hosting the best parties in the county. Even though Felton's butler training encompassed much of what he became involved in at the mansion, he continued refining his skills as time went on. Felton wanted to be the best butler he could be and assist Garth in becoming even more magnanimous.

Garth's theme parties always had a concept that was different every time. Garth never wanted to repeat himself and always wanted the guests to be enthralled and talk about the parties to their friends who hadn't been lucky enough to be invited. Garth's parties were always held on Saturdays. That way, if people wished, they could stay the night and go home in the morning. One theme was Halloween for a party held on Saturday, October 31. Another theme was a New Year's Eve party held on Saturday, December 31. Another party was on Saturday, July 4. All the party attendees were expected to dress appropriately for the designated themes. If a guest forgot to bring a costume, they could pick one from the fully stocked costume room in the mansion.

Numerous pool parties were held year round at the mansion at the heated in-ground 5,000 square foot pool. The weather there in Southern California was always nice. The pool parties involved a lot of secret rendezvous afterward in the mansion. The pool parties seemed to be Garth's most popular parties, due no doubt in large part to the casualness of the attire of the partygoers.

Due to being so busy with his oil empire, Garth never had much time to meet women. He had relied on Felton to do the dirty work for him. Felton was in constant contact with the numerous talent agencies that maintained lists of the thousands of women who aspired to become actresses in nearby Hollywood. The talent agencies supplied Felton with the lists and pictures of the actresses with the idea that Garth through Felton would help to get the actresses established in Hollywood. Garth had helped many of the actresses get their start in the business.

Since all the parties were on Saturdays, Garth's dates were invited to stay overnight at the mansion until Sunday if they wanted. On Friday evenings, while Felton was giving Garth the

daily tension-reducing neck massage, Garth would peruse the names and pictures of the actresses that Felton had provided. After Garth had picked out a number of possible dates for the Saturday party, Felton would call each woman until he found one who was available. Felton always picked up Garth's dates in person with one of the limos and brought them to the party. He drove them back home on Sunday mornings or whenever they felt like leaving. Garth never rushed anyone out of his mansion. He loved people's attention and freely spent his money on people. Garth never felt used by his guests. He loved to entertain at the highest level. Once in a while he made friends with a politician who came in handy eventually.

In order to maximize discretion, Garth only permitted Felton to arrange and transport the dates to and from the mansion parties. The chauffeurs transported the other guests, but never Garth's dates. When Garth had entrusted Felton with his mansion and secrets, he considered Felton to be an indispensable part of his life and privacy. Felton had kept every secret he was ever exposed to, which was another crucial trait of being an expert butler. Butlers were expected to keep secrets as tightly as priests in confessionals or psychiatrists in their offices.

Felton suggested Kentucky Derby themed parties where the guests could ride horses from Garth's stable of beautiful ex-racehorses. Garth didn't believe in buying horses from breeders. He preferred to buy horses from owners that were unsuccessful at racing, to save the lives of the horses that would otherwise be sold to the glue factory. Garth was a great humanitarian and donated millions to charities that helped wounded veterans get jobs, volunteer organizations that needed funding to do their great work and many other worthwhile organizations. Garth only donated to the charities that had the maximum value per dollar donated. Many charities wasted a lot of donations on administration salaries and other inefficiencies.

Felton came up with the idea for the Indianapolis 500 themed party where the guests could ride in high powered go-karts around a special track on Garth's estate. The track and cars cost a pretty penny, but people loved it. Most of the guests considered themselves good drivers but no one could ever beat Felton on the track who usually led the race the whole way. His extensive butler training included advanced driving techniques.

Garth had a movie theater in the mansion in which were viewed all the latest and greatest movies selected by Felton who always kept up on the latest media trends. Garth's actress dates particularly liked the theater, hoping to see themselves on the big screen someday.

Some of Felton's secrets involved Garth's personal issues. When Garth revealed anything personal to Felton, the information was to stop at Felton and go no further. Garth had a reputation to maintain as a fearless, ruthless business tycoon and couldn't allow any weaknesses or weirdnesses to become public knowledge. Garth had occasional issues with hemorrhoids that were only his to know about. Felton had learned the best ways to treat the minor ailment at his butler college and was most helpful to Garth in that regard. Due to Garth having frequent contact

with so many different aspiring actresses, he contracted the occasional bout of "social illness." Felton knew exactly what to do in those situations and was able to restore Garth to perfect health in a short time. Garth's vast wealth gave him access to a "doctor of the stars" who was able to provide Felton with the necessary lotions and potions for Garth.

As Garth aged, his bodily functions occasionally became somewhat uncontrollable and he had to wear certain undergarments purchased by Felton. Garth didn't mind getting old, but at 89, his body started falling apart. Felton was 62, and hadn't yet begun to endure the things his boss had been experiencing. Felton had exhaustive psychological training in England, which helped him on many occasions to mentally bring Garth down from a scary place. Garth had been feeling paranoid lately that everyone was out to get him. He trusted his workers at the office less and less and questioned them more often than they liked about the way they were running his oil empire. Felton had assured Garth that he was still the boss and no one would dare to do anything to wreck his fortunes. It was Felton's ongoing cerebral support that helped Garth to keep working and stay successful. Garth wanted to continually expand and increase his wealth so that he could donate more money to charities.

Sometimes, Felton felt like a father giving advice to his son when Garth would ask him for help. Garth would ask Felton about a particular person, whom Felton didn't know and if Garth should fire that person. Felton would ask Garth, "What would the Garth of 20 years ago do?" Garth would say, "That younger Garth would have fired them!" Felton would reply, "Then fire them!" Garth would then fire the person. Garth trusted Felton's judgment in all situations. Garth felt that since Felton came from the English butler school, he was versed in all matters helpful to Garth. Over the years, Felton had proven it.

When Garth traveled on business trips, Felton always went with him as his right hand man. Felton carried on with Garth away from home the same way that he did when they were in their hometown. Felton had displayed his indispensability repeatedly on the business trips, helping Garth to get organized and stay organized. Felton had a knack for numbers and paperwork. He always ensured that Garth's briefcase contained the most pertinent documents for Garth's many meetings. Felton packed and carried all the luggage for the trips. He arranged the airfare and hotels. Wherever they went, Felton somehow knew where the best places were to entertain, wine and dine clients.

Felton really came into his own when Garth traveled to England. Since Felton was born and trained there, he knew everything there was to know about England. He helped Garth to gain some valuable clients there. The clients were impressed by Garth's choice in butlers. Felton appeared to them to be capable of acting as an assistant, business consultant and butler all in one neat package. When Garth and Felton traveled to Japan, Felton located and supplied Garth and his clients with Geishas, which the Japanese businessmen loved. Felton was capable of

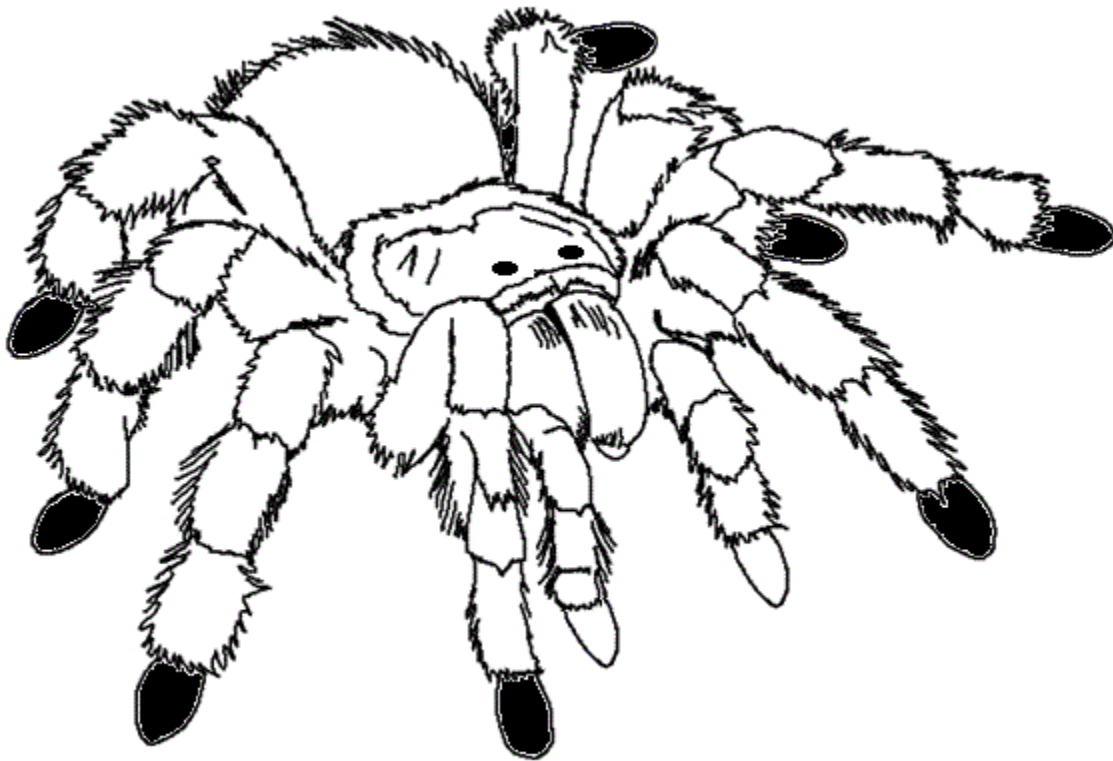
minimally conversing in several languages including Japanese, German, Spanish and limited Chinese. He acted as an interpreter for Garth all over Europe and Asia. In butler college, Felton gained just enough literacy in foreign languages to just get by with Garth in business meetings abroad. Garth concluded early on that Felton had been a good investment, perhaps his best investment, 2nd only to his 1st oil well purchase.

Garth had always loved boats and boating - sailboats, speedboats, cabin cruisers, yachts - virtually all things marine related. He owned many boats of all makes, shapes and sizes. Felton had gone along with Garth on a boat buying vacation. They traveled the U.S. in search of boats with the latest technology, comforts and sleekness. Price was no object to Garth, since everything he owned was slated to be given to charity when he passed. He owned hundreds of collectible motorcycles and vehicles that had drastically increased in value over the years, proving to be a good investment. He had many boats already, but wanted to add many more to the fleet. Felton heavily researched the boating industry and selected many of the new models for Garth to consider purchasing. Felton also suggested a few of the older restored classics, just for the pure nostalgia of the boats.

Garth agreed with Felton's recommendations and had set aside \$500 million to splurge on the boats. Felton had suggested \$350 million, but Garth was going for broke. Garth felt that he wasn't getting any younger and he wanted to ensure that enough money was put into that field of investment. Felton concurred. They bought luxury yachts in Malibu, fishing boats in Charleston and speed boats in Miami. They bought restored sailing vessels originally from the 1700's. After 3 months of crazed spending they were done with the boat-buying spree and headed back to the mansion. Since the mansion was located on the ocean, it had great access to open water. Garth had a small wall and protected area constructed for the boats that were in the water. The 10 or so boats that Garth kept in the water year round were always protected from waves and storms.

Garth felt like throwing a real humdinger of a party and Felton suggested a boating party to show off some of the new purchases. Garth felt that it was a splendid idea and had Felton call out the invitations on that Friday evening. Felton called an actress for Garth's date to the party and drove her to the mansion on Saturday afternoon. The boating party was a roaring success with everyone enjoying the new boats and water festivities. Even though Garth was old, he still enjoyed operating the smaller boats by himself to blow off business-induced steam. Very late that night, when the party was over and most of the guests had gone home, Felton heard a knock at his door. Felton was accustomed to hearing knocking at his door in the middle of the late night, due to Garth's many unusual nocturnal requests. When Felton opened the door, he saw Garth standing there soaking wet, with wide eyes. Garth shrieked, "Felton, you have to help me! She's unconscious!" Felton said, "Who? Who's unconscious? The actress?" Garth cried, "Yes! I let her drive that new Chris Craft and we crashed into the dock!" "Is she still breathing?" said Felton. "We have to get rid of her!" said Garth.

42. Garnet's Web



42. Garnet's Web

Garnet began life as a typical spider that was only capable of spinning a web barely strong enough to retain a victim that the spider would then incapacitate, roll up in webbing and suck the life out of. Nature had a way of preventing spiders from getting in above their heads. It only made sense. Imagine if a spider the size of a dime could spin a web strong enough to hold a squirrel. The spider would never be able to do anything with the squirrel. The spider wouldn't have enough toxins in its puny body to drug the squirrel into submission. The squirrel would be caught in the web, until it died weeks later and rot, until some crows found its rotten carcass. Garnet's prey was limited to small creatures such as flies, small bees and small moths. Large horse flies, bumblebees and butterflies easily tore through his web and flew away laughing.

As Garnet's luck would have it, an Atomic Energy plant had been recently constructed upstream of his web location. The plant was the first one built in the U.S., with the majority of the major issues worked out, per the eminent atomic and radiological scientists. The scientists claimed that if a malfunction occurred in the plant that involved the radioactive core in any way, the plant would shut down and cool off before any real damage could take place. The atomic core of the energy generating system was cooled by water, which was multi-filtered, then released into the stream outside the plant. The stream was tested weekly for excessive levels of radiation. Atomic energy production had been studied extensively for 15 years before the plant was built. Various checks and balances and automated systems ensured almost 100% reliability and safety.

After the plant went into operation, it began releasing the cooling liquid into the stream. When Garnet initially built his web, it spanned the stream and was connected to 2 trees growing on either side. The bottom of the web was above the level of the stream. As soon as the plant went into service, the water level of the stream rose, due to the increased amount of water that was being discharged into the stream by the plant. New insect varieties began to get caught in Garnet's web such as water striders and water flies. Over a couple of weeks, Garnet gladly welcomed the new species of insects and ate them all. The pressure from the stream pushing on the bottom of his web forced Garnet to reinforce the entire web with extra webbing from his spinnerets. One day, a baby frog floated downstream and became caught in the web. Before the plant was built, the frog would have easily torn through Garnet's webbing material.

Garnet wondered why the frog couldn't tear the web, then dismissed the thought, drugged the frog and wrapped it up in a cocoon for supper. That frog would be the largest thing that Garnet had ever eaten. Garnet continued to reinforce the web to repair the damage from floating sticks and weeds. A week later, a bumblebee floated into the web and became caught, unable to tear the web and escape. Garnet couldn't believe his eyes. He had a bumble caught in his web! It was impossible. The bee tried and tried, but couldn't break free. Garnet stung it and ate it immediately, triumphant of his victory. Garnet continued reinforcing the web and eating the new

floating morsels for a month. While repairing the web one day, he happened to notice his reflection in the stream.

It appeared that his body had gotten bigger, although he couldn't be sure. A chipmunk floated downstream while Garnet was admiring his reflection. Garnet saw the chipmunk and crawled up high in the web, expecting the chipmunk to easily tear his whole web down. It didn't! The chipmunk thrashed in the web and stayed there. Garnet hesitatingly approached the chipmunk to bite it. He didn't expect to be able to drug the chipmunk, but it worked! The chipmunk fell asleep and Garnet wrapped it up. Garnet awoke the next morning and drained 1/2 of the chipmunk for breakfast, saving the other 1/2 for supper. He couldn't believe he was able to fit that much chipmunk juice in his belly. Garnet concluded that his spider body must in fact be bigger and he must have more toxin in his mandibles for drugging larger animals. He drank the other 1/2 of the chipmunk for supper, dispensed with the dried husk of the chipmunk body and reinforced the web again.

Another month passed with various insects and more chipmunks meeting their fates in Garnet's web. Garnet expanded the width and height of the web, while reinforcing the entire structure. He sensed that the webbing produced by his spinnerets must be getting stronger somehow. How else was he able to keep catching those larger animals? A red squirrel floated downstream one day, getting caught and then the next day, a larger gray squirrel was caught. Garnet was really feasting. A week passed and a rabbit became caught. Garnet had been checking on his reflection daily and was enjoying his ever-increasing size. His web was taking on an almost wiry feel to it. He expanded the size of the web again and reinforced the entire thing.

A fox floated downstream one day and Garnet hurriedly climbed up into the corner of the web to watch. The fox had been caught in the web! Yes! Garnet sneaked down to the animal, stung it and wrapped it up. Garnet couldn't figure out what was happening to him, but whatever it was, he liked it. He continued enlarging and reinforcing his web.

Time passed and Garnet trapped more squirrels, foxes and chipmunks in his web. He also trapped raccoons and possums. Garnet had grown to the size of a beagle and his web was bigger and stronger than ever. He expanded the web laterally and connected it to stronger trees that were growing farther away from the stream. He wondered how big of an animal his web would be able to trap. Could he trap a coyote or a wolf or a bear?

Garnet's questions were answered when a violent rainstorm had caused a coyote to float downstream into his web. The animal probably slipped from the eroding edge of the stream. The water was really muddy. The animal thrashed violently, but was tightly caught. Garnet sneaked down to the spastic animal and silenced it with a one-second bite. Incredible! Garnet was so hungry that he sucked the animal dry on the spot. Garnet continued growing larger and soon attained the size of a Labrador retriever! Garnet had actually become larger than his prey!

The continuing stormy weather caused 2 wolves to slip into the water upstream and they floated into Garnet's web. Even though the wolves were caught in the web, they still snapped at Garnet as he tried to bite them. After 30 minutes of thrashing, the wolves calmed down, enabling Garnet to dispatch them. Garnet's hunger caused him to drink down their liquids immediately after biting them. Garnet's body size surged after eating the wolves.

Garnet found himself getting hungrier and hungrier as he continued to grow. He felt he was being drawn into the machine of his mind. He was no longer the same casual spider that was satisfied eating flies and tolerant of laughing bumblebees. He was getting a strange feeling that he could do and eat whatever he wanted. Why should he wait for the food to come to him? He was currently the size of a Great Dane and he had enough toxin to knock out any animal he chose. He decided to leave his web and capture a bear to eat! Why not?

The next morning, he climbed off his beautiful web and marched through the woods in an upstream direction. Everything good that had been happening to Garnet over the past several months had come from upstream. There must be a nice bear up that way somewhere. After a week of walking, he was beginning to wish he were back on his web. He hadn't eaten anything since the wolves. He had expected to encounter animals along the way to snack on as he searched for the bear, but found none. He was starving! He had to get something to eat already! He wondered if he was scaring away all the animals by his size. That was a possibility. The typical animals of the woods had never seen a spider so big. Even though he hadn't eaten in a week, Garnet continued to get larger. He had reached the size of a young bear, weighing in at 200 pounds.

Speaking of bears, there's one right now! Finally! Garnet hunkered down on the ground as low as he could and considered how to engage the bear. When animals were caught in Garnet's web, they were easier to approach and bite, because they were almost immobilized by the web. A bear out in the wild would be loose and capable of much bodily harm if Garnet weren't careful. Of course! When he got close enough to the bear, he would quickly spin around and point his spinnerets at the bear. Then Garnet would squirt the webbing from the spinnerets and hopefully get enough on the bear to entangle it as if it were caught in his web. It would have to work.

The bear was tearing at a tree eating honey. Garnet sneaked closer, trying not to make too much noise. It was close enough. Now! Garnet spun around and soaked the bear with webbing. The bear started growling, roaring and trying to tear at the sinewy webbing. Garnet's webbing was holding and he moved in for the bite. The bear saw Garnet sneaking toward him and roared in Garnet's face, spewing drool on it. Garnet leaped at the bear, landed on its back, and bit the bear's neck. Down the bear went to the ground! Garnet began drinking the bear's juices without delay and stayed on top of it for 3 hours, enjoying the meal. Garnet camped out at the bear for a week and drank it all down to the last drop. Garnet liked the concept of eating bears, because

there was so much food in one animal.

He was determined to find another one. After 5 days of trekking, he spotted another bear, captured and ate it in the same way. He felt himself get a lot bigger after eating those 2 bears and admired himself in the stream. His eyes almost popped out of his head when he saw the reflection of himself. He looked like a bear with 8 legs! He was beautiful! The drawback to being so big was the big appetite necessary to keep feeding the machine. Life was easier when he was satisfied after eating a fly. He currently needed a 300-pound bear to feel full. What had he done to himself? It was too late. He was gigantic and getting bigger. He had to keep finding bears to eat; it was that simple.

Garnet continued walking in an upstream direction as he hunted for more bears. In a week, he found 2 more and ate them over 2 weeks. Bears were definitely the way to go! After another week passed, he found no bears. Then after another week, there were still no bears. Were they all gone? Garnet was always hungry. He weighed 700 pounds and was the size of a Volkswagen Beetle. Where were all the bears? As he looked around the woods for bears, he spotted the power plant through the trees. He wondered what it was and sneaked to the edge of the woods to observe. Garnet saw animals that resembled bears but the animals walked on their back feet. The animals had no fur. Garnet had never seen such furless-animals before. Some of the animals were walking to and from a large square rock into which they somehow entered and disappeared. Other of the animals were getting in and out of smaller, colored rocks that moved and disappeared from the area! How strange!

The furless-animals appeared to be weaker than bears and would probably be easy to catch with Garnet's webbing. Garnet thought he would probably have to catch 3 of those animals to equal one bear. There were enough furless-animals for Garnet to eat for the rest of his life. He noticed how the stream that he had been following came out of the big square rock. Garnet's plan was to run as fast as he could at the animals, spin around quickly and spray them with webbing. The webbing would easily hold the animals until as long as necessary. Since he was getting weak and hungry, he would have to drink the juice from some of them on the spot, to regain his strength. Then, when he had cocooned all of them, he could bite them and drink their liquids at his leisure.

The furless-animals appeared to exist in unlimited numbers. It looked as if the animals lived in the big rock and came out to use the smaller colored rocks for a while, and then return. Garnet wondered about the stream that flowed out of the big square rock, the very stream that had supplied him with so many animals over the past months. Were the animals that had floated downstream to him being placed in the water by the furless-animals in the building? Garnet supposed that it didn't matter, since he planned to go into the big rock after he had caught all the animals outside.

Once he was inside the big square rock, he would capture all the animals and investigate the

stream. Maybe he would have easy access to the animals that float in the stream and be able to easily pick them out of the water to eat. Garnet had big plans for the furless-animals. Once he got started, there would be no stopping him. The weak animals wouldn't know what was hitting them.

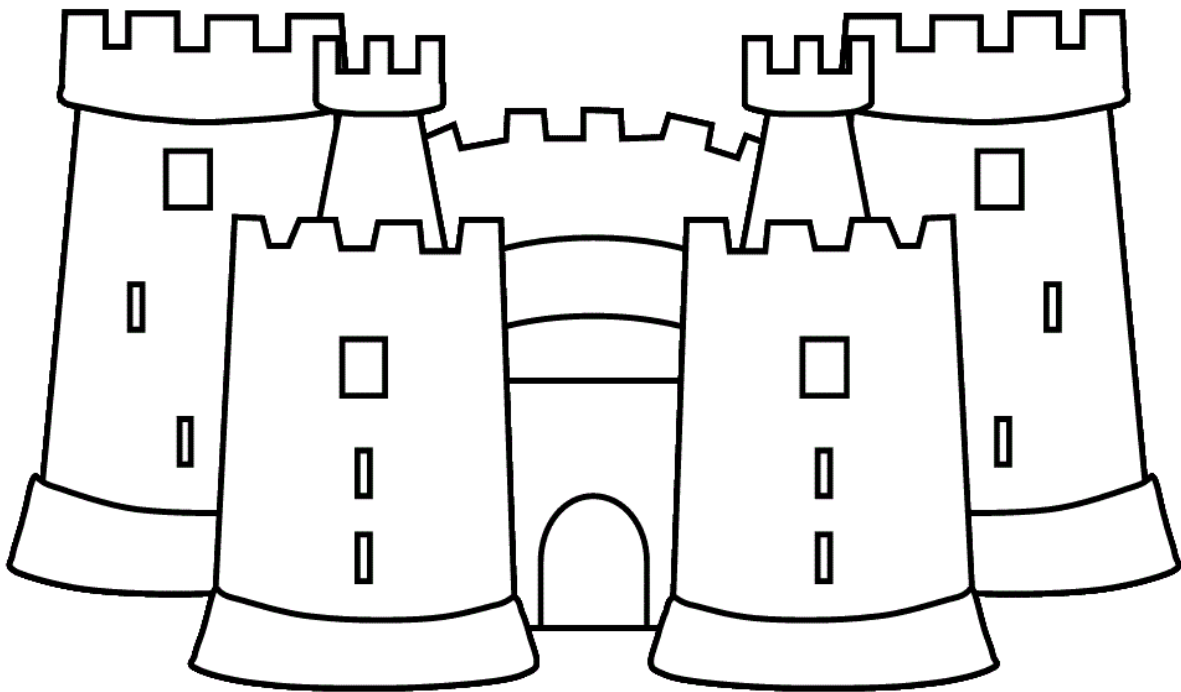
The giant bear had been living 3 miles downstream of Garnet's web for a while and had been enjoying the fish that were swimming downstream to him over the past several months. The bear had grown to enormous size as a result of eating the fish in the stream, in the same way that Garnet had grown to enormous size from eating the animals that floated on the stream. Before the power plant was built, the bear had been the average bear size of 300 pounds. It had increased in size to 4,500 pounds and was as tall as a tractor trailer when standing on its back feet. The fish in the stream had ceased being enough to supply his nutritional needs. He had to supplement his diet of fish from the stream with any animals he could find in the woods.

He began marching in an upstream direction, eating the stream fish, then fanning out to the left and right, eating everything that moved. His instinct told him to follow the stream, because it would lead to more and more food, which it did. The bear kept progressing and eating. It began to wonder if it would run out of food. It had to walk on its back feet, since its belly was so enormous that it scraped on the ground, slowing its progress. The bear couldn't afford to waste any energy. It needed all it could get. The bear ate deer, moose, wolves, coyotes, raccoons, possums, squirrels, chipmunks, other bears and foxes. Similar to Garnet, the more the bear ate, the bigger its already unusually large body became. The bear became possessed by the quest for food. It remembered when it was content tearing into a tree eating the honey out of it. Those days were long gone. The giant bear wished it didn't have to eat so much to survive, but like Garnet, it had become a victim of the stream.

As the giant bear continued his quest upstream, it encountered an enormous spider web, the largest he had ever seen. The bear lumbered through the web as if it weren't even there. The bear walked at such a quick pace that it caught up to Garnet's trail and it saw the spider's tracks in the dirt. The bear wondered what kind of animal had made those huge tracks. It wondered if it was following the trail of the spider that had built that enormous web. The bear didn't care what kind of animal it was following. Whether or not it was some kind of big spider was immaterial. The giant bear was hungry and would eat whatever it was to survive.

Garnet didn't want to waste too much time in the world outside the woods. He wanted to capture all the furless-animals as quickly as possible, and then bring them back to his web for future consumption. Garnet suddenly heard a great crunching of branches behind him. The giant bear growled. Garnet turned toward the sound and saw the biggest bear he had ever seen holding an enormous boulder over its head. The bear roared. Garnet quickly spun back around to operate his spinnerets at the bear. It was too late.

43. Darick's Kingdom



43. Darick's Kingdom

When King Darick awoke in his King-sized bed, he reached out to the silk pull cord next to the bed and gave it a yank. Within 15 seconds, a slew of people entered the King's bedroom and began the morning's events. As Darick sat up in bed and raised himself off his silk-cased pillow, a person placed another pillow behind Darick's back to keep him elevated. A silver tray of food was placed on the silk bedspread directly in front of Darick. The person who had placed the tray began feeding Darick from the varied assortment of tasty items on the tray. The person moved the spoon or fork in front of an item and Darick would nod his Royal head slightly, indicating that he wanted some of the food placed in his mouth. The server fed Darick with a bite of the food only after first sampling it themselves. The Royals were constantly being poisoned and safeguards had to be in place.

After each bite of food, the server gestured with their free hand to one of the glasses of liquid beverage. If the King nodded, the server held the glass for Darick to drink after first drinking from the glass themselves, of course. The server always patiently waited for Darick to finish chewing before gesturing to another food item. A napkin was always handy for the server to wipe Darick's mouth. It was up to the server to notice when Darick's mouth required wiping. If Darick burped or farted while eating, the server or anyone else in the room had better not grin, laugh or giggle, at the risk of entering the guillotine. No one ever laughed at the King. It was the law. Darick's latest queen had laughed when Darick farted in the Grand Court during a knighting ceremony the previous month. She was forced to enter the guillotine. Currently, Darick had no queen and was sleeping alone.

If Darick burped, it was the server's duty to gently pat Darick on the back like a baby, to assist with the passage of stomach gas. There was no assistance necessary when Darick farted. He didn't need any help doing that; he did it all day long. He reckoned it was because of all the beans in his healthy diet. When Darick finished eating, he walked to the corner of the large room behind a wall where he sat on the gold encrusted toilet and relieved himself. A gold encrusted bathtub awaited him next to the toilet. While Darick was eating, the tub had been filled with water of his desired temperature. The food server removed the food tray and exited the room, while the 2 bathers bathed the king. The bathers helped Darick safely climb into the tub, holding his hands and arms tightly.

While one of the bathers washed Darick's hair, the other washed the remainder of his body. When Darick's hair was clean, he was shaved and had his hair trimmed. His fingernails and toenails were maintained as necessary. When the bathing was completed, Darick was carefully removed from the tub, dried and powdered with a fragrant finely ground talc. The 2 bathers exited the room and the 2 dressers took over. The level of decorum required for the day's meetings determined how fancily Darick was clad by the dressers. The dressers obtained

Darick's daily schedule of meetings from Zenon the wizard, who arrived with the others to greet the king. Zenon was always in Darick's presence or close nearby. Zenon's room in the castle was next to Darick's. Most of the kings back in those days had a special adviser who was actually a wizard. The king trusted the wizard with all his secrets and scheduling. Only the wizard knew each day what the king was doing, to prevent attacks on the king from being planned.

Typically, a king has a dream or a vision of the wizard. The wizard mysteriously appears to the king sometime after the dream, confirming the prophecy. The relationship between a king and a wizard was otherworldly and unquestioned. The kings who had wizards working for them in the castle were the most feared of all the kings. Due to the fear that people had for the wizard-employing king, the king had to watch his back at all times.

On that particular day, Darick was scheduled for a knighting ceremony, which was the most decorative ceremony held in the castle. A person becoming a knight was a great honor and the king enjoyed being a part of enabling another valiant soldier to protect the king and kingdom. The 2 dressers had their work cut out for them. The king's best garments were on hand to apply to the king. As Darick stood like a statue, the dressers applied the upper and lower undergarments, laced and tightened them and then applied the pantaloons. Then the jacket was applied followed by the belt, sash, sword and cape. The wig with the longest hair was carefully fitted in place on the king's head and powdered. The last object placed on the king's head was the jewel-encrusted gold crown, which was brought into the room by the master at arms, who arrived under heavy guard. The entire time that the crown was on the king's head required the master at arms to be present with his guards to protect the crown.

The last article of clothing was the beautiful, mid-thigh, black leather boots. The king had to sit in a chair to have the boots pulled on and laced with the lacing needles. Each dresser did a boot to hasten the process. The king walked with a special cane made of the hardest wood, topped by a giant ruby. When Darick was fully decked out, he looked amazing and he knew it. His favorite expression was, "It's good to be the king!" As Darick walked through his room to leave for the ceremony, he stopped at the large mirror and admired himself. Zenon had been standing in the corner during the king's morning ritual, as he did every morning. Zenon whispered to Darick, "You look wonderful, my king, as always!" Darick said, "Thank you, Zenon!" Zenon's only article of clothing was a large, black silk-hooded cape. The hood covered Zenon's head at all times, concealing his emotions and expressions. No one knew if Zenon wore anything under the cape and no one wanted to know. Those wizards were spooky, mysterious characters, seemingly with their own agendas. Wizards were supposedly totally devoted to the kings, but only the king's really knew for sure. The kings never revealed anything about their relationships with their wizards, for fear of tainting the mojo.

Darick exited the room followed by the master at arms, his guards and Zenon, who followed the

king everywhere to provide the king with important guidance. Darick and the entourage were on their way to the Grand Court, where Darick performed knighting ceremonies and day-to-day decision making with Zenon's assistance. Each day was full of possibilities for Darick. On some days, he would pardon people's crimes. On other days, he would sentence people to the guillotine. The king had power over everyone in the kingdom and could decide anyone's fate at the drop of a hat.

It was a spectacle in the court when someone was brought in to see the king for whatever reason. The court clerk read the charges against the person who was kneeling on the ornately carved stone floor in front of the king a considerable distance away. Heavily armed guards stood on the floor in 2 lines, poised to prevent any attacks on the king. Part of being knighted by the king involved the new knight in committing their lives to the king. The king must be protected at all costs, even if a knight had to leap in front of an arrow, sword or spear.

Zenon stood directly behind Darick so that he could as discreetly as possible whisper in the king's ear. Many members of the kingdom felt that the way to survive was to be always on Zenon's good side. The problem was that no one knew anything about Zenon and no one ever talked to him, except the king. Most thought Darick made the major decisions in the kingdom and only asked Zenon for concurrence, extra guidance or information. Part of Zenon's mystique was his unusual amount of knowledge about everything. No one knew where the wizards came from. They just appeared and were adopted by the king for an eternity. There were no courts of people making decisions in the kingdom. The king, the wizard and the court clerk were the judge, jury and executioners. There was no way for anyone to gain favor in the eyes of the king. His wisdom was counted upon to make the best decisions possible based on his knowledge, experience and fairness.

Occasionally, people were brought into the court to suggest new ordinances or laws, which would favor them in some way. Darick and Zenon would quickly see through the person's scheme and the person would be severely punished in the pillory, dungeon or guillotine. Examples had to be set in the court to prevent the court's valuable time from being wasted on trivial dreamers wanting something to make their lives easier. Darick's equality and fairness in his rule made him adored by most of the members of his kingdom. The people who hated him or plotted against him were the businessmen who always wanted a bigger piece of the pie. Darick's kingdom had no room for monopolizing business practices. Darick wanted everyone to have an equal chance at working and providing services to the community. The kingdom's businesses and business owners were constantly audited to see exactly how much money the businesses made. If a business became too large, it had to downsize to allow another business owner to participate.

Even if there were 2 businesses next door to each other, selling the same things, it was preferable

to one larger business doing too much business. The people who were just starting out in the business world loved the idea of a little guy not being squashed by a bigger guy. It was Darick's egalitarian principles relating to business that made his kingdom so prosperous and capable of trading with other kingdoms. By having more people involved in business, more ideas were always flowing and better ways of doing things were discovered every day.

Sometimes people were brought into the court for lack of paying their bills. If the people had good enough reasons for the lack of payment, the court would pay the bills, with the condition that the person would have to work for the money paid. Lazy people weren't capable of making do on the king's pardon and were punished. Those lazy people had gotten themselves into their non-payment dilemma in the first place. Others, who had suffered accidental or natural hardships such as illness, were pardoned until they could make amends. The king tried to be understanding within reason of the problems that many people faced in their lives. The king could only go so far, however. Times were tough back then and nobody expected to live past the age of forty. Just getting by was all many people were able to do. Life was hard and simple.

The kings from other kingdoms lived differently from Darick. The other kings chose to be worshipped by their peasants and live in ridiculous luxury, while 99.9% of the people of the kingdoms suffered. The people of those other kingdoms had heard of Darick's theories of equality in business and were considering leaving their harsh communities to live in Darick's kingdom. The other kings began to hear the mumblings of their peasants and didn't like it. The other kings began to send spies to Darick's kingdom to investigate. Darick was no fool. He knew his policies were risky and not held in high regard throughout the land. Most of the royalty preferred to have things stay the same, as they had always been to ensure continuous rule by the royal families for infinity, without resistance from the common people.

Darick saw an eventual end to rule by royalty with the people someday electing their own leaders and lawmakers. Some considered Darick's talk blasphemous. Some of Darick's most outlandish ideas were only heard by Zenon. Zenon had been warning Darick for years to stop his foolish talk about rule by the people. Zenon thought to himself that in such a society where there was no king, there would be no need for wizards. Zenon couldn't allow that to happen. He couldn't permit Darick to change things as radically as he seemed to be planning. Zenon had magical ways to effect changes that no one could decipher. He was a wizard of the highest order and so old, that he had to be well over 100. No one knew anything about wizards - how long they lived, if they ate, or if they were even human. They only seemed to mysteriously appear and even more mysteriously disappear at their convenience.

Darick had noticed that something was amiss with Zenon lately, but was afraid to approach him about it. Zenon always spoke in a whispery voice, but recently his whisper had taken on a lower raspier tone, which was more difficult to understand. Darick was afraid to ask Zenon to speak up

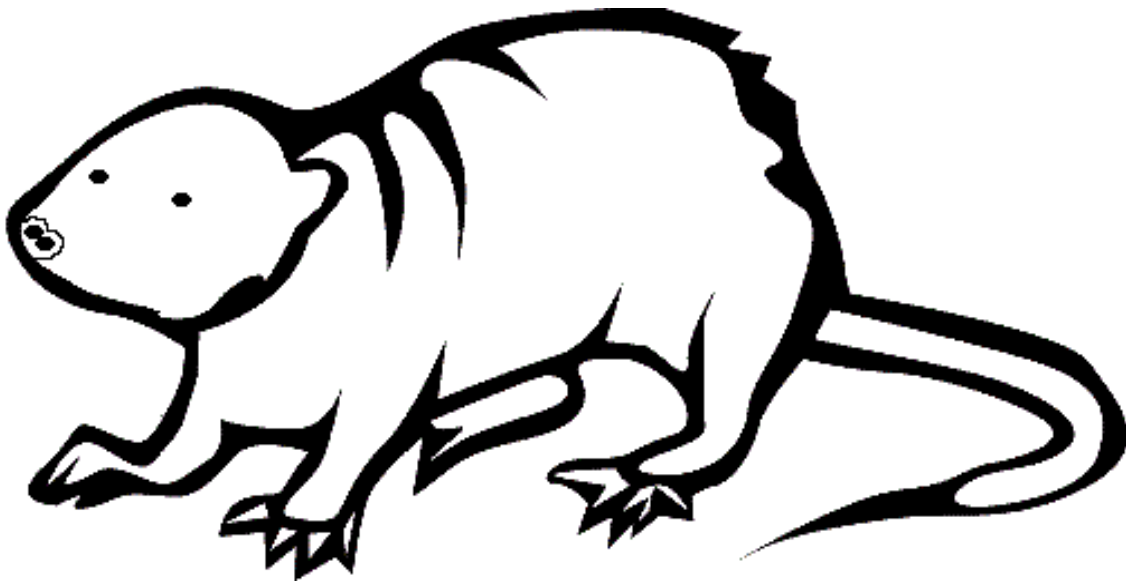
when he whispered something, because he didn't want the wily wizard to become perturbed. Darick knew that wizards were capable of surreptitiously doing things to kings, for which no one could find a culprit. Wizards could possibly use magic, poison, the evil eye or any number of other wicked things. Darick had always given Zenon a wide berth, but never knew what the wizard was thinking. Zenon never smiled, laughed, raised his voice or cried.

When the other kings sent infiltrators to Darick's kingdom, they would sometimes try to influence the commoners to perform certain acts for favors. The acts to be performed were intended to result in the removal of the king. The people who dressed the royals were sometimes offered great sums of money to plant a disease-laden tick on a king's body in an out of the way place. By the time the king noticed, it was too late, since he had already been bitten and was on his way to the hereafter. The dressers who performed such acts had to be so secretive, that many chickened out, unable to do it. If the king noticed the tick at any point, the dresser would instantly be on the way to the guillotine post-haste. Some dressers detested the king whom they dressed and found the money offer worth the risk, since they were able to get back at the king for whatever personal reason.

Some infiltrators from outside the kingdom would offer life insurance policies to the people who served the food to the king. Since the servers always had to sample the food before feeding it to the king, if they poisoned the food, it would guarantee the king's fate and their own. The beneficiaries of the server would be handsomely rewarded by the server's sacrifice. The infiltrators rarely had takers for the insurance policy offers, for obvious reasons. However, some of the servers had many mouths to feed and numerous people living in their households, necessitating some of them to take unusual risks.

The next morning, Darick awoke as usual and pulled the cord for his subjects to enter the room. The food server seemed less boisterous than usual, but still managed to feed a filling breakfast meal to Darick. Darick thought the eggs tasted a little saltier than usual, but were still edible. The dresser who applied Darick's lower undergarment always hated it when Darick farted in the dresser's face, as the undergarment was cinched in place. Darick couldn't help farting during the process, due to the pressure from the cinching. Zenon stood in the corner observing the morning ritual from his dark corner. He was muttering something to himself in his new raspy low whisper. Darick had another important ceremony to conduct for a visiting king from a faraway kingdom. It was common in those days to present visiting kings with a golden key to the kingdom as a token of friendship and goodwill. Most of the world's kings never wanted to wage war against each other, but not all the kings. Darick was the most peace-loving of all the world's kings, perhaps too peace-loving. Some of the kings wanted a good reason to eliminate him and war was one of those reasons. As Darick walked to the Grand Court in his full regalia to meet the visiting king, he suddenly fainted to the floor.

44. Hassan's Dirt



44. Hassan's Dirt

Most people think sinkholes are caused by old water mains breaking. Not always. Sometimes the sinkholes are caused by a monstrous tunneling mole named Hassan. Hassan was a real terror to the masses, but didn't think he did anything out of the ordinary. He lived perpetually underground and ate every insect, worm, mole, chipmunk, snake and toad he encountered as he tunneled merrily along. When he was born, he was average size, and then one day he ate one of those rubbery poison earthworms that humans use to kill moles. The poison worm didn't put Hassan permanently to sleep; it made him grow like a house on fire. In only a year's time, Hassan went from a weight of one ounce to a weight of one ton.

His hunger increased with his size and he had to eat every waking minute. He had to cut back on his hours of sleep, which he hated, because he loved his sleep. Hassan used to feel that if he didn't get his 8 hours, he was useless. His sleep had been reduced to 4 hours, to enable him to eat for 20 hours a day. He had recently been considering cutting back to 3 hours of sleep, but that would be going too far. He was always nervous, jerky and cranky as it was at 4 hours. He felt that if he cut back to 3 hours of sleep, he might suffer a panic attack. He had heard of moles suffering from panic attacks. It didn't sound to him like something he wanted to take a chance of experiencing.

The reduction in sleep had given him constant diarrhea. Before he ate the poison worm, his poop consisted of nice firm stools. The main problem with the diarrhea was that he couldn't comfortably back up in the tunnel. It would be too messy. When he had the firm stools, he could back up all the time with minimal mess. He currently had to tunnel always in a forward direction, which sometimes led to difficulties. As long as he was able to find food items as he tunneled, he was happy. He needed to encounter some type of edible creature every 20 minutes, or he would begin to feel weak and had to reduce tunneling speed. Reduced speed led to reduced food intake. It was a vicious cycle that he chose to avoid if possible.

He never tunneled to the surface for fear of exposing himself to the sunlight, which would be highly injurious to his skin. Since he had eaten the poison worm, and had started growing, he lost all his fur, leaving his skin vulnerable to sun damage. His skin emitted a slippery substance that helped him tunnel faster, which was nice. At least being furless had that benefit. His body seemed to automatically adapt to prevent him from having problems surviving. Moles had enough things to worry about without adding sunburn to the list.

He never knew how far down from the surface he was tunneling. All he knew was he had to avoid tunneling upward at an angle. He had to maintain a level or downward tunneling direction. Sometimes he accidentally got going at a downward angle and would encounter so much food that he would forget how deep in the earth he was. He needed to have a minimum amount of air provided by a porous soil. If he tunneled too deeply into the earth, the amount of air in the soil

wouldn't be enough and he would risk passing out. He had passed out many times while tunneling, but tried to avoid it. When he did pass out from lack of air, he luckily woke up in time to realize it or he would have surely perished. When he awoke after passing out, he immediately tunneled upward to reach the more aerated soil layers. He never panicked underground, since he was born there and it was his home. He just had to be careful. It wasn't easy being a mole.

One day while tunneling, Hassan crossed over an oil well gusher that had just punctured the reservoir below and wasn't yet controlled at the surface. The force of the oil pulsing from its source below was enough to push Hassan upward through the soil with unheard of velocity. At the surface, Hassan exploded upward through the equipment that had been drilling the well. Hundreds of tons of soil and rock, combined with thousands of gallons of crude oil burst into the air in a great black spray. Hassan landed unharmed 3,000 feet away on an oil company building, collapsing it flat. He quickly tunneled underground again to avoid being seen. Hassan felt that for some reason, he had to remain invisible to the outside world. Humans might have spotted him while on the surface, but apparently never followed up on it.

Another hazard of tunneling occurred when Hassan passed through the location where a water well was in the process of being drilled. The auger from the powerful drilling machine on the surface passed between Hassan's head and left front foot, slightly injuring his face on that side. He instantly corrected by backing up and turning to the right. He was lucky to have been born with ridiculously quick reactions and acutely sensitive exterior body parts. The injury on his face left a small mark and damaged his already questionable looks.

Once he accidentally tunneled into an area where a quarry was in operation. The rock was blasted from the walls of the quarry with large amounts of dynamite. As Hassan's nose made contact with the wall of the quarry, the dynamite was detonated and he went flying out into the quarry with thousands of tons of rock. He landed unharmed on a dump truck that was 1/2 full of rock and he crushed it to the ground. He scurried up the quarry wall, went back into the tunnel he came out of, and resumed tunneling. The dynamite blast made his ears ring for several hours. If anyone had seen him there, he never knew about it and didn't care either way.

The humans would never be able to do anything to him if they detected him. They never knew where he was underground at anytime, unless he was tunneling close to the surface for the more aerated soil. He destroyed millions of dollars of golf courses by tunneling too close to the surface. When he tunneled under the golf courses, he created a ridge of soil on the surface that was 3 feet high by 3 feet wide. A ridge such as that caused major damage to the courses, especially in the greens areas. The greens keepers broke down in tears, when they saw the massive ridges being created. Even though they were paid to keep the courses in shape, it still cut them to the core to watch the destruction taking place before their eyes. Hassan would tunnel so fast that the greens keepers would try to run after him to stab him with their shovels, but

couldn't catch him.

When Hassan tunneled through an old cast iron water main, he went so fast that he blasted through both walls of the pipe. Then the water poured out of the sides of the pipe, eroding vast amount of soil. If the water main was under the road, the road usually caved in as a result, creating the ever-popular sinkhole. He didn't mind occasionally tunneling through the water mains, because he always got a nice rinsing off. It was a dirty world down there under the ground. He liked feeling clean once in a while, if only for a short time.

Hassan hated it when he accidentally tunneled through a sewer pipe, due to the large amount of foul, wet human waste that ended up covering his body. After a sewer pipe incursion, he stunk for a long time, usually until he tunneled through a water main again. He never intentionally tunneled through any of the underground manmade structures. It always happened by accident. He was rarely slowed down by anything in his path due to the speed at which he tunneled and the incredibly hard, aggressive claws on his front feet. His back feet also had huge claws for tunneling in reverse. He tried to avoid tunneling in reverse to prevent tunneling through his own diarrhea. On some rare occasions, he tunneled through a sewer main and then had to tunnel in reverse for some reason through his just pooped diarrhea. He really stunk badly after that. Those times are the toughest times of being a mole.

Occasionally, he tunneled through a bank of underground electric wires, resulting in major shocking. Power outages aboveground took place for hours, while the power companies vainly searched for the breaks in the wires. Luckily, he was never electrocuted by the encounter, due to the short time of exposure. Hassan's raw tunneling speed got him out of trouble as quickly as it got him into it. His tunneling speed came in handy.

Hassan sometimes tunneled too close to highway foundations, causing roadways to collapse. Sometimes he caused bridges to collapse by tunneling through the footings. On occasion, he tunneled through the basements of buildings sufficiently enough to cause the buildings to collapse. He always managed to avoid things falling on him.

He tunneled through the wall of a cave and ended up inside of the cave. Thousands of bats attacked him and he ate as many as he could, until the stench of the bat guano became too overwhelming and he had to leave. The bats had a foul taste that he didn't like. That was the only time he ate bats. It seemed like the thing to do at the time.

When Hassan tunneled through the wall of the state prison and allowed 42 prisoners to escape, he almost became caught by the humans who were tracking the escaped prisoners. He smelled the trackers on his tail and quickly tunneled in a deep zigzag manner and escaped. He always wondered what happened to the prisoners.

Once he tunneled through the wall of a bank and was shot at by the security guard. He escaped unharmed because the security guard missed.

When Hassan tunneled under a fish farm, he broke through the bottoms of each tank and ate all the fish. He tunneled under a large building full of chickens and ate all of them. He tunneled under many barns of dairy farmers and ate all the cows. Unbeknownst to him, he really wreaked havoc wherever he went.

Everywhere he went was unplanned and accidental. He never intended to seek and destroy anything. Things just happened while he was there. It was the humans who made him into the giant mole that he became. That's what they get for trying to use poison on nature's creatures. It wasn't Hassan's fault.

Hassan had traveled the entire U.S., tunneling for millions of miles, causing incalculable damage in the process. He was just living his life. He always stayed one step ahead of the authorities. He didn't feel like a criminal, although he had been labeled one by the humans aboveground. Stories of his exploits became daily news from the villages, cities, towns and states he visited. He became a minor celebrity of sorts. He was nature's most perfect tunneling machine. Transportation authorities wanted to capture Hassan and somehow train him to dig tunnels for them. They saw the potential in using a giant mole in such a process. Hassan was impossible to catch, however. By the time his destruction was noticed, he had already sped away in his tunnel. He neither knew nor cared anything about what the humans wanted to do. He was a simple animal with basic needs that he satisfied the only way he knew how.

Two years after he ate the poison worm, he weighed 2 tons. He seemed to grow a ton per year. Naturally, his appetite increased as well as his waistline. He tunneled and ate faster and faster. His tunneling speed increased along with the subsequent destruction he left behind.

He didn't know it at the time, but he ended up tunneling in a northerly bearing toward New York State. His tunneling courses varied with the obstacles he encountered. Sometimes he tunneled in a straight line for hundreds of miles, when encountering no reason to turn left or right. It all depended on the geography of the region. As Hassan blazed his underground trail through Pennsylvania, he began veering northwesterly. The food supply was good and there was no reason to stop tunneling. Hassan had been tunneling so quickly recently that he couldn't believe his good fortune. He was able to eat such vast quantities of plentiful food, that he was able to increase his amount of sleeping hours to 5.

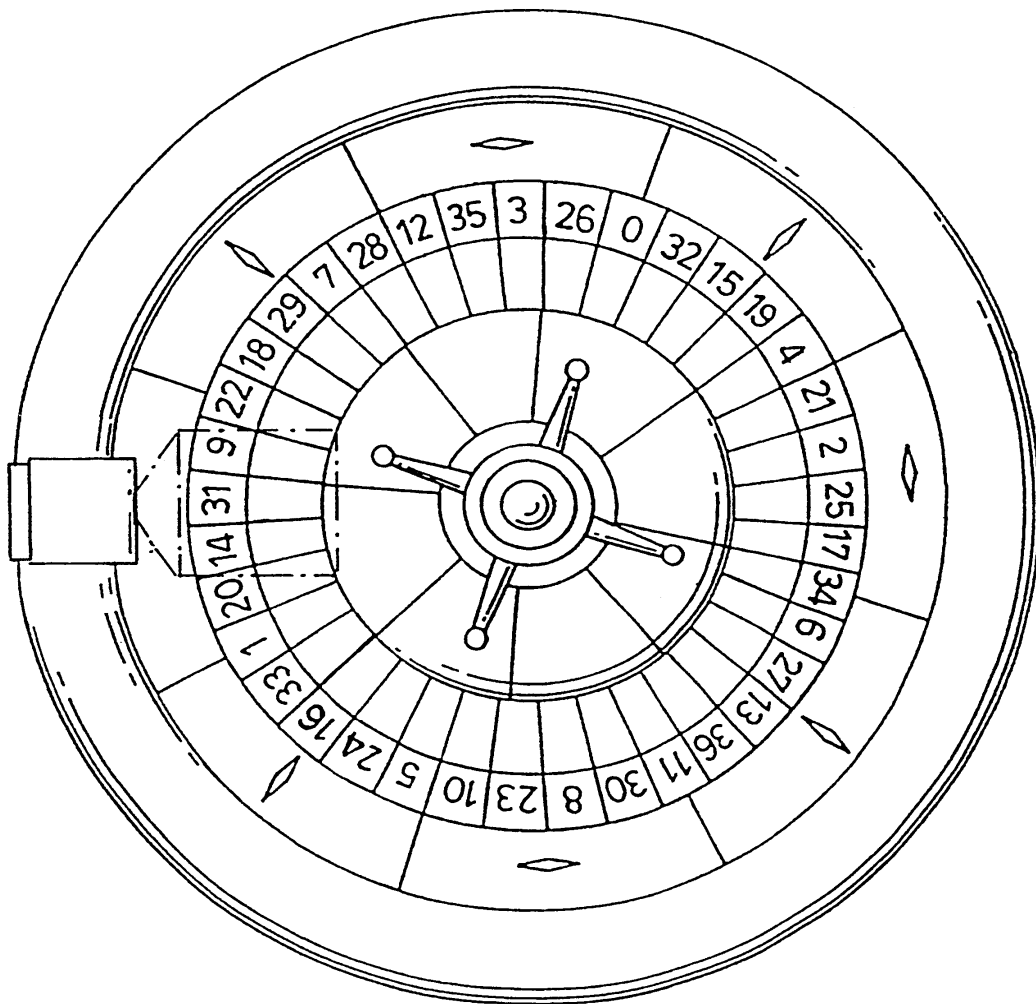
He loved his sleep and would prefer to go back to sleeping 8 hours a day, but it seemed unlikely. At least he gained a little. He was surprised how much better he felt by just adding that one hour. Hassan continued on his northwesterly path through New York State. Things were really good in his life. All his recent minor bumps and bruises had healed leaving his skin with a nice smooth

sheen. He hadn't tunneled through any sewer lines recently and hadn't tunneled in reverse into his diarrhea either. Increasing his sleep hours to 5 had reduced the amount of diarrhea anyway. He was still clean and sparkly from the last water main that he had smashed through and destroyed. That incident caused major roads and highways to be shut down. The water and sewer lines of his current location seemed to be very large. There must be many humans living in the area.

Hassan unexpectedly tunneled out into a swiftly moving body of water! Wherever he was, he had no way of getting back to the shore to tunnel underground again. He had tunneled into narrow streams and rivers before, but was always able to recover and get back to the shore. He had been tunneling so quickly, that he had shot out into the middle of the wide river. He tried to swim to the shore but the current was too great. He looked ahead to see what it looked like down river. It appeared that the river disappeared ahead. He had never seen such a thing. How could the water disappear? Where did it go? He began to hear a tremendous roaring sound emanating from the water ahead. He had never heard such noise!

The fast digging Hassan had inadvertently tunneled his way into the Niagara River and was going along with the flow. The roaring was getting louder. What was making that sound? The water definitely disappeared ahead. It looked really misty for some reason, as if it were raining or something. As he got closer to the place where the water flow seemed to stop, he got a funny feeling. In one instant, he was floating in the water, and then the water fell straight down beneath him. In the next instant, he was only floating in the air. He began plummeting downward. He looked down and saw great piles of boulders, water and mist.

45. Jarrett's Risk



45. Jarrett's Risk

Jarrett would bet on anything. Sometimes, he made a lot of money and other times he ended up living on the street with the other losing gamblers. There were so many gamblers in the world that it was really pitiful. Casinos were constantly being opened to tempt the current and future gamblers into spending it all. There were seemingly unlimited ways for people to waste their life savings on nothing but a cheap thrill.

When he was in kindergarten, he and his best friend bet each other all the time. Jarrett and his friend would bet on the time at which the crybaby kid would first cry. Another kindergarten bet involved betting on the time the first milk would be spilled. Another bet was the time that the first sneaker was thrown by the kid who was frustrated from not being able to tie it. Other bets involved betting kids to eat certain insects and objects picked up from the floor. Other bets involved daring kids to do things. He bet kids to ask the teacher nonsensical questions. He would bet on how many kids would say they couldn't sleep during naptime.

Other school bets included shooting a basketball through the hoop while standing the farthest away from the backboard. Another bet was scoring a goal in an empty hockey net while standing the farthest away. Another bet was similar with a soccer goal and ball. Another was the longest field goal. Another was throwing a football, baseball, softball the farthest. Another was hitting a golf ball the farthest at a driving range. At lunchtime, they would bet on what kids from other tables would produce from their lunch bags. They would bet on who forgot to bring their homework to class and what excuse they would use. The most popular excuse was usually, "My dog ate it!" Jarrett bet with his friends and any other kid who would take a bet while in school.

During the winter, he bet on the date of the first snowfall, and how many inches. He bet on the highest and lowest snowfall days. He bet on the total accumulation for the season. The rest of the year, he made similar bets involving rainfall amounts. They bet on who would and wouldn't have dates on Fridays, for dances and especially for the prom. They bet on who would make the sports teams and cheerleading squads. They bet on who would be dating whom in the future and for how long. They bet on the grades certain people would get. They bet on who would get scholarships and for what reason. They bet on the colleges that their friends would end up going to. They bet on who would get financial aid or take out student loans.

He placed bets on the nominations and winners for the Oscars, Emmys, Tonys, Grammys, etc. For the Oscars, he only bet on the best picture, director, actor, actress, supporting actor, and supporting actress. He thought all the lesser categories were too confusing. He would talk to people about different movies and would bet on the actors and actresses smoking in the movies. Jarrett thought all people who smoked were idiots and believed it was the tobacco industries that provided funding for movie production in exchange for having actors light up during the films. He bet on correct song lyrics. Some songs had famously mysterious lyrics that nobody knew

what the actual words were. He bet on whether acceptors of awards would cry or how many words they would use in their acceptance speeches. He bet on what time the different award ceremonies would end, since the variability of the acceptance speeches made it impossible to accurately time the show.

Jarrett bet on all political elections. He obtained lists of who was running for which office and when. Betting on the elections was really interesting. Sometimes the outcomes of political elections were obvious, requiring odds adjustments. Other elections had near 50/50 chances of either candidate winning. Those had the greatest thrill. Jarrett loved the bets that could go either way. He bought all the available lottery tickets each day. He played bingo and gambled on all the horse racing related events.

He would stand at bus stops and bet strangers on the arrival times of the buses. He was surprised how easy it was to find a taker for those bets. It must be the chance for unexpected money gains that some people can't resist. He never bet more than a dollar or 2 at the bus stops. He didn't want to flash any real money. Strangers at bus stops didn't have a lot of money anyway.

He would go to the airport lobby and bet on actual-not-scheduled plane arrivals, departures, delays and cancellations. Planes never actually adhered to the posted schedules. There was always a variation in the take off and landing times. He would sit by the big window with the person he was betting and they would watch the gates. That was the definitive time used in the bets, not the scheduled take offs and landings on the big board.

He did the same thing at the subway stations, except the trains were easier to get times visually, as they appeared and disappeared in the tunnel. The betting was more straightforward than at the airports, but still enjoyable. Jarrett loved it all. All the little stupid thrills gained by both winning bets and losing bets. Sometimes losing gave a better thrill for some unknown reason. Those are the bets that he didn't understand. He often asked himself why he would get a thrill out of losing. He didn't really know or care why; he just liked it.

He made huge amounts of money betting on sports and lost it all again. He repeated the process over and over. Jarrett was like a person who loses and gains the same weight over and over, for their entire lifetime. It was a strange parallel concept.

There was no limit to what he would bet on; he was hooked on the thrill. The money involved had no meaning. The money was only the means by which to get the thrill. Jarrett always lived cheaply and simply. He didn't want to waste money on anything. He wanted all the money that ever passed through his hands to be available for betting on something. He bet on all the card games and casino games. Sometimes he made so much money, he stayed in hi-roller suites and other times he was so poor, he lived in his old Ford van down by the river.

Jarrett would bet when the sun came up and went down. When he worked on the farm, he bet at what time the rooster would crow and how many times. He bet how many gallons each dairy cow would yield. He bet how many kittens and puppies would be in each animal's litter. He would bet the farmer how many of the corn seeds planted in a particular row would germinate and become plants. He bet how many bales of hay a field would produce. He bet how many eggs the chickens would lay in a day, in a week and in a month.

He bet his friends how many of various objects and food items they could fit in their mouths. They bet how much money people would win on game shows on TV. They bet on the dozens of Superbowl bets involved in each game. They bet on the halftime puppy bowl and kitten bowl. They would watch random movies and bet on certain words being said during the movies, or if and when someone would cry or get shot, etc. They would go to the beach and fill different sized vials with sand and bet on the number of grains of sand in each vial. They would play all the kid's board games and create different ways of betting on them.

He would go to the park and bet people who were walking their dogs how many pieces of poop the dog would make. He would bring a scale to bet on the weight of the bagged poop. He would sit on the bench at the park and bet someone how many people would pass by the bench during a specified time interval. He would grab a handful of pine needles next to a tree and bet on the number of needles. He bet on the number of kites, baby carriages, joggers and squirrels seen.

He would sit in a vet's office and bet how much people's dogs and cats weighed on the scale. When he drove somewhere with someone, he bet how many animals, people or bicycles they would see on the way to the destination and back. He bet how much gas would go into the gas tank when filling up. He bet on the tire pressure of each tire when a tire gauge was applied. He bet on how many miles could be driven on a tank of gas.

Jarrett had considered seeing a psychiatrist, therapist or going to Gambler's Anonymous to find out if he actually needed help with his problem. The first thing was that he didn't think he had a problem. To Jarrett, betting or gambling was a hobby, not a problem. If he had ever considered gambling to be a problem, he would stop immediately. He didn't need anyone to tell him anything. He knew what he was doing. Sometimes his hobby made him a rich man and other times, a poor man. Jarrett thought everybody should have a hobby and his was betting. He actually preferred the term betting to gambling. Gambling implied there was a risk involved. He looked at betting as if he was betting something was going to happen, meaning he would win the bet. Gambling was something where people were unsure of the outcome, and there may be a loss involved. In Jarrett's psyche, the term betting was more positive than gambling.

The geniuses of Vegas and Atlantic City finally coined the term gaming, which was really the least derogatory of the 3 words. When a person thinks about gaming, they think about playing a game, that's all. What harm could result from playing a game? Gaming usually applied to

playing one of the slot machines or terminals, not necessarily to pure betting. Therefore, of the 3 terms Jarrett preferred betting, gaming and least of all gambling. Jarrett was definitely not a gambler; he was a better. He supposed that if someone placed a label on what he did, they could use any of the 3 terms. It was up to them.

Jarrett had known people who sought help for their gambling problem. They claimed they spent a lot of money for someone to tell them what they already knew. The therapist offered nothing constructive to help them out of their dilemmas. The therapists just sat there and listened. Jarrett had heard from more than one person about what a waste of money therapy is.

Jarrett occasionally encountered people he knew in the past who had quit betting and seemed happier. Of course, those people had to quit or go to jail. Some of them had been so much in debt that they maxed all their credit cards and took all the home loans and personal loans they could. The judges decreed that they go to therapy and G.A. and get cleaned up quickly or go to jail. Most cleaned up quickly. Jarrett could sense the sorrow in the people of not being able to bet anymore. He could tell that the people missed the thrill of the bet. He could see it in their eyes. Jarrett fortunately had no wife or children to worry about getting in financial trouble, so he was wild and thought he was happy.

Jarrett never felt he had a gambling problem as they call it. His only problem was not winning all his bets. He had more of a "not winning all the bets problem" than a gambling problem. He wondered if he always won all his bets, would he get the same thrill out of it. Part of the thrill of betting was the chance that he might lose. If he always won and there were no chance of losing, there would be no thrill, which is what he thrived on.

He often considered placing one gigantic bet in Vegas on the roulette wheel on red or black. He could double his money. Those were the best odds around. The bettor had a 50% chance of winning. He had heard about some people who did it and won. Probably more people tried it, lost and were never heard from again. The general public loved to hear about the winners. Everybody liked to hear when somebody beat the casino, or won a big lottery or won some other huge prize. The little guy making it big was a popular story, because there were so many little guys.

Jarrett determined to place a \$1 million bet on the roulette wheel on red. He felt himself getting in a rut lately, by always betting away all the money he won and ending up at zero again. He postulated that if he walked away from Vegas with \$2 million in his pocket, maybe he could settle down and stop betting all the time. Sooner or later, he would have to stop betting anyway. He couldn't continue the way he was going forever. That one big bet would fix him mentally for life. It would have to.

Jarrett estimated that he had probably won over a million dollars in all the decades of betting. If

he had kept his winnings, he would be sitting back watching a big-screen TV and eating popcorn. Instead, he was living in a van down by the river.

He would do it or die trying! He had to make a careful plan of betting and efficiently reinvesting the winnings, instead of whimsically betting it all away again. He sat down and thought back to his best days and what he did to get his money up so high. The most money he ever made was at the craps tables in Vegas. He had never been banned from any of the casinos there, so he could hit each one in succession to build the \$1 million. He would need more restraint than ever before.

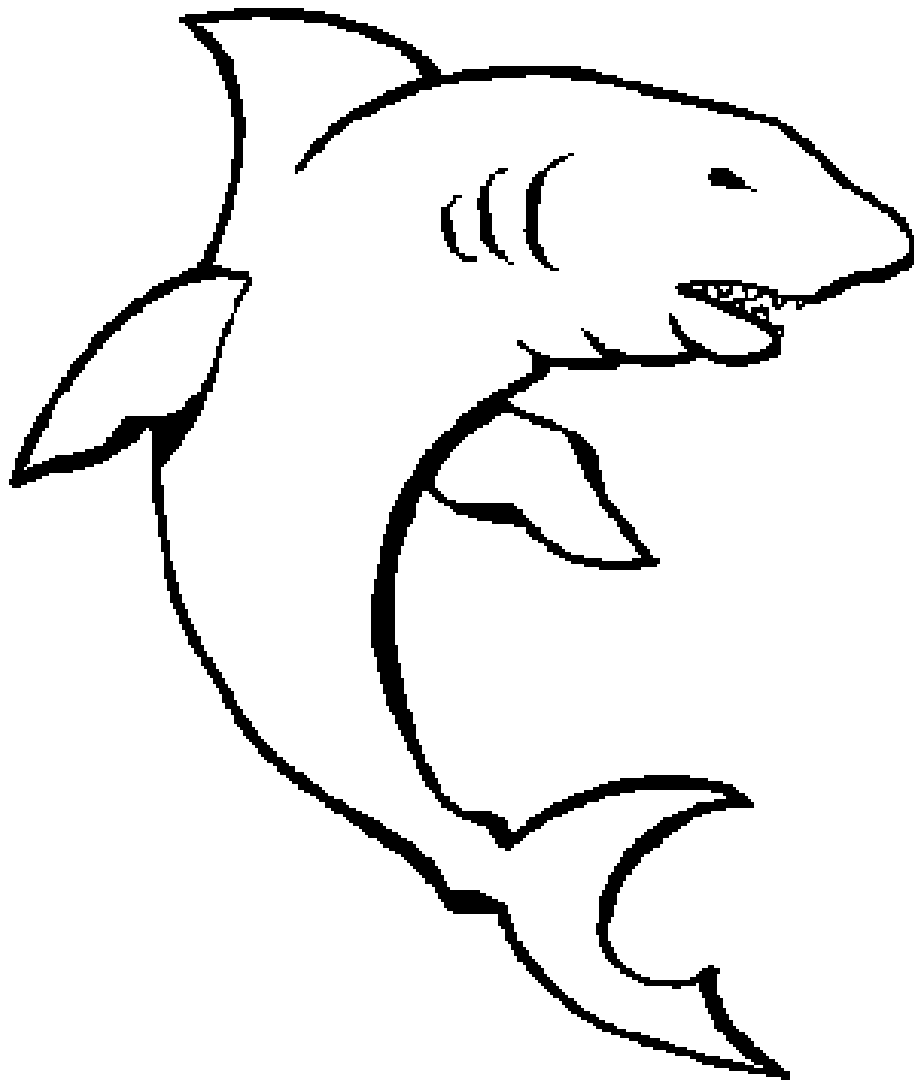
He had to get his mind right. He had to tell himself to stop betting immediately if the strategy wasn't working. He knew how to bet with the best of them. At brief times in history, he was the best. Regrettably, he always lost it all again in exchange for the thrill of the bet.

He could do it, but he had to focus. He knew how to roll the dice. He had thrown millions of dice in his years. He could roll almost anything he wanted at will. He would need unusual composure. He had to keep his sight on the prize.

He drove to Vegas and rented 5 suits for a month. He estimated that he could make the money in that time. He would wear different hats, glasses and fake moustaches to distract the casinos. He didn't want to appear to be the same guy every day in the casinos. He didn't want them to get suspicious and watch him closer than any other person in there. Some of the older bosses may recognize him, but they would remember him as the old carefree Jarrett, not the new scheming one. The old Jarrett was maniacal, only playing for the thrill, the casino's best friend. The casinos hated the people who were careful, won a certain amount and left with the money. The casinos wanted people only to put money into the casino and never to take any out.

Jarrett started his strategy. He borrowed \$20,000 seed money from a loan shark on the city limits. He had to pay back the shark \$40,000 within the month, or else. The money began piling up immediately. He still had it! He reached \$100,000 during the 1st week. He placed successive higher and higher bets with the winnings. As soon as he lost a bet, he went to another casino and began again. It was foolproof! He hit \$200,000 during the 2nd week. He went from casino to casino and kept winning. He couldn't believe the feeling. His old way was so foolish. The new way was the only way. At the beginning of the 3rd week, he hit \$500,000, then dropped down to \$350,000 on a stupid roll of the dice. By the end of the 3rd week, he was back to \$500,000. He was almost there. During the 4th week, he hit \$1.1 million. He was ready! He bet the entire amount at the roulette table on red. He waited with a crowd of other people who had gathered to watch. He was so nervous. The guy spun the wheel. Jarrett's fingertips were itchy. The guy dropped the ball. Jarrett felt the sweat pouring out of his body like a sprinkler. Around the ball went. Jarrett watched the wheel. The crowd was roaring. He could feel it slowing down. Red! C'mon! Red! Yes! No! The ball landed on 24 black.

46. Kazuko's Banana



46. Kazuko's Banana

Kazuko was little when the accident happened; at only 8 feet long, he wasn't yet a fully-grown Great White. He was swimming in the cloudy shallows feeding on tiny colorful fish when the motor boat passed over him. Evidently, the operator of the boat didn't see the shark or he would have avoided it. It isn't likely that people intentionally run their boats over things when they can help it. Outboard motors are fragile and easily damageable. The boat operator noticed when the prop of his motor made contact with the poor shark. The prop broke and the guy had to beach his boat. The accident took place just next to Elbert's lagoon.

The boater saw the injured shark floating in the red water with the outer tips of his tail missing. The boater ran from his beached boat to Elbert's shack, which was set back in from the ocean. Everybody from around the area knew old Elbert. He had happily lived in that dilapidated shack for many years. Elbert owned the property that the shack was built on and the lagoon, which he created. He owned 10 acres of the island and was permitted to excavate the area for the lagoon, since the excavation didn't damage any of the coral reef in the ocean.

Elbert paid a guy to dig out the lagoon, which was really a pond set back from the ocean, but connected to the ocean via an opening. The water flowed in and out of the lagoon as if it were a bay. The lagoon was 30 feet deep in the middle and supported a tremendous population of fish, which Elbert maintained. The ocean currents passed through an 8-foot wide opening at the front. The opening of the lagoon was near Elbert's shack.

Elbert eked his existence partly from the inheritance from which he purchased the 10 acres of land and partly from charging people who wanted to fish in the lagoon. The opening at the front was deep enough for boats to navigate through. The 8-foot opening enabled boats to pass, but also permitted the gate to function. The gate was a steel pipe that pivoted from the shack side. Water was able to pass under the pipe gate as the tide went in and out. The water was deep enough at the gate to allow boats to pass through under any tidal conditions. The lagoon never went dry due to its ingenious design.

Fishermen could pay Elbert by the day to fish in the lagoon or buy a lifetime pass. He maintained a list of the people who bought the lifetime passes. The lagoon did a good business, because of the variety of fish in the lagoon that had swum in out of curiosity and stayed or were forced in by storm surges and stayed. The lagoon was designed to be fish friendly with many, many sunken logs and boulders covering the entire bottom.

Elbert never left the shack for any reason. He had all the comforts of a simple man living in a simple home. He had a cell phone. He had satellite TV and internet. He had a comprehensive solar panel system that supplied all his power. His water supply came from his desalination system. His sewer system was located toward the rear of the 10-acre lot.

The boater reached Elbert and told him what happened. Elbert immediately bolted from the shack and ran with the boater to the injured Kazuko in the water. The boater was one of the frequent fishermen who owned a lifetime pass to fish in the lagoon. He was on his way to do some fishing when he ran over the shark. Elbert knew exactly what to do. Inside the lagoon Elbert had a sectioned off area where injured fish could be carefully nursed back to health. Elbert instructed the boater to stay with Kazuko. Elbert ran back to the shack and returned with an inner-tube device in which he could float in and guide the shark into the lagoon. Elbert brought Kazuko into the lagoon and into the special area. The area was 50 feet x 50 feet and was fenced from the surface to the bottom, to keep the other fish out while the injured fish was convalescing.

Elbert bandaged Kazuko's damaged tail and caught some fresh fish from the lagoon for the shark to eat. Elbert had helped numerous sharks, dolphins and sea turtles to recover from their propeller injuries and had released them all back into the ocean almost as functional as original. Elbert had gotten praise from the Oceanographic Institute for his rescue work. The Institute offered him donations, but he politely refused. Elbert had figured out a way to use coconut husks to help repair the damaged tail. When a suitably shaped piece of husk was carefully taped in place, the shark's body would fuse into the husk as the tail healed. The healed tail wouldn't look the same as the original, but its function would be similar. He had successfully used the technique on dolphin tails as well. When a propeller damaged a sea turtle's shell, a section of coconut husk was taped in place overlapping the injury. The tape had to be wrapped all the way around the body of the turtle so it would stay in place.

Kazuko was very passive due to his injury, but still had a healthy appetite. Elbert fed Kazuko as much fish as the shark could eat. Elbert knew that the key to a speedy recovery was the intake by the shark of more than its usual amount of food. Kazuko was able to swim slowly around in the special area and his tail slowly began to heal. The size of the sectioned area was just big enough for minimal movement, but not too much swimming around that would damage the wound repair. Kazuko stayed and ate in the special area for 9 months and had doubled in size to 16 feet in length.

Part of Elbert's sewer system design involved the liquid from the sewage to seep into the lagoon all the way in the back. The process was completely concealed and unnoticeable. The inspector had passed Elbert's sewer system with no issues. The seeping sewage provided an extraordinary dose of nutrients to the lagoon, enabling all manner of seaweed to grow profusely. The fishermen in the lagoon always remarked about all the lush seaweed growing there. The seaweed created a perfect environment in which smaller fish could hide. In addition, many of the fish ate the seaweed and the corresponding micro animals that lived in the seaweed as part of their diet. The seaweed seemed to have an almost magical effect on the growth of the fish that ate it. The fishermen had never seen such large specimens of the fish in the lagoon. Elbert made a lot of

money allowing people to catch those large fish. The fish that were born in the lagoon grew larger than they would have if they were born in the ocean. The fish that were fully-grown already and ended up in the lagoon and stayed, grew bigger while they were in the lagoon. The lagoon was a fish factory.

Elbert speculated if Kazuko's rapid growth was caused by eating the fish from the lagoon or if it was normal shark growth. When Kazuko reached 20 feet long, Elbert wondered if he should let the shark back into the ocean or try to find some use for the beast. How could he use the shark? Elbert kept feeding Kazuko as much as the shark wanted to eat of the fresh lagoon fish. Elbert had been floating in the special area with Kazuko from the beginning and had been feeding the shark by hand with no snappiness from the shark. Kazuko seemed to be as gentle and responsive as a dolphin. Elbert reckoned that the shark's gentleness might exist as a result of Elbert's care. The shark was totally passive. Maybe not all sharks are aggressive when they are fed all they want to eat. When sharks live in the wild, they have to be aggressive to survive.

The isolated shark attacks usually occurred when people were goofing around with sharks in the shark's feeding grounds. The people were asking for the shark to attack them. The shark didn't know any better. Sharks and other predatory fish are equal in that they are just doing what nature intended them to do to survive. The problem is that some of the sharks hang out in shallower water than say barracuda, tuna, or other predatory fish and the sharks as a result get into trouble. Sharks probably get a bad rap for unfair reasons.

Kazuko couldn't possibly be a hazard to humans. He was nowhere near being an aggressive shark anymore. He had become gentle and would probably stay that way as long as he was supplied with all the food he needed. It was the same with lions in a zoo that were always too full to be instinctively aggressive. Elbert to an extent was reaching a little. He had become attached to Kazuko and didn't want to let him go back into the wild again. He didn't want Kazuko to get hurt again. He couldn't possibly swim as fast and adeptly as a healthy, uninjured shark. Perhaps Kazuko would be at a disadvantage and become prey to other sharks due to his partial infirmity.

Questions, questions! Elbert decided that it wouldn't be fair to keep Kazuko in the lagoon. He had always released into the ocean all the other sharks, dolphins and sea turtles that he had helped. Elbert decided to release Kazuko. Kazuko was at full health and ready to resume living his wild life in the ocean. Elbert opened the gate of the special area to allow Kazuko out. Kazuko swam out of the area, into the lagoon and through the opening into the ocean. Elbert began crying at the sight of Kazuko leaving the lagoon. Perhaps it was Elbert's old age finally catching up to him, making him excessively emotional. Maybe he would simply miss the shark like a pet. Elbert told himself to not get attached to any of the animals that he helped in the past and he didn't. He had mistakenly become attached to Kazuko and Kazuko broke his heart by

leaving. It was the right thing to do though. Nature had taken its natural course. Elbert was happy that Kazuko was free. He wiped the tears from his eyes and walked to the lonely shack to watch TV.

The next morning, Kazuko was back in the lagoon! He had swum into the special area through the gate that was left open and was casually swimming around in there! Elbert ran to the special area and realized that he had left that gate open as well as the main lagoon gate at the front. Kazuko had apparently taken advantage of the open gates and returned home! Elbert was overjoyed. Maybe Kazuko had gotten so accustomed to the unlimited supply of food in the lagoon that he didn't want to leave it. Maybe Kazuko missed Elbert. Whatever the reason Kazuko had for returning, Elbert was glad he was back already.

When Elbert was watching TV the previous night, he saw a commercial for a resort that used banana boats in addition to other beach toys. That is when Elbert got the idea to use Kazuko as a banana boat. If people could see how gentle Kazuko actually was, maybe they would like to take a ride on the shark. Elbert would first try it himself. He needed to fashion some kind of harness with places to sit on the shark's back.

He could set up the ride in the sectioned area. Kazuko could wait in the area with the harness on his back while the people climbed on. Then Kazuko would swim out into the ocean and give the people a fun ride! It sounded like a great idea.

The next day, Elbert called for a water taxi ride to the mainland close to his island. He went to the water sports store and bought several of those plastic riding toys that are attached to a speeding boat. The people hang onto the handles and are pulled by the boat. He went back to his island and attached the toys together in a chain. He brought the riding system to the new ride loading area where Kazuko was waiting. Elbert strapped the riding system to Kazuko and the shark didn't seem to mind it. Elbert climbed into the front seat to which he attached additional straps for steering Kazuko. The idea was that Elbert would operate the banana shark boat with the riders behind him straddling the shark and hanging onto the handles.

Elbert operated the reins of the system and Kazuko seemed to get the idea. The shark slowly swam out of the loading area, into the lagoon and out the front opening into the ocean. It was working! Elbert brought a mesh bag full of fish to feed to Kazuko as a reward for the trick he was performing. It seemed like the way to do it. Elbert gently kicked Kazuko with his heels, indicating for the shark to go faster. Kazuko understood and swam faster. It was actually fun! Elbert kicked again and Kazuko increased his speed again. Elbert was curious how fast Kazuko could swim with him on the shark's back. The shark was able to go faster and faster. It was a thrilling ride indeed! Elbert didn't think they would go as fast while loaded down with people, unless the people wanted to.

After Elbert was convinced of the viability of the general concept, he turned Kazuko back toward the lagoon. Kazuko seemed to get the idea and cruised into the loading area. For the next 5 days, Elbert continued riding Kazuko to make sure the shark was 100% into the idea. Kazuko didn't seem to care what he was doing as long as he was being fed the fresh lagoon fish. Elbert demonstrated the shark banana boat concept to some of the fishermen and they all seemed to be on board with the idea.

Kazuko continued growing from his lagoon fish diet and was 25 feet long when Elbert placed the advertisement in the paper for the "New Shark Banana Boat Ride at Elbert's Lagoon." Everyone already knew who Elbert was and where the lagoon was. People started showing up in droves to witness the sensation. Nobody wanted to get on the shark just yet, though. Everyone wanted a demonstration of the ride and of Kazuko's alleged gentleness. Elbert introduced the spectators to Kazuko in the new loading section. Elbert floated in the water with Kazuko and fed him fish by hand. Elbert then permitted other people to first toss fish into the water and then use a handle with an extension and finally hand feed the shark.

Elbert then allowed people to pet Kazuko as he Elbert held him next to the dock. Kazuko had to keep moving as much as possible to keep the water flowing through his gills. Elbert tried to paddle the water to accomplish the purpose. The people gradually became confident of the tameness and gentleness of the shark.

It seemed that the ride was ready to commence. Elbert climbed onto Kazuko first and then the next 5 riders carefully climbed on with assistance from their friends. Elbert figured 5 riders in addition to himself would be enough for the beginning runs. Elbert took the shark and group out to the ocean for the ride of their lives. Kazuko was an incredibly stable straight-line swimmer. That ability gave him the potential for swimming at great speed without scaring anyone into thinking they were about to fall off. Elbert started out slow and increased Kazuko's speed as the riders requested it. Some of the riders couldn't believe how much better of a banana boat ride it was compared to a traditional one. Regular rides went too slow because the banana boat was unstable at too great of a speed. The riders were thrilled beyond their wildest imaginations.

Elbert and Kazuko took everyone back to the lagoon for the next set of riders. Elbert decided to give free rides for a while until the idea caught on. He wanted to create a good buzz, and then begin charging a fee for rides. The next batch of people began mounting Kazuko and one of them scraped their foot on the deck, cutting their foot slightly. The minor injury dripped a few drops of blood into the water in the fenced loading area. The 5th rider mounted Kazuko and Elbert prepared to head out. Kazuko tasted something in the water that was unfamiliar to him. He became psychotic from the taste. He had to have it! What was it? He lurched. Elbert tried to calm him down. Kazuko reared up, throwing Elbert and the 5 riders off his back, into the water. The people began screaming. Kazuko launched toward the first person he saw.

47. Lionel's Illusions



47. Lionel's Illusions

Lionel had 2 sources of income. One source was from the funeral parlor he owned. The other source was from occasional evening and weekend gigs as an illusionist. Like most illusionists, Lionel hated the term magician. He outright refused to be associated with the term. He preferred the term illusionist because he felt that he created an illusion by the use of special lighting, equipment and the time honored art of prestidigitation. The term magician was actually a misnomer. Per the dictionary, the term magician implied the use of supernatural powers to attain the desired effect. Therefore, it wasn't possible for a human being to be a magician per se.

He had been performing illusions since childhood, when he received a kit of illusions for a Christmas present from his parents. He learned how to perform everything in the kit and practiced to the point of it affecting his grades. His parents threatened to take away the kit if his grades didn't improve immediately. Lionel was easily able to bring his grades back to snuff, since he was such an intelligent boy. His parents began to feel that the kit was a mistake, because Lionel started blabbering something about becoming an illusionist as part of a career path. Lionel's father had created his funeral parlor business from scratch and expected Lionel to follow in his footsteps by taking over the funeral parlor when he passed. Lionel did take over the business, but continued performing his illusions, his true passion.

Lionel's inspirations in life were the likes of Houdini, Blackstone, Copperfield and Siegfried & Roy. Lionel joined the National Illusionists Association (NIA) to gain access to some of the secrets of creating professional illusions. The annual membership fee was pretty steep at \$1,200, but Lionel figured that for \$100 a month, it was well worth it. He was able to communicate directly with the world's greatest illusionists and gain their secrets. Part of the membership contract was the prohibition of using any of the illusions professionally. Lionel was only legally permitted to learn how the illusions were performed. He was allowed to use the secret in creating his own illusions. He had learned many things from the NIA and had access to an extensive library of members-only literature that went back 150 years. He created illusions for his part-time gigs that were quite effective using a combination of his own imagination and some modifications of secrets borrowed from the greats.

Lionel loved performing as an illusionist, but was never able to make a lot of money at it. To really hit it big in the illusionist industry required a great show, great illusions and most importantly, a lucky break. There was a lot of competition out there for very few positions. The few really major illusionists clung to their strongholds like grim death. It was next to impossible to become an illusionist at the level of David Copperfield. There simply wasn't enough demand. The few choice spots were already taken.

It didn't matter to Lionel if he ever made it big; he loved the art so intensely that he would do it for free. His funeral parlor always had business and he got by. The illusionist work was more of

an enjoyable hobby that paid ok. His illusions were pretty basic stuff, using playing cards, capes, hats, sheets, boxes, tanks and other common illusion-related props. He always handed out business cards at the funeral parlor in case the bereaved needed any uplifting from Lionel's illusion show. Lionel mainly performed at parties, clubs and for friends.

He felt that if he could ever come up with a truly mind-bending illusion, it might get him more notoriety in the industry. He went to every local show that had illusionists, hoping to pick up a few tricks along the way. Sometimes, viewing performances would strike a chord and lead to a revelation for a new illusion.

Lionel's favorite type of illusions involved making things and people disappear. They were usually the most popular illusions performed by any illusionist. Lionel never tired of hearing the phrase, "How did he do that?" He enjoyed looking into the audience and seeing people's mouths drop open. He loved watching people look at each other in wonder. Performing illusions gave Lionel a feeling of power. He cherished having the power to make strangers believe that something impossible took place before their very eyes. He savored the roar of the audience when a particularly mesmerizing illusion had been performed. All illusionists had the same need that Lionel had, the need of control. Making strangers believe what you want them to believe is a way of controlling their thoughts. There aren't many situations in life similar to that of illusionists having that power over people.

One Saturday night after doing a show, Lionel had a strange dream in which he made his female stage assistant disappear. The illusion was performed in such a way that it was impossible to figure out how it was done. Other illusionists appeared in the dream, sitting in the audience watching the illusion being performed. After the show, the other illusionists asked Lionel how he did it. Of course, illusionists never revealed their secrets. The other illusionists begged him to reveal the secret of the illusion. Lionel insisted that he was sorry, but he could not reveal the secret under any circumstances. There was something so covert and forbidden about the way the illusion was performed that it shocked Lionel awake from the dream. He awoke sweating from head to toe.

He fell asleep again and resumed the dream. The secret of the illusion was revealed in the dream. When he awoke the next morning, he exclaimed, "Of course!" The sinister dream gave him an extraordinary idea for the ultimate illusion. Since he had access to corpses in his funeral parlor, he would have a ready supply of bodies to use in the illusion. The bodies that were destined to be cremated could be used as props in his act. When he typically cremated bodies and handed the relatives the ashes, nobody ever questioned if they were the actual ashes or not. There was no way to prove that the ashes even came from a human being. He could easily hand people ashes that came from a fireplace.

That's exactly what he would do. The bodies slated for cremation would be embalmed and saved

for use in his act. Then he would just burn up a bunch of wood in the incinerator and hand over those ashes to the people. The illusion would be performed with the aid of a female assistant as usual, but this time her body would actually physically disappear. In the past when performing a similar illusion, the assistant disappeared through a trap door or other cleverly manufactured box or device.

In Lionel's new illusion, he would use a dead body from the funeral parlor that resembled his assistant, via makeup and wigs, etc. When he went to perform the illusion, the dead body would be immersed in a tank of highly corrosive acid, which would in seconds completely dissolve the body in the acid. The body would appear to have disappeared. It would be such a great illusion! Nobody would be able to figure it out, even the greatest illusionists in the world! He would have to employ a new unscrupulous person as his assistant. The assistant would of course know the questionable secret behind the trick.

It isn't as if he would be killing anyone; the bodies would be already dead of whatever causes. What could go wrong? The new illusion could put him on the path to greatness! He placed an ad in the local papers for an assistant and found one who wanted to go to Vegas at any costs. Lionel tested the woman to see how far she would actually go. He presented her with various scenarios beginning with the phrases, "What if ..., If someone asked you ..., Did you know ..., etc." She appeared to be truthful based on his judge of character. Lionel told her that after a year of traveling with the act, they would be in Vegas with it. She agreed to the idea.

The new assistant was filled in on how things were going to work with the dead body, acid, etc. and they decided to begin performing locally. Lionel was able to stockpile a number of bodies that he had embalmed for freshness. Licensed funeral directors had access to various chemicals that were used in the trade, so he was able to do whatever was necessary without suspicion. He bought a special tank for the acid that could be sealed against leakage and he bought a sufficient amount of acid to fill the tank. The illusion was relatively basic except for the fact that the body actually disappeared. No one would ever think that a real body was somehow dissolving in what appeared to be water! It was a tremendous foolproof illusion.

The first time Lionel and his assistant performed the illusion for practice, the assistant was flabbergasted by the simplicity and brilliance of the concept. There was no way anyone would suspect anything was afoot. The audience would only be completely amazed! She felt that they were indeed on their way to Vegas.

Their first gig was at a wedding. The audience was spellbound by the act, which ended with the finale of the disappearing assistant. He handed out business cards and the number of gigs increased. He hired someone to run the parlor while he was performing his road show. He had plenty of bodies already available for the show, so he could really start performing. The assistant was surprisingly good, since she had performed as an assistant for many years already by the time

Lionel had hired her. Their act was a huge hit everywhere they went. The finale blew everybody away. They were beginning to make the papers. The number of gigs had increased exponentially. They were performing everyday. They made their way out toward Vegas to keep increasing the notoriety of the act.

They were very busy and Lionel was starting to wonder if they were going to have enough corpses to keep the act going. The tractor-trailer that they had leased was full of all the equipment and costumes. Lionel had underestimated how popular the act would become. He found himself being pulled into the momentum and wanted to keep performing. He was becoming a star. No one had an act like his. He was on his way to becoming the premiere illusionist of the country. Eventually, he would have his Vegas act.

Every other month, Lionel had to return to the funeral home to process more bodies to use in the act. He was making enough money to buy another funeral parlor closer to Vegas, so he wouldn't have to drive so far for all the dead body props. He alternated between the 2 parlors, processing bodies at both. There didn't seem to be enough people requesting cremation. He didn't want to burst the bubble of his increasing stardom by running short of bodies. He had to keep performing the amazing act and getting more and more notoriety. That is how the system worked. It took a lot of time and energy, but eventually paid off, he hoped.

Lionel and his assistant were becoming exhausted from the hectic pace. She wasn't complaining about the work and felt they were definitely on the right track to fame and fortune. She also began to wonder about the increased need for bodies for the act. The more they performed the finale, the more bodies they needed to dissolve in the acid. They decided to try performing shows on Saturdays and Sundays, in which only the Sunday show included the grand finale. They hoped to make the corpse supply last longer that way.

They immediately found that nobody wanted to see the basic act; everybody demanded to see the grand finale with the disappearing assistant. The finale is what made them so famous. They went back to always doing the finale, but did fewer shows. Unfortunately, fewer shows meant reduced forward thrust. They had to keep up the feverish pace of doing a lot of shows or they would not make it all the way. It kept going back to the problem of having enough bodies to do all the shows.

Lionel's assistant suggested getting the bodies from somewhere else more convenient. He asked her what she meant by that. She asked him what he thought she meant. Lionel said she couldn't be thinking what he thought she was thinking. She said she was. Lionel told her that under no condition were they going to produce their own corpses from live people! She asked why they couldn't. Lionel then realized that he had hired a bit of a schizo for his assistant.

She asked him why he hired her with the pretense that they would do whatever it took to make it

in Vegas, and then back off when it really got down to it. Lionel maintained that he would do whatever it took within reason, obviously. She said that he was welching on the deal. He said that there was never any deal that involved creating their own corpses at will. The bodies were always supposed to come from the funeral parlors. She brought up the fact that they were running out of bodies. What were they going to do? They wouldn't be able to maintain the pace of performing without having a lot more bodies to use in the act. She didn't want to stop short of Vegas.

Lionel reluctantly acknowledged that she had a point. They were so far along that it would be terrible to back off from the juggernaut that was their momentum to stardom. However, as much as Lionel wanted to make it in Vegas, he didn't want to be involved in what she was suggesting. She said that he wouldn't have to do anything. She knew people on the outskirts of Vegas who could procure as many bodies as they would require for the rest of their lives of performing the act. Lionel told his assistant that he would have to think about it.

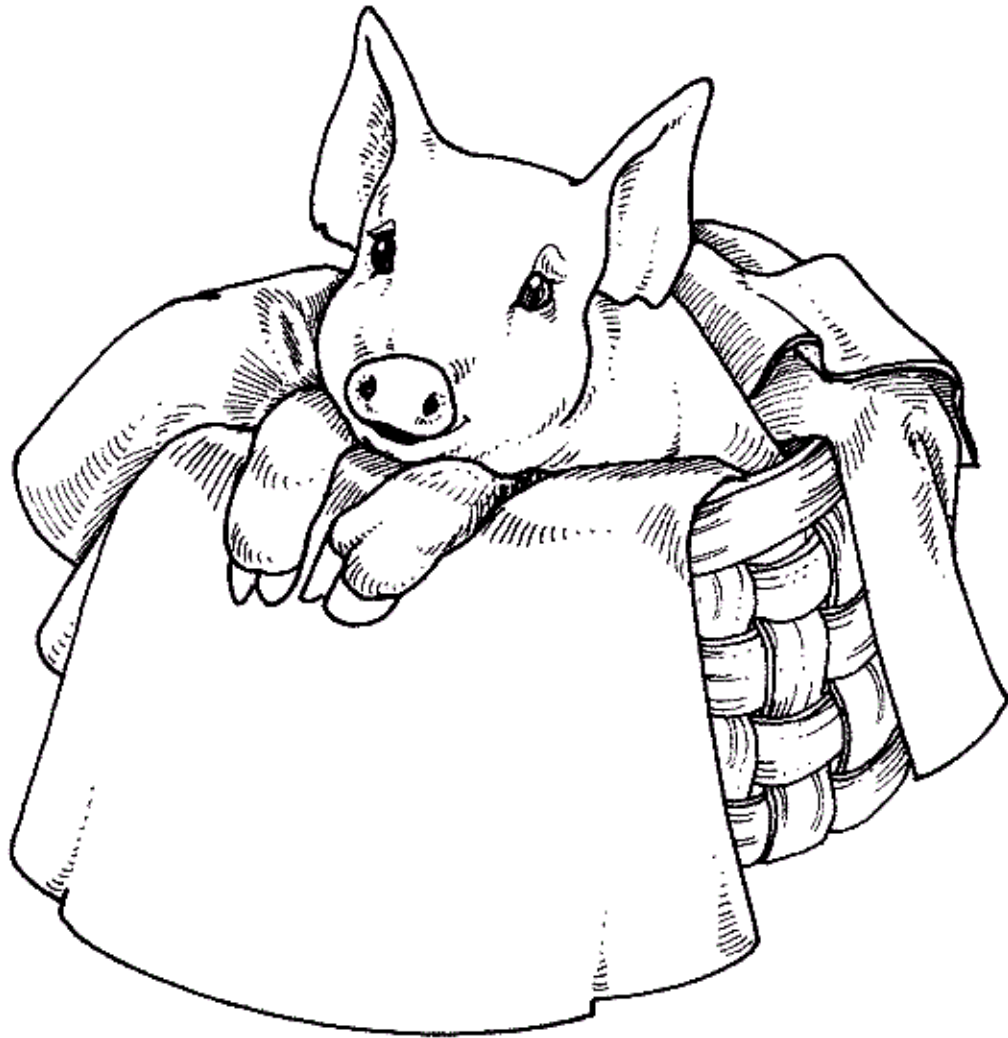
Lionel's lunatic of an assistant had possibly come up with the solution to their body supply issue. Should he take her up on it? It was well known that many homeless people had no relatives or friends. Everyone has heard the expression, "They wouldn't be missed." It was an unfortunate reality in big cities. There were always people dying everyday with no names on their tombstones. The world was a hard place.

Why shouldn't he and his assistant capitalize on the plight of the unknowns? Lionel was on the verge of becoming a somebody and his assistant would be there to share in the glory. Why not? When homeless unknown people die, they don't even realize it is happening. One second they are barely alive in their miserable existence. The next second they are at peace.

Lionel had a long talk with his assistant about the whole ugly process. Lionel insisted that his name and face be kept out of the whole thing. He would pay the assistant's supplier with the assistant as the go-between. Lionel's assistant agreed. The next stop for their act was actually in Vegas, but not in a big theater yet. They worked around Vegas for a while, performing 2 daily shows in small places to establish the buzz. The bodies were coming in as promised through Lionel's assistant. His assistant's contact assured her that they could have all the bodies they wanted. An increasing number of disappearances were being reported in the Vegas papers. Lionel and his assistant were too busy to read the papers.

After one of their shows, they were approached by an agent who loved the act and said he could book them in a big theater for a one-night tryout. Lionel and his assistant naturally agreed to the offer. They were in the big time! During the performance of the disappearing assistant finale, they switched the assistant with the dead body as usual. As the sheet was being pulled up in front of the tank, someone in the audience recognized a tattoo on the arm of the body in the tank. They yelled, "Wait, that's my sister in the tank!"

48. Osvaldo's Oink



48. Osvaldo's Oink

Designer dog breeds were becoming all the rage. Anyone who was anybody wanted to own and cuddle the most recently bred creation. Osvaldo came into the world as a first in breeding. The spoiled brat heiresses had waited a long time to get their hands on the first successful cross between a Chihuahua dog and a pig, named by the breeder, a chia-pig.

Dog breeders had mixed different breeds of dogs over the years to produce the over 400 breeds available. However, no one had successfully bred 2 different animal species, until Dr. Neville Newton came along. Neville didn't want to create a new dog breed, since the market had been already flooded. He wanted to create something cuter and cuddlier than a Chihuahua. He had tried mixing different animal species over the years with no success. There was something missing to get the whole thing to gel properly. He couldn't figure out what he was doing wrong.

Neville visited China as part of a 2-week cruise and had wandered into an old man's shop to buy some ointment for his feet. The old man seemed very knowledgeable. Neville was able to communicate with the man in English, which was a plus. The man produced a tube of ointment that was created from a special combination of ingredients. When Neville asked the man what was in the ointment, the man said, "Ancient Chinese secret!" Neville laughed and the man laughed with an excessively congested lung sound. Just taking a stab in the dark, Neville asked the man if he knew anything about breeding animals. The man said he didn't, but handed him a moldy dusty book that was surprisingly written in English. The book was entitled "Breeding."

Neville bought the ointment and book and read the book on the flight home. The book proved to be highly enlightening. It was 900 pages long and took a while to read, but at the very end, Neville found what he hoped was the answer to his breeding issue. The trick was apparently to add just the right amount of neutral DNA to the male liquid of the dominating animal of choice. In Neville's case, he wanted the dominating animal to be the dog over the pig, meaning he wanted his mixed breed to be more dog than pig. The neutral DNA can come from a number of animals including frogs, snakes and iguanas. The most available to Neville was the DNA from frogs.

After 9 months of trial and error, Neville bred his little chia-pig named Osvaldo. The market had been anxious for Neville's new pet. He had demanded and received the sum of \$1,000,000 for Osvaldo from the hotel heiress Paris Hilton. Money was no object to Paris, especially when it wasn't her hard-earned money. Neville could perhaps have gotten more for the animal, but he was happy with the million. The money would be used toward breeding other new animal mixes, now that he knew the trick.

Paris took delivery of Osvaldo immediately after Neville released him. Neville wanted to make sure Osvaldo was in full health. The doctor couldn't be sure if Paris would feed Osvaldo

properly at his young age, so he wanted to hang onto him long enough to start his life healthy. Neville recommended a mixture of Purina puppy chow and pig chow for Osvaldo's diet. Paris stocked up on the food mixture at the Petco store. Paris was able to carry the little critter around in her blouse pocket, because he was so small, at about a pound in weight. Chihuahuas range in size from 2 pounds to 10 pounds. Paris normally carried her Chihuahuas in her hand, but Osvaldo's smaller size made him more convenient to carry around. He fit snugly in her pocket, comfortably, but incapable of falling out. Paris instantly fell in love with her new little pet. He looked like a tan Chihuahua with a pig's nose. He grunted like a piglet and had a quiet bark that sounded like a cross between a squeal and the typical small dog yappy bark.

Paris and Osvaldo went everywhere together and she loved showing him off. She had the first chia-pig on earth and wanted to make sure the world knew about it. She was photographed constantly with Osvaldo and he didn't seem to mind all the attention from the paparazzi. All Paris' friends were jealous of her new pet and they all wanted one of their own. Paris informed them that the breeder who bred Osvaldo wasn't going to breed any more chia-pigs. He intended to pursue breeding other animals instead. That declaration thoroughly incensed her friends who felt cheated. Paris had paid a premium price for the new little animal and she intended to make the most of it by excessively gloating and bragging at every turn.

When Paris went to charity buffet luncheons, she put food on her plate then allowed Osvaldo to eat from her plate by leaning forward enough for Osvaldo to eat while he was still sitting in her pocket. It was the cutest thing that anyone had ever seen. Osvaldo was a huge hit everywhere he went with Paris. The chia-pig was becoming a bigger celebrity than Paris was.

Paris participated in many charity events, including bingo. When she played, she allowed Osvaldo to operate the marker on the numbers on the cards. He was really smart and learned how to do things in a very short time.

Paris found herself being invited to everybody's parties with the sole purpose of seeing her new pet. Paris and Osvaldo both loved the attention. Part of a Chihuahua's personality was that it loved being held and being in contact with people. Osvaldo definitely had that trait bred into him, because he and Paris became inseparable. When Paris didn't wear a blouse that had a pocket, Osvaldo would lie on her shoulder and be held down by one of the straps of the outfit. He probably could stay up there without the strap, but Paris thought it looked cuter to strap him down.

Paris made a deal through Mattel Toy Co. to create a chia-pig doll with her branding. Soon all the kids wanted a chia-pig doll of their very own. It was the closest thing to having a real one, since Neville Newton refused to breed any more chia-pigs. She sold quite a lot of the dolls with all the money going to charity. All Paris' flighty girlfriends bought chia-pig dolls and walked around with them as if they were real animals. Some of those heiresses were really out there.

Paris was invited to a White House party to show off Osvaldo, whom everyone wanted to see and pet. Osvaldo loved it there. Paris taught Osvaldo to sing Happy Birthday to the Vice President and it was a huge hit. Paris sang and Osvaldo just kind of grunted/squealed along.

Paris' friends asked to borrow Osvaldo for just a day, but she refused. She had become so attached to Osvaldo, that she couldn't let him out of her sight. She slept with him, ate breakfast with him, drove in the car with him and even showered with the little creature. Osvaldo loved being clean and appreciated the daily showers. He was always grooming himself like a cat to remain sparkling between showers.

When Paris and Osvaldo went to bed at night, Osvaldo would wait until Paris was asleep and he would walk down his ramp to go exploring. The mansion that Paris lived in was huge and it took Osvaldo a while to investigate every little nook and cranny. When he was done roaming, he would go back to bed completely tired out and have a solid sleep. He needed proper sleep each night to prepare him for the following day's festivities. Paris went somewhere everyday to do charity events or other promotional events for her empire. When Paris went to a nightclub after a busy day, she brought Osvaldo inside the club and he stayed on her shoulder as she boogied.

Paris found that Osvaldo was smarter than she originally thought. She taught him to play Checkers, then Chess and eventually Scrabble. The little guy became better and better at the games eventually beating Paris at all 3 games! Osvaldo played the games with the various members of the mansion staff during their break times and managed to win against all of them as well. The landscapers and gardeners tried to beat Osvaldo at the games and only one of them could do it, the master gardener from Haiti. Paris bet all her friends that Osvaldo could beat them at the games and she won every bet. Osvaldo must have inherited hyper-intelligence through the breeding process. Some of Paris' friends joked that Osvaldo was smarter than she was. They weren't that far from the truth.

Osvaldo had learned how to use the toilet to go to the bathroom in the mansion. He had his little ramps all over the place, including next to each toilet. He walked up the ramp and carefully stood on the seat, which as a rule of the mansion was always down, except during toilet cleaning, and squatted to piss & poop into the bowl. Then he reached the lever with his front foot and flushed the toilet. Luckily, his breeding gave him the feet of a dog, not the hooves of a pig, or he would be slipping and sliding like crazy. When Osvaldo went to the bathroom in the middle of the night and walked back up the ramp to the bed, he returned to Paris' pillow where he slept. He looked adorable sleeping with her on the same pillow.

Paris had been approached by MTV to do a TV show with her and Osvaldo as the main characters. They wanted to call the show "Paris and Osvaldo," but she turned it down after being sick of doing TV from her previous disaster. Some of her friends encouraged her to do the show and others thought it would be stupid. She thought the show was a cute idea, but didn't want to

waste all the time required to film and edit it. Paris had been increasing her charity work in an attempt to reverse the bad press she was getting of being a ditzy blonde heiress. She admitted to being ditzy. She couldn't help it; she was born that way. The press was saying that she was just another spoiled brat rich kid with nothing to do all day but waste her daddy's money.

Paris genuinely wanted people to love her and respect her. It was her idea to increase her charity work to keep herself busier doing constructive things that helped the community. As time passed, she began to succeed in changing the public's opinion of her. More importantly, she started to enjoy the charity work, spending her time more usefully instead of self-indulgently. Unfortunately, buying Osvaldo put her in the spotlight again, because of the high cost of the new pet. It made her look like a spoiled brat again, willing to waste a large amount of money on something frivolous. She set about to change that as quickly as possible by donating \$1,000,000 to the Los Angeles County food bank. The donation went a long way toward fixing her reputation.

She also created charities of her own, such as the Downtown Reading Center where literacy was taught, the Pick Up Game Club, where youths could play indoor sports in a safe environment and the Beverly Hills Animal League, where animals were taken in and adopted out. Paris was a good person inside, but nobody knew it. Osvaldo knew she was a good person and loved her for it. Paris had always loved all animals since childhood and Osvaldo really blew her away with his affection toward her.

Chihuahuas are a very jealous breed of dog and Osvaldo had inherited the jealousy trait from his breeding. When the owner of a Chihuahua is holding it, the dog wants the owner to pay full attention to it, like a baby. If the owner is distracted, the animal gets nervous and jerky, demanding to be noticed.

Paris always wore a large amount of jewelry around the mansion and more when she was in public. Osvaldo had been noticing Paris' tendency of looking at herself in the mirror, caressing and eyeing her earrings, necklaces and pendants. He felt that she should be devoting all her attention and affection to him. He hated it when he sat on her shoulder and she touched her diamonds, when she should be petting him. Those shiny objects seemed meaningless to Osvaldo and didn't appear to serve any purpose. He was annoyed when the photographers' flashes would reflect off her jewelry into his eyes. Why did she have all that junk?

Osvaldo was determined to do something about the sparkly junk that was depriving him of attention. He would systematically begin to get rid of it. That night, when he was sure Paris was asleep, Osvaldo looked around for her jewelry. He didn't have to look far. From the bed, he could see a bunch of shiny objects on a dresser. He walked down the ramp from the bed and pushed the ramp over to the dresser. He walked up the ramp to the dresser and took 2 of the earrings in his mouth. He walked back down the ramp, pushed it back to the bed and walked out

the bedroom to the bathroom down the hall. He walked up the ramp to the toilet, dropped the earrings into the bowl, took a poop & piss and flushed the toilet. He walked back to the bed, walked up the ramp and went to sleep on Paris' pillow.

The next morning, Paris noticed that the earrings were missing. She had a real hissy fit. Osvaldo was surprised that she even noticed the earrings were missing, much less get so excited about those stupid things. She ran around the mansion, asking everyone she encountered if they saw the earrings anywhere. No one saw anything. She figured that she must have misplaced them somewhere in the large mansion, some place outside or in one of the vehicles. She calmed down and took Osvaldo with her to breakfast. Osvaldo snickered to himself at his small victory.

Osvaldo decided to wait for things to settle down before he absconded with any more of Paris' shiny objects. Two days later, when Paris was asleep, Osvaldo performed his same act, flushing a necklace down the toilet. The next morning Paris was livid. Apparently, the necklace was the most valuable item on the dresser. Osvaldo had just gotten lucky with that one. Paris questioned everyone again with no results. She began to think someone was entering her bedroom at night and stealing from her. The thief could only have been the butler, maids or nanny, who all had rooms in the mansion. Paris didn't consider any of her relatives who lived there.

Paris discussed the apparent theft with her relatives at the breakfast table. They suggested for her to lock her bedroom door to prevent someone entering. She said that wouldn't work because the staff had keys. She had the lock changed that day, guaranteeing that a staff member couldn't enter her locked bedroom unless they picked the lock. Osvaldo waited for things to settle down. He watched how Paris locked and unlocked the bedroom door. It seemed to be a simple turn of a button thing. He could operate it; he was sure of it. When Paris was asleep, he stole a large pendant from the dresser, pushed the ramp to the door, carefully unlocked it, walked to the toilet and flushed the pendant. Piece of cake! In the bedroom, he relocked the door, pushed the ramp to the bed and went to sleep.

The next morning, when Paris noticed that the pendant was missing, she screamed at the top of her lungs. She claimed that someone had picked the lock and stole the pendant. She demanded that all the staff residing in the mansion be fired. They were fired and replaced by a new staff. Paris hoped that she had solved the thefts by firing the old staff.

That very night, the rascally Osvaldo endeavored to do it again! He scooped up as much jewelry as he could fit in his mouth, unlocked and exited the bedroom and walked to the bathroom. When he walked up the ramp to the toilet, the seat was up! Since he didn't want to make noise by slamming the seat down, he tried to walk on the toilet rim, which was narrower than the seat. He dropped the mouthful of jewelry into the toilet, reached up to the lever and flushed it. As he turned to walk down the ramp, he slipped and fell into the flushing toilet!

49. Porfirio's Gaze



49. Porfirio's Gaze

When Porfirio was on stage, he was in control. His powers of hypnotism went beyond the ability to simply convince impressionable people to do funny things. Of course, he could make a person act like a chicken, dog or duck and make them cluck, bark or quack, but that was child's play. Any hack hypnotist could perform that kid's show. Porfirio was capable of getting inside and bending people's minds to do his will without people being aware that it was happening. He was one of the few people on earth born with clairvoyant powers. He didn't let on to anyone about his powers, because he needed to keep them secret for his own means. When he appeared on stage, to the audience he was just another amazing hypnotist, The Amazing Porfirio.

Porfirio planned to take subliminal control of as many people as possible, one audience at a time. Those people would give him all their money at a designated place on a designated date and time. He had conducted extensive research on the concept of "power of suggestion." He learned that it was possible to cause people to consciously do things without knowing why they were doing them, or care why they were doing them. When the people were suitably mentally prepared ahead of time, they could be influenced into doing something by some sort of a trigger, such as a sound, word or phrase. It was similar to hypnotizing someone on stage, snapping a finger or saying "Alakazam," and having the person perform some act of the hypnotist's choosing. The stage show was a small limited application of the power.

Porfirio's idea was to mentally prepare the audience members of his shows with a combination of subliminal messaging and his power of suggestion. While he was on stage doing his act of hypnotizing someone, he would have an audio-visual display as part of the act. Images would be flashing on a screen that was the full width of the stage behind him. Music would be choreographed to the flashing images. The images would contain a variety of sights - some disturbing, some happy, some sad, some light, some dark, some black & white and some color. The images would be presented in such a way that while the audience was watching the hypnotism being performed, they would find themselves also drawn to the images. The audience's attention would be divided between the hypnotism and the images, with them not realizing it was happening.

The audience would believe that the images and music were just a background to the main act of the hypnotism being performed. In reality, the images that they were occasionally glancing at were Porfirio's real show. Hidden within the general images were microbursts of special images with subliminal messages. Porfirio devised the messages to plant seeds in the brains of the members of the audience. Once planted, those seeds would provide the means of mentally preparing the people for future control by Porfirio.

Porfirio was careful to prepare the special images so as not to be detected by someone. In case someone was filming the act and they filmed the images, Porfirio ensured that no matter how

slowly the images were replayed, the subliminality of the images would be undetectable.

Porfirio had already proven that his idea worked. He had performed a smaller scale version of the plan on an audience in another state. Most of the members of the audience resulted in giving him their money when they heard the trigger phrase, "Happy New Year 2001." The genius was that it was assumed that most people generally stayed up to watch or hear one of the New Year's Eve events on TV, radio or at a bar somewhere. Most of the people of that audience heard the trigger phrase and took all their money to a designated place at a designated time and left it there.

Porfirio was an evil genius in a greedy way. He wasn't brainwashing people into doing things like some religious organizations. He felt his mind control over the people was no big deal. They would overcome the financial loss and go on with their lives. Porfirio rationalized and justified his actions in a number of ways. He wasn't committing any crime that he knew of. He felt as though he were relieving people of the burden of having to figure how to spend their money. Porfirio had used the money from that first test audience to fund his newer bigger act, which was capable of mentally preparing more people at one time.

He leased a large theater in which he planned to perform his act over a 10-year period, which was already in progress. New Year's Eve 2011 would be the date and time of the next event. He calculated that if he performed 52 shows over 10 years at 500 people per show, he would have performed to 260,000 people. If only 1/2 of those people responded to the trigger phrase and deposited a minimum of \$1000 at his designated place, he would be richer by a minimum of \$130 million.

It seemed like a cut and dry process, but there was actually more involved than the audio-visual subliminal messaging. As Porfirio performed the hypnotism act, he gazed out into the crowd and looked into the eyes of every audience member. His unusual power of clairvoyance provided him with the ability to see into people's minds and souls. In case the audience members didn't gain enough mental preparedness from the subliminal messaging, his gaze provided the clinching force. Porfirio could easily walk up to someone on the street, look into their eyes for only a second and cause them to walk out into traffic if he felt like it. He was just that powerful. If he really wanted to, he could wreak some serious havoc, but he wouldn't, not yet anyway.

Occasionally Porfirio thought back to his lonely troubled youth and all the bullying he had to put up with. When in later life he had captured and focused his power into using it for his hypnotism act, he thought about getting even with some of the bullies of his youth. He imagined what he could do to those guys with just a look in their eyes. He could make them do things to themselves. He could make them commit crimes and become incarcerated. He could make them give him all their money. He could bankrupt those buffoons if he wanted. He could make those guys do funny embarrassing things in public. He could expose those people to much worse ridicule than he faced. He could cause them to ruin their families by making them commit

adulterous acts. The more Porfirio thought about it, the more devious ideas he came up with that he could unleash on those bullies.

He wondered why he started thinking the way he was. He was still a lonely person as an adult. Perhaps, his loneliness as a kid stayed with him through life and prevented him from making friends. Maybe he didn't want any friends. Maybe his power was all the friend he actually ever needed. He would never know if that was true until he gained a friend, which didn't seem forthcoming. For the time being, he would have to be content performing his act and mentally preparing people for their future donations to his bank account. It was going to be a while though to wait 10 years to make the big score. He supposed in the meantime, that it couldn't hurt to seek out some of those bullies of his past, just to see how they were doing in life.

He got on the internet to attempt to find some of those idiots. Porfirio eventually located a guy named Zack who used to lock him in his locker between classes at school. As a result, Porfirio had gotten in trouble many times for being late to class. The excessive late slips had led to detention and then being grounded by his parents. Zack strutted around the school with his cronies and knocked kids' books out of their hands on the stairs. The books and papers would go flying down the stairs, creating a big mess to clean up. Zack Krazy-glued one of Porfirio's hands to his desk in Math class. The nurse had to be called to apply a special product to loosen the bond. In gym class, Zack would always hit Porfirio in the balls during dodge ball games, a practice that was forbidden by the gym teacher. When they ran around the track, Zack tripped Porfirio, which resulted in Porfirio getting skinned knees. When they played basketball, Zack intentionally passed the ball too fast to Porfirio, which jammed Porfirio's fingers.

When they played soccer outside, Zack kicked Porfirio in the shins as often as he could get away with the gym teacher not seeing the violation. In the locker room during gym class, Zack snapped Porfirio's ass with a towel every day. In the showers, Zack enjoyed making fun of Porfirio's smaller than average-sized male appendage. At a school outing, Zack wiped poison ivy on one of Porfirio arms, which resulted in much scratching. At the same outing, Zack sprayed a chemical on Porfirio's tee shirt that attracted mosquitoes, instead of repelling them.

In the school cafeteria, Zack sprinkled itching powder down the back of Porfirio's shirt, which made Porfirio really itchy. Also in the cafeteria, Zack often spat in Porfirio's food, making it difficult for Porfirio to finish eating it. When Porfirio played chess in chess club, Zack would walk up to the classroom door's window and make faces. Once in art class, Porfirio was 3/4 finished with a beautiful watercolor rendition of a vase of flowers, when Zack spilled the water container onto the painting, ruining it. Porfirio had to start over with the painting, but was less enthusiastic with the 2nd attempt.

In the internet blurb about Zack, Porfirio read how Zack had become a minister in a neighboring state. The information went on to say how Zack had mended his youthful ways as a miscreant

and after spending some time in the slammer, finally had a revelation from above. The minister currently held court at a large historic church with a tall bell tower. Zack had never married and after the revelation, decided to fully commit himself to doing the creator's work. The church's parishioners enjoyed listening to Zack's message and filled his beautiful church each week.

To Porfirio it sounded like an interesting story. There was the demon from his school years receiving all that adulation and praise. Little did those churchgoers realize what a complete moron that guy was as a kid. Forgive and forget was a difficult phrase for Porfirio to live by. Porfirio never forgave Zack and would never forget how the guy had tormented him. Porfirio wouldn't be surprised if all Zack's former cronies had also served time in the penitentiary. Porfirio guffawed at the concept of people who do bad things, whatever they are, and then change their ways. All of a sudden, everybody loved them. Zack lived in a different state from the state where he bullied all those poor kids, including Porfirio. The people of the church where he worked had no idea how rotten he used to be and possibly still was inside. Maybe Zack had actually changed, but he caused irreparable damage to a lot of kids who might have grown up a little weird because of the abuse dealt by Zack and company.

Porfirio wasn't a religious enough person to forgive Zack. He just couldn't. Porfirio felt that by forgiving Zack, he would be almost acknowledging that what Zack did was somehow ok. Zack was a twisted kid. Porfirio supposed that every school had bullies, but what the bullies did was never ok. Forgiving those bullies was like saying what they did was ok. It was too easy to look at a person in later life who had been a bully as a kid and analyze the person as probably being a bully because they had been bullied themselves. Aw, the poor bully couldn't help bullying other people. Porfirio didn't buy it. Bullying was never ok, whoever did the bullying. It was unfortunate that bullies were typically created outside the school and then the bully transferred the abuse from himself to other kids. The kids who were being bullied didn't want to hear that the bully couldn't help what he was doing. The bullied kids just wanted the bullies to stop.

Porfirio decided to find Zack and have a little chat with him about the past. Porfirio put his hypnotist act on hold for a while until he resolved his issues with Zack the minister. Through the internet, Porfirio tracked down the location of Zack's church and made reservations at a hotel nearby. He drove to the city, which took about 6 hours, checked into the hotel and then headed over to Zack's church to see what all the fuss was about. Porfirio found the church and parked across the street to behold it.

The historic church was indeed a majestic structure with the peak of the tall bell tower at 167 feet. The church was beautiful and had been constructed in the 1700's. The bell tower housed and enormous 1000-pound bronze bell, which was a scaled-up replica of the Liberty Bell, except it was much larger. Porfirio had arrived on a Friday to get a feel for the place before he met with Zack after the service on Sunday. Porfirio pictured Zack in the church spewing his line of bull at

the unsuspecting and unknowing listeners. The person they listened to and so highly respected each week had been a monster as a kid. At least Porfirio felt that way. Porfirio was sure that all of Zack's victims felt the same way. What would be the best way to make Zack suffer?

As Porfirio sat in his car pondering Zack's fate, a thunderous sound was heard. It was 2:00 pm in the afternoon and the massive bell in the bell tower had been struck. The bell produced an incredibly loud, melodious note when struck. It was struck again. Amazing! Then the striking of the bell stopped, although the sound continued to resonate. Porfirio had never experienced such a beautiful sound. Who would think that a hunk of metal could sound so beautiful? Those craftsmen who built that bell way back then really knew what they were doing.

Porfirio looked up at the bell and remembered reading that during the daily hours of noon to 8:00 pm, the bell was operated by hand. Before and after those hours, a recording of the bell chiming was played through a loudspeaker. There appeared to be a rope attached to the bell and someone was up there wearing hearing protection holding onto the rope. That person must be the one who rang the bell by hand for the 8-hour shift. Porfirio didn't think that could have been Zack up there. It didn't seem like something he would do. The minister was probably considered too important to perform such a menial task. The bell ringer was probably a volunteer from the church.

On Sunday, Porfirio drove to the church and parked across the street. He waited in his car while Zack shook hands with the parishioners as they left the church after the mass. Zack looked the same as he did in school. When Zack had finished with the last person who exited the church, Porfirio walked over to him. Porfirio said to Zack, "Hi Zack. Do you remember me?" Zack's face reddened when he instantly recognized Porfirio, whose looks hadn't changed in all the years. Zack said, "Hello Porfirio! You look well. How have you been?" Porfirio stared deeply into Zack's eyes and said, "You ruined my life, Zack." Zack's eyes took on a blank stare.

Zack didn't respond to Porfirio and silently walked back into the church. In a few minutes, the bell in the bell tower began ringing like never before. Zack had gone up to the tower and was pulling on the rope as hard as he could. Porfirio looked up and saw Zack moving like a jackhammer next to the enormous bell, which was making a tremendous roar with its spastic chiming. Zack wasn't wearing any hearing protection. Porfirio had hypnotized Zack into pulling the bell's rope until the cacophony made him deaf and then he was to keep pulling. Parishioners looked up from the street, covering their ears. No one could hear anything because the bell was so loud. Porfirio smiled and began walking to his car. The old bell wasn't designed to be rocked so forcefully by Zack's effort and had loosened from its ancient iron mounts. The still-clanging bell tore free, fell out of the tower and plunged toward the sidewalk below. Spectators screamed and pointed at the plummeting object. Someone yelled a muted, "Look out!" The startled Porfirio looked up just as the bell crashed down on him.

50. Quincy's Eggs



50. Quincy's Eggs

All Quincy knew was that he loved the taste of ostrich eggs raw from the shell. The stuff was the essence of what made him into such a magnificent specimen of an ostrich. Quincy's owner Winford was the most famous ostrich farmer in the world. Winford had fed Quincy raw ostrich eggs since he was a little ostrich chick. As a result, Quincy had grown to twice the size of an average male ostrich. Winford learned the trick from the African man who sold him his first ostriches in Africa. Male ostriches that ate the eggs became huge for some reason.

Winford originally started raising ostriches to sell the meat to restaurants and food supply houses. He did a really good business selling the meat, but he had to absorb the cost of raising ostriches from chicks to harvest-size. A bodybuilding friend of his ingested raw chicken eggs daily as part of his protein intake. Winford suggested trying raw ostrich eggs for a change of pace. The friend tried the ostrich eggs for a while and noticed more muscle mass as a result. He immediately switched to ingesting exclusively ostrich eggs. Winford wondered if there would be a market for the ostrich eggs. His friend knew other body builders who would probably use the ostrich eggs.

Winford began a side business of selling the raw ostrich eggs in liquid form to the body builders. The guys loved the stuff and they all saw improvements from the product. One of the guys was a businessman who suggested processing the ostrich eggs into powder and selling the powder at a nutrition store. After a month of research and meetings with local food processing companies, Winford decided to pay a company to process the eggs into powder for him. The regulations involved with processing food products were outside the scope of Winford's operation at the ranch. It was more cost-effective for him to have someone process the eggs into a nice packaged product. He started selling it as a bodybuilding supplement and really began to turn a tremendous profit on the product. He converted his ranch into an egg production facility.

Quincy mated with the 900 hen ostriches of the ranch. For some unknown reason, when Quincy began mating with Winford's ostriches for egg production, the size of their eggs doubled. A normal ostrich egg was 6 inches across and weighed 3 pounds. Eggs laid by ostriches that were mated by Quincy laid 12-inch eggs that weighed 6 pounds. Just by the simple act of using Quincy as the rooster ostrich, Winford had doubled his egg production. In addition, the eggs had 50% more protein than an average ostrich egg.

The powdered product was so effective as a bodybuilding supplement that it literally flew off the shelves. The product became nationally known as the best new supplement in years. Other manufacturers attempted to duplicate Winford's success but couldn't beat his price. No one could produce the product at his cost and still make a profit. No one believed he could be making a profit selling the product so cheaply.

Without Quincy, Winford would still be raising ostriches for meat, barely getting by. With Quincy, he was raking in the money hand over fist. Winford couldn't thank that African guy enough for telling him secret of raising Quincy on the ostrich eggs. Since ostriches can live for 75 years and Quincy was only one year old, Winford would be sitting in the fable catbird seat for many years to come.

Winford's business boomed and Quincy was busier than ever mating with the ostrich flock. The bird was treated very well by Winford and lived in his own private building with a large enclosed yard. The female ostriches were brought to Quincy in succession as needed. It was a continuous line of birds going in and out of Quincy's establishment. He was very busy at his job of mating with such a large amount of ostriches, but enjoyed it very much. It was the most natural thing he could do in life and he didn't have to brawl with other male ostriches to get with the females. He was able to use all his strength and vitality toward helping the hens make those super-sized eggs.

The main problem with Winford's business was the competition that he had eliminated when he entered the supplement market with his new product. The market had been established before he entered into it and all the players were in place happily making their profits. When Winford came along as an unknown, he threw everybody for a loop. In a market that was at capacity, there was no room for Winford. He managed to satisfy the need in the market by supplying his better product at a lower price. The competition didn't like it. The competition looked at it as though he may be starting with that one product, but may add more in the future. Soon the unknown guy would have a whole line of products, further cutting into established profits.

The number one company in the supplement industry at the time was Nutrico and they didn't appreciate losing the slot that Winford had occupied so blatantly. They decided to arrange a business meeting with Winford to discuss matters. They found his info from his product label and placed a call. Winford was more than glad to take a meeting with representatives from Nutrico. He hoped to learn a little more about the business from the pros.

Two weeks later, Winford met with the Nutrico people at his ranch office. There were 2 guys from Nutrico - one business-looking guy in a suit and another huge guy the size of Lou Ferrigno wearing a bulging sports jacket. They were both scary looking fellows. They had a long discussion about how Winford didn't know enough about the business to be in it. Nutrico suggested that Winford stop selling his product for a year or so, until he learned more about the business. Winford immediately recognized the strong-arm tactics being employed by the Nutrico guys and told them he would think about it. The men left their business cards; he thanked them and bade them farewell. After they left, Winford called his lawyer about what to do. His lawyer suggested standing firm and staying in the business. Winford thought about it and agreed. Who were those buffoons to give him such a veiled threat? The worst that could happen was that he would have to stop marketing the egg product and go back to selling ostrich meat. He would

really hate to give up all the easy profits though.

His lawyer composed a legal document, which outlined the meeting between Nutrico and Winford, what was said at the meeting and how Winford planned to stay in the business of marketing the powdered egg product. Winford, the lawyer and 2 witnesses signed the letter. The letter was notarized and mailed to Nutrico, with copies sent to the BBB, The State Department and CNN. When Nutrico received the letter, they were outraged that the upstart Winford would pull such a prank. They decided that if they couldn't force Winford out of the business, they would find out his secret and take it from him. They mailed a response letter to Winford stating how they were sorry about the pressure they put on him, etc. in words that cleverly didn't implicate them in any wrongdoing or unfair business practices.

Winford felt relieved upon receipt of the letter and sent copies to his lawyer, the BBB, The State Department and CNN. Winford went on with his business but slept with an eye open and always watched his back. He hired a 24-hour security guard, had a security system installed, erected a tall barbed-wire fence around the ranch and installed a gated entry at the front. The improvements cost thousands of dollars, but he could afford it with the immense profits that kept pouring in from the sale of his product.

In the meantime, Quincy kept plugging along, unaware of the goings on. He felt safe in his secluded area and was invisible to any prying eyes. The Nutrico boys researched Winford's life and noticed how he had changed his business in mid-stream. They wondered why he had switched from selling ostrich meat to selling ostrich eggs. It seemed to be a bizarre change of industries. Nutrico wasn't aware of any companies that exclusively sold one thing and made a profit doing it. The norm was always to diversify. What was Winford doing to make so much profit on those ostrich eggs? Was he actually making a profit or just messing with the industry for a while until he went bankrupt. Nutrico had seen 'em come and seen 'em go. They were so well established that not many companies could compete with them. They usually bought out failing companies and absorbed them into their holdings. Nutrico ran a financial check on Winford and he was apparently actually profiting and not pretending to profit.

Nutrico had contacts everywhere and consulted with the contacts in Winford's neck of the woods. Nutrico had discovered that Winford had revamped the security of his ranch and made it difficult for people to walk around to see what was really going on there. They infiltrated Winford's security guards by placing one of their own into the ranks. Winford didn't know any of the security guards before he hired them, so he didn't notice the one placed by Nutrico. Winford's security guards had access to all the locks and security devices on the ranch. Nutrico's guy discovered Quincy on the first day and immediately notified Nutrico. Nutrico put 2 and 2 together and determined that the giant ostrich was somehow involved in the high profit eggs.

Nutrico hatched a plan to steal Quincy from Winford and hold the ostrich for the ransom of

Winford leaving the industry. The security guard that they placed there was the key. Nutrico's guard quickly learned the simple routines of the ranch and limited security measures. Winford's house was on the ranch, but far enough from Quincy's structure that no one would notice any noise. The guard fed the info back to Nutrico and the plan went into action. Since Nutrico's guard worked the midnight shift, the ostrich would be stolen at night. Nutrico consulted with a zookeeper about how to tranquilize a large ostrich and they provided the information.

The guard obtained the tranquilizer gun and dart from Nutrico and sneaked into Quincy's building that night. The guard had a separate radio to contact the goons in the getaway truck. The guard shot Quincy with the dart and radioed the truck as Quincy fell asleep. It required the 2 guys in the truck and the security guard to wrestle the 500-pound ostrich into the back of the truck. It took them 45 minutes to do it, but they managed. The security guard escaped in the truck with the goons and drove to the location designated by Nutrico. When Nutrico saw Quincy, they were impressed. They wondered where Winford had obtained such a large ostrich. They could definitely see a connection between the big ostrich and the eggs somehow. They still didn't understand the connection, but it didn't matter.

They had considered doing away with Quincy altogether, thus possibly solving the problem in one swift step. They couldn't be sure that the ostrich was the secret though. The way Winford had sent the letter to them and the other official places had alerted them to Winford's shiftiness. They had underestimated Winford's tenacity. They had initially assumed their meeting with the little businessman would have ended the problem on that day, but it didn't. They had to keep things in line and not miss any details. They had to plan for any future shiftiness by Winford.

When Winford discovered Quincy and the security guard missing, he called the security agency and got nowhere. He called the Police, filed a report and notified his lawyer as well. He hired a new security agency to replace the old one that had been infiltrated. He hoped the new agency would be more trustworthy, but couldn't be positive. He began to wonder if he should have taken Nutrico's advice, but it was too late. Quincy was gone.

Nutrico had strong-armed their way through the industry over the years, establishing themselves on top, where they intended to stay. Employing their typical shrouded means, they contacted Winford via an untraceable phone call, with their demands concerning Quincy. When Winford heard the phone ring he suspected it was Nutrico, but naturally they used electronic altering of their voice when talking to Winford. Winford couldn't identify who it was, but he knew it was them. Who else would it be?

Winford was dumbstruck and consulted with his lawyer. The kidnappers demanded that Winford quit the supplement industry in exchange for the release of Quincy. Winford knew there was nothing he could do about it. They had him where they wanted him. They were the big guys for a reason. Why didn't he listen to them? Poor Quincy. He hoped his big ostrich was still ok and

that they were treating him properly. Winford agreed with their demands and asked them what specific things they wanted him to do.

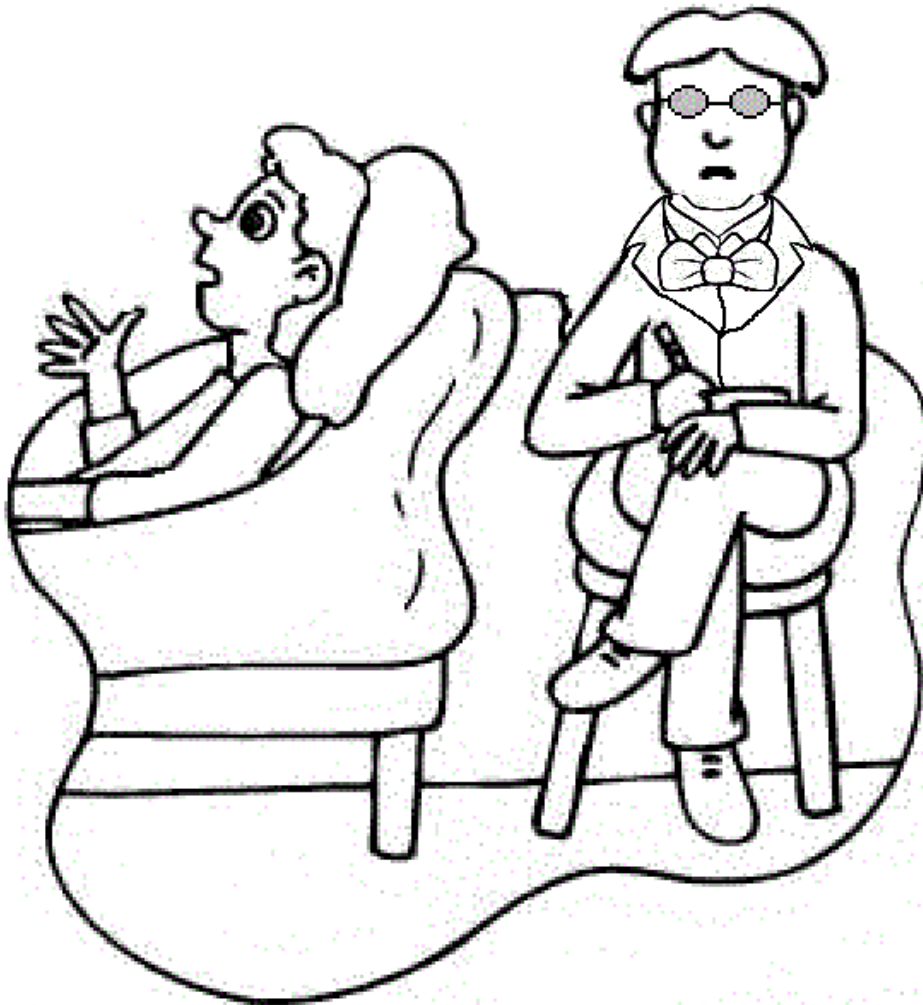
When Quincy awoke in the horse stall in the dark barn, he knew where he was. When the security guard had shot him with the dart, it had only knocked him out for 20 minutes. While the fools were trying to get him into the back of the truck, it jostled him awake. He kept his eyes shut while in their presence, pretending to be asleep. The door on the back of the truck was ill fitting enough for him to peek through on the side. He observed the entire journey from his ranch to the abandoned farm where he currently was. He memorized the route so he would be able to find his way back home when he escaped.

Quincy sized up the horse stall with the locked door in front; he laughed, turned around and kicked the door from its hinges. It went flying across the barn and smashed down the door of the stall across the way. He ran out of the stall, turned to the left and rammed into the barn door at full speed. He smashed the big door to pieces as he vaulted through it, not losing much speed in the process. He hastily looked around and located the house, where the Nutrico goons had just hung up the phone with Winford. He increased his speed and sprinted to the building as 4 men emerged - one of the Nutrico guys who met with Winford, the security guard who darted Quincy and the 2 guys who drove the truck.

Quincy had been sharpening his front toenails since he was a baby; they were his primary means of defense. With a single kick from one of the powerful legs of an ostrich, the bird can split a man down the middle, due to the concentrated force channeled through those sharp toenails. Because of Quincy's size and ridiculous strength, he had grown into a supremely dangerous weapon. The big ostrich continued running at the men who stood there with their mouths hanging open in confusion and fear. Quincy leaped into the air at the man all the way on the left and sliced his head clean off with a swift kick to the man's neck. The man's head went flying through the air, bounced off the siding of the building and landed in the bushes.

Quincy landed on the ground, turned and assaulted the 3 remaining men. One of the men pulled a gun from his vest and raised it to fire as Quincy bit the man's wrist. The man dropped the gun and swung his fist at Quincy, missing. Quincy's awesome momentum knocked the 3 men to the ground, breaking their ribs and puncturing their spleens. The man with the bleeding wrist reached for the gun too late as Quincy's sharp toenails stabbed through his hand, stapling it to the ground. The 3 men screamed in agony from their multiple injuries. Quincy picked up the gun from the ground and flung it over the roof. He pulled his toenails from the man's hand like a soldier removing a bayonet from a torso. Quincy chuckled as the man shrieked from the pain. Quincy wanted to get home so he turned from the mortally wounded men and jogged down the driveway. When he was halfway down, the Nutrico guy with the suit from the first meeting jumped out of the building firing a fully automatic AK-47. Quincy was hit!

51. Ulrich's Patients



51. Ulrich's Patients

It was 8:32 am and Ulrich was only 32 minutes into the session and was already bored with the new patient, not that he was keeping track of the time or anything. Actually, he was keeping track of the time. It was part of his vocation as a psychiatrist. The new patient kept blathering on and on about how their mother and father never loved them, etc. Ulrich's job was starting to feel like listening to a broken record. Everyone seemed to have the same inane issues. What was wrong with everyone?

Actually, Ulrich shouldn't talk, when he was young, he had a lot of issues that he fortunately grew out of, as do most kids if given a chance. Ulrich drifted off again. What was the patient talking about? Oh yeah, something about their dog not loving them, blah, blah, blah. When does it end? Is the person done yet? Wait, the timer is at 55 minutes. Hurray! Only 5 minutes left.

That's the way it was everyday for Ulrich, patiently listening as people revealed their innermost ugly secrets. It was actually a good-paying job. It should be, after the huge cost of the college and student loans he finally paid off. He drove a nice Jag and lived in a nice house with a nice wife and kids.

Some days were particularly brutal, involving many strange revelations being handed to him. It was a good thing for some of Ulrich's patients that there was a confidentiality agreement in place. Some of those people were on the verge of criminal activity, at least as far as the patients were telling him. They might be only revealing part of the stories to him, keeping the really ugly stuff to themselves. For some of his patients, Ulrich hoped it was that way. He didn't see how some of those people could live with themselves after doing the things they claimed to have done.

Ulrich was always fully booked with patients each day. He had 8 one-hour sessions with an hour for lunch. Ulrich only required 10 minutes to eat the small lunch that he brought each day. He wanted to allow his receptionist to have a full hour to run errands or whatever. On some days, Ulrich had to squeeze somebody in who required emergency therapy. The hour of time allocated for lunch was perfect for those emergencies.

Some of his patients he had for years and others were recent additions, referred by fellow psychiatrists who had full patient loads. Some patients only required a short time of therapy, which opened up spaces for new people to come in when the others were cured. Ulrich worked in a co-op of therapists, where they moved the newer patients around to keep all the doctors fully booked and the patients happy with someone to whom to spill their secrets. It was a great system that the co-op worked out and everybody made a lot of money, due to the efficiency of maximizing the number of patients seen.

Ulrich and the receptionist took 4 weeks off for vacation in one-week blocks to enable patient

scheduling well ahead of time. Most of the patients had appointments every other week, which enabled Ulrich to have such a great vacation schedule. The few patients that had appointments every week permitted Ulrich to conduct their sessions over the phone. Those people were the really hard cases that would never be completely right in their heads, even if they saw a psychiatrist every day of the year. Those are the patients that therapists dread taking into their offices. Those rare ones end up being serial killers, criminals and/or cannibals. The really hard cases always scared and sometimes threatened Ulrich.

When a doctor takes the Hippocratic Oath, it is their duty to try to help everyone who asks them for help, as difficult as it may become. Even though Ulrich earned over \$150,000 annually, it wasn't always an easy paycheck. Without fail, he couldn't get through a week of patients without someone saying something that truly frightened him to the bone. Some of the things people told him were so diabolical that he couldn't wait for the session to end. Listening to the most difficult patients was like watching a horror movie where you couldn't close your eyes or cover your ears. He just had to sit there, listen and take it.

The major key to the success of any doctor-patient relationship was the careful listening part. A patient would be able to tell immediately if the therapist were just saying yes, no, maybe, etc. and not really listening. The proper way to conduct a therapy session was to listen carefully to every word to decipher the meaning behind the words. People in therapy sessions weren't sitting or lying there in the doctor's office reading from a book or script. Those people were trying as hard as they could to get help by presenting their cases. The patients fully realized that they were talking to someone who was neither a friend nor a relative. They were telling the doctor everything they confidently could to get the doctor to understand.

After that first patient of the day - the new patient - had left, Ulrich felt better. He shouldn't have been so impatient with the person. Ulrich was always like that with his new patients, because the relationship always started the same way. After so many years of starting with new patients, it became rote. Ulrich followed the basic rules of handling a new patient, the rules he had learned in college. The first sessions were always intended to be introductory, involving the release of all the basic information into the air. Ulrich promised himself that the next session with the patient would be meatier. The patient would begin to reveal the more complex facets of the issue at hand. That's when it would begin to get more interesting for Ulrich.

The 2nd patient of the day was a butcher who was starting to have issues with her trade. The poor person's father had been a butcher, etc. The patient had inherited the established business from her father. She was beginning to have problems with the morality of processing slaughtered pork and beef related animals. It was unfortunate, since her livelihood depended on it. The butcher supported a large household of 7 kids, a spouse and grandparents. Being a butcher was all the person knew how to do. She would hate to give up all the financial security. If she quit

the business, how would she support her household? The butcher was the type of patient that Ulrich really enjoyed trying to help. The patient faced a common problem that many people have of working at a job they didn't like just for the financial rewards.

Ulrich had been seeing the butcher for a month, with little headway being made. The butcher was to the point of crying the entire time she was at work. The butcher felt sorry for the animal that was hanging on the meat hook in front of her. She didn't perform the actual dispatching of the animals, so it wasn't as bad as it could have been. It was bad enough though. The butcher felt that she was responsible for the deaths of the animals. It was really starting to wear on the butcher's psyche and something had to happen to influence her thinking soon. The butcher was beginning to express suicidal tendencies to Ulrich, which was the real problem. If Ulrich couldn't help the butcher soon, the loss of a person's life might be placed on his shoulders.

Ulrich had been trying to research the butcher's issue by consulting the vast resources available to the psych industry. Millions of pages had been documented on the cases experienced by psychiatrists and therapists. Only the results of the cases were published, with complete anonymity afforded to the patients involved in the cases. It was indeed a sticky wicket, but Ulrich believed that he might have come up with the solution. It was Ulrich's plan that the butcher consider the bodies of the animals she was processing to be lumps of clay. The butcher was to perform the butchering job as a sculptor. The butcher/sculptor would cut pieces of clay from the beef or pork side and wrap them up as smaller sculptures to be enjoyed by the customers. It seemed farfetched, but the concept had been proven to work with people in similar circumstances.

Ulrich explained the mental process to the butcher who at first thought it was a stupid idea. Ulrich reasoned with the butcher that she needed to give it a try. The whole concept of the butcher having problems with processing animals was a mental one. She only needed to manipulate and structure the concept of butchering into something else. The butcher would still go through the motions of performing the same actions, but she would have to think about it differently. It would take time, but it might work. There was only one way to know if it would work and that was to try it out.

Ulrich sent the butcher home feeling a little better, but still doubtful. It bothered Ulrich that he could only provide so much assistance to people. He couldn't physically climb inside people's minds and make them better. The people had to do it for themselves.

Ulrich's 3rd patient was a letter carrier who was becoming afraid to deliver mail because of being attacked by cats every day. Ulrich had letter carriers as patients on a semi-regular basis. Delivering mail wasn't as straightforward as mailmen made it seem. When they were delivering mail to the houses, the letter carriers were inadvertently invading the territories of the dogs and cats that lived there. The animals were defending their home turfs. It was unusual for cats to

attack letter carriers, but his patient apparently had a real problem with it.

The typical logic is that when animals sense fear in other animals or humans, they are instinctively stimulated to attack the fearful being. The letter carrier insisted that he wasn't afraid of cats or dogs in general and in fact, owned one of each. The mailman had no idea why the cats were attacking him, but he was becoming mentally affected by it. There were 6 cats that the mailman had to watch for, that would skulk behind corners, under bushes and next to trees. By the end of the day, the mailman was so traumatized from fear that he was shaking from head to toe. He was barely able to drive his mail jeep back to the station. He had informed all the cat owners on his route through his supervisors, per standard procedure.

Apparently, none of the cats that attacked the mailman even lived in the houses on his route. For some reason, the cats traveled from other neighborhoods for the sole purpose of terrorizing him. That was the strange part about the whole thing. Ulrich was baffled by the case, unsure how he could help the mailman. Ulrich instructed the mailman to change his route to get as far from the sinister cats as possible. The mailman had insisted that he had already changed his route 3 times, but the cats kept finding him. The only advice Ulrich had left was to transfer to another city.

Ulrich's 4th patient had a strange habit of filling her bathtub with gallons and gallons of ketchup and sitting in the tub for hours on end. She would then bring containers of the ketchup to the diner where she worked, to top off the ketchup bottles. Ulrich had a real problem with the patient, because he felt the practice was disgusting. When Ulrich found out where the waitress worked, he never ate there again.

At 1:00 pm after lunch was over, the 5th patient walked in wearing a trench coat with nothing on underneath. The person was a longtime flasher who loved to show it all at the public park down the street. The person had been arrested numerous times, but was unable to stop performing the flashing act. Ulrich thought the patient had an innocent problem, but agreed that it was unsuitable for children to see the obese man's disgusting naked body. Ulrich suggested that if the man had to continue flashing, he should at least try to lose some weight.

The 6th patient of the day was a woman who loved purses. Most women loved purses, but this one carried her entire purse collection with her wherever she went. She currently owned a total of 33 purses that were overflowing with as much of her household goods as she could fit in them. When she walked into Ulrich's office, the purses were hanging all over her body and probably impeded her ability to walk. Ulrich had instructed her to try to reduce the number of purses she carried by one per month. In less than 3 years time, she could be down to the typical number of 1 or 2. She said she would try, but she had just seen a nice purse in a shop window on the way to the office, that she planned to buy after the session.

By 3:00 pm, Ulrich was usually getting a little drowsy and drank a large cup of coffee to get him

through the afternoon. His 7th patient walked in as Ulrich was finishing the coffee. The patient ran over to him and knocked the coffee cup from Ulrich's hand. Ulrich had forgotten about the patient's tendency to demand 100% of Ulrich's attention for the entire 60 minutes of the session. The patient yelled, "This is my time! You can drink coffee on your own time!" Ulrich said he was sorry to the patient and tried to calm him down. The patient soon calmed down and began his typical spiel.

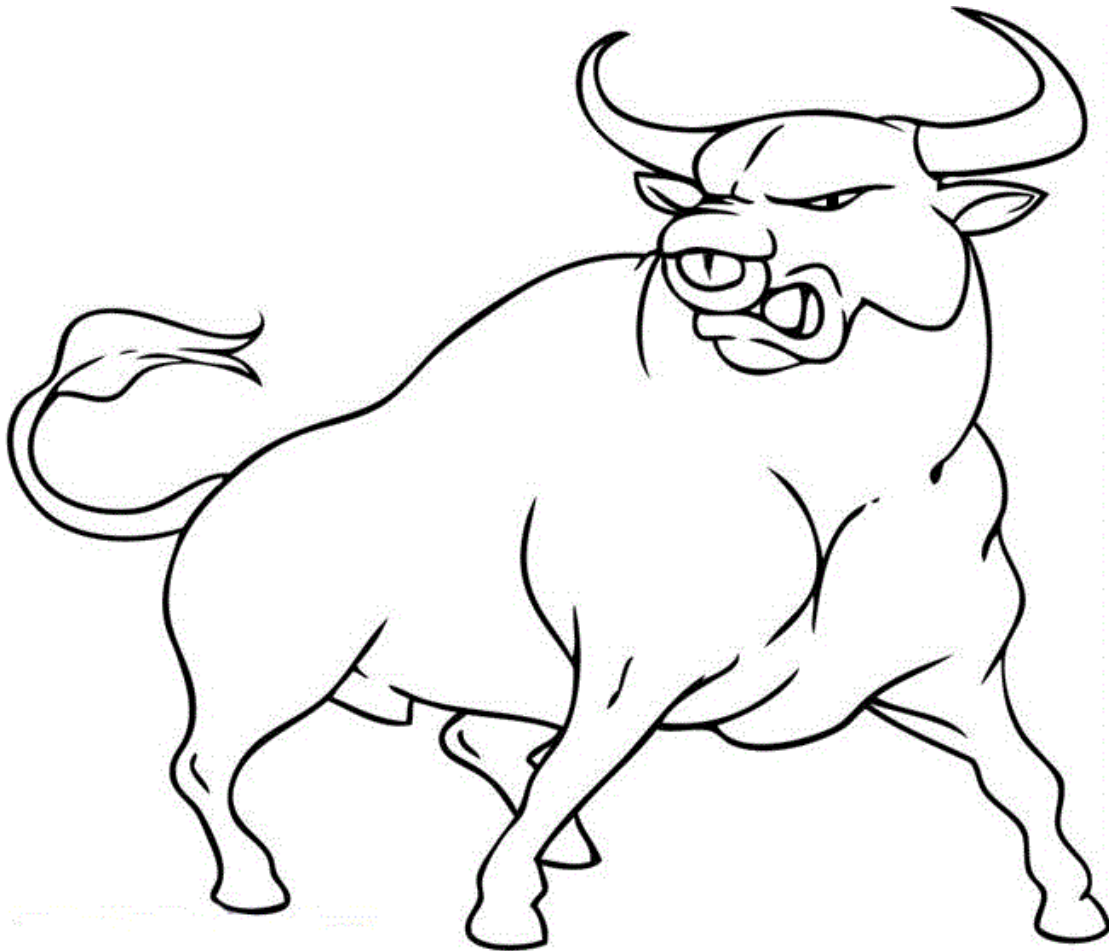
One of the risks that psychiatrists faced on a daily basis was the potential instability of their patients. Some of the patients were on medications and some weren't. The medications had little to do with people's occasional outbursts. Long-term damage to a person's behavior is sometimes impossible to completely resolve. Psychiatric professionals attempt to smooth out the corners the best that they can. Ulrich had been mildly assaulted many times by his patients over the years, but nothing life threatening. Ulrich had buzzers installed around his sound-insulated office that he could press in an emergency. If his receptionist heard the sound of the buzzer, she immediately dialed 911. She had been forced to place the call more than a few times. Psychiatrists and therapists know what potentially can happen when they start their professions.

When 4:00 pm rolled around and Ulrich's last patient of the day walked into this office, he felt energized by the coffee from earlier. Ulrich was ready to do some serious healing. The patient was a powerful woman who had been in combat in the army. She was thoroughly shell-shocked and jumpy. Ulrich consulted his notes and remembered that it took very little to set her off. He had to be very careful to not cause her to flash back into combat, which was her tendency. During a previous session, she had flashed back and nearly destroyed his office by throwing things all over the place in a blind rage. She didn't seem to realize at the time that she was safe in his office and not on the battlefield. As she trashed his office, she screamed out the names of her fallen comrades.

During the current visit, she wanted to show Ulrich some pictures of her and her fellow soldiers. All of the other soldiers in the pictures had been killed in combat. Ulrich felt it was part of her healing process to look at the pictures and describe what took place before and after the pictures were taken. When she looked at the first picture, she burst into tears and couldn't speak. Ulrich quietly asked her to talk about the picture. It was a picture of a smiling woman dressed in camouflage, holding a rifle. The patient told how the woman was her best friend and had been killed minutes after the picture was taken. The patient screamed out, "No! No! Not her!"

Ulrich tried to calm the woman, who had thrown down the purse that held the pictures. She kicked her chair across the room and ran to the window. Ulrich remembered to remain calm with the woman, walked over to her standing at the window and whispered for her to please sit down. The woman again shrieked, "No! No! Not her!" She grabbed Ulrich by the shoulders, picked him up and threw him out the window.

52. Xavier's Might



52. Xavier's Might

Xavier was the biggest, baddest bull in the history of bull riding. In his 23 years of carrying riders, no one had managed to get a full ride. Out of 13,400 rides, thousands of injuries had been inflicted, many of them fatal. The bull loved what he did and the audience loved what he did. The riders liked what the bull did to a point, because he made the sport of bull riding so popular by his menacing presence. The riders that drew Xavier, shuddered when they found out they were to ride the great bull. The riders didn't know if they were going to survive the ride and were just glad to get the ride over with.

If a rider could ride Xavier without being injured, it was a rarity. The bull learned early on how to act when a cowboy was on his back. He knew how to spin and buck. He always waited just long enough for a full ride to almost occur, and then throw the rider to the ground. While the rider was in the dirt trying to get clear, Xavier always gave the rider a good kick to the head or an even more savage stomp on the ribs. The rodeo clowns served no purpose when Xavier was out there. The bull ignored the clowns and spat at them. Xavier thought the clowns looked stupid with all their painted faces and ragged clothing. Xavier was the only bull in the industry that scared the rodeo clowns.

Xavier had a normal humane upbringing and wasn't abused in any way to make him mean and ornery. He grew up on the same ranch as other bulls, ate the same food and drank the same water. It was just that from the first day, when they put him in the arena and tied on the flank strap, he was determined to play the game harder than all the other bulls. When Xavier was young, he watched how the other bulls seemed satisfied with merely throwing the riders off and then walking away. The average bulls accidentally injured the riders as they turned and the riders slipped into the horns. After the riders dismounted the average bulls, the bulls accidentally stepped on the riders. Not Xavier. Xavier thought that was being too easy on the riders and not very interesting for the audience. Xavier intentionally stepped on, gored and kicked the riders as often as he could, never intending to fatally injure them though.

From his very first ride, Xavier tried to mildly maul the riders during each second of the short event. If a good rider managed to hang on properly, the rider could avoid Xavier's horns. The good riders never avoided Xavier after dismounting however. If the rider was still standing after dismounting, one of the riders on horses could shield him. If the rider fell on the ground in any way, Xavier always got a hoof or horn in on them.

Before Xavier came along, the bull riding industry was pretty much a southern spectacle. Cowboys didn't have much popularity in the north. When Xavier started damaging the riders, word got around and bull riding suddenly became popular around the world. As much as some people rooted for their favorite cowboy to have good rides, more people rooted for the bulls to damage the cowboys. It was in the best interest of the cowboys to have dangerous bulls for them

to ride. The dangerous bulls made the sport more watchable and brought more money through TV coverage. The arenas got bigger and bigger, enabling more people to watch rodeos live. More viewers always resulted in more money.

The riders complained a little about the savagery of some of the bulls, but it was part of the allure of the sport. The PBR Association only wanted more and more fans to visit and watch rodeos on TV. The riders had little to say about the hazards. If the riders wanted to, they could wear helmets and vests to protect their bodies. Xavier laughed at the helmets and vests harder than he laughed at the rodeo clowns. The helmet would protect the rider from getting a cracked skull, but not from a concussion. The vest would protect the rider from getting a hole punched through their torsos, but not from getting cracked ribs. The cowboys didn't wear any form of protection for their legs, which Xavier targeted for a lot of his damage.

Even with the helmets and vests, Xavier had still inflicted hundreds of concussions and cracked thousands of ribs. Xavier really enjoyed the sound made by shinbones breaking and thighbones cracking in half. More importantly, the audience loved it. Xavier was the terror and star of every rodeo in which he participated. After his first 2 years of devastation at rodeos, he became in high demand around the country. All the rodeos wanted him at the show and paid top dollar to his owner for the privilege.

Xavier had listened to the audience when other bulls went before him and after him at rodeos. He noticed how the sound of the audience increased when he came out into the arena. The audiences began chanting for Xavier to come out. The rodeo cleverly put Xavier out toward the end to maximize the concession sales. The longer people stayed at the rodeo, the more overpriced food and beverages they bought. It was that way with any industry and its star attraction.

Xavier's owner came up with a clever marketing idea for Xavier, calling him the X-factor, which the snarly bull definitely was. People would follow Xavier wherever he went, going to all the rodeos in which he participated. Xavier developed a following and his owner created a website called xavierxfactor.com. He posted the pictures and videos of almost all of Xavier's rides, some 13,000 of them. The website was hugely popular with Xavier's fans. The owner was careful not to capitalize on the misfortune of the riders who had died while riding Xavier. The website had no pictures or videos of the fatally injured riders. However, there was still enough solid material pertaining to the many non-fatal injuries to keep the fans happy.

Countries such as Japan that had no rodeos, found the concept of bull riding fascinating and enjoyed viewing the savagery on the internet and TV. Xavier had many fans in Japan, where Xavier was known as the Godzilla of America. Xavier's owner began marketing Xavier dolls and sold them at various stores and on the website. The owner made recordings of Xavier's snorting and grunting and gave them away free as ring tones. It was definitely strange when somebody's phone rang with that sound emanating from it.

The riders who rode bulls for a living knew what they were getting into when they rode Xavier. They always hoped for a full ride, but felt it would never happen. The riders of the industry began to fear pulling Xavier out of the hat. The riders needed all the points they could get to win the huge prizes at the end of the season. Some of the riders who had been injured by Xavier reluctantly bowed out of rodeos in which the bull participated. Bowing out of a rodeo was a drawback to the riders, but they valued their lives more than the potential points.

Rumors began spreading through the industry that Xavier was actually possessed by the devil and intentionally tried to kill his riders. The rumors were spread by the riders who were afraid to ride him, hoping other riders would also bow out of the Xavier attended rodeos. The industry was bigger than the riders were; the industry and the riders both made a lot of money. If some riders were too nervous to take the chance of riding Xavier, there were always others that would ride him. The industry was extremely competitive and lucrative for the riders who were fearless enough to ride all the bulls they pulled. There were riders that had been injured by Xavier and continued to ride him. There were riders who were best friends with or relatives of riders who were killed by Xavier and those guys continued to ride Xavier.

Xavier never intended to kill any of the cowboys who had the misfortune to ride him. He only wanted to injure them. He couldn't help it if they were in the wrong place at the wrong time. Xavier felt that it wasn't his fault if he accidentally killed someone while he was only trying to injure them. Sometimes, he didn't know his own strength. The humans were wimpy weak creatures and really didn't belong on the backs of crazed bulls in the first place. Xavier looked at bull riding as a game that he played as hard as he could. If the riders couldn't play the game at his level, they suffered for it. What was the use of playing a game at all, if the riders didn't intend to win?

Xavier planned to continue being a terror at rodeos and wasn't going to reduce his ferocity for any reason. He enjoyed going to rodeos and being the star. He got special treatment from his owner, including massages, horn polishing and brushing. Initially, the main enjoyment that Xavier derived from bull riding was doing as much damage as he could to the riders. As time went on and he noticed what a star he had become, he grew to appreciate the fanfare more and more. He knew that he couldn't get one without the other. He needed to maintain his viciousness in the arena to get the audience cheers in the arena. The 2 concepts went hand in hand.

Xavier's owner began to get grief from the rider's union that he had intentionally made Xavier as mean as he was. Some of the riders spread rumors that Xavier was being abused to make him mean. The rumors leaked to animal rights activists who felt that something should be done about it, if the rumors were actually true. Xavier's owner challenged anyone to prove that he was in some way intentionally making Xavier ornery through inhumane means. No one could prove a thing. Xavier had been in full view of the public his entire life, for all eyes to see. He had no

unusual marks or scars on his body and certainly wasn't skinny from underfeeding. Xavier's owner stated over and over that the crazed bull had been born mean and that's all there was to it. The bull never needed any prodding or poking.

The few weak-willed riders who spread the rumors were laughed at by the top riders who wanted the big money and continued to fearlessly ride Xavier. The rumormongers were discovered by the PBR Association and were politely pressured to cease their industry-damaging remarks. If the rumormongers didn't stop spreading lies about the star of the bull riding industry, they would be banned for a year, which was the maximum penalty. With the top riders making up to \$4 million per year, a lot of income could potentially be lost by any rider who was banned for a year. The whining riders immediately stopped spreading the rumors and let Xavier and his owner continue unabated.

The riders who continued to fearlessly ride Xavier and collect all their points began raking in more and more money. Xavier was becoming a worldwide sensation. The world's hunger for violence had no natural limit. Whenever animals inflicted violence on humans, people really ate it up. People actually considered the bulls in bull riding to be the underdogs and everybody loved the underdog. In Xavier's case, he wasn't considered the underdog; the unlucky rider was. People always rooted for Xavier to hurt somebody and the bull never let the people down, ever.

Xavier knew he could kill every cowboy who rode him if he chose, but he honestly didn't have it in him. He wasn't as mean deep down as he appeared to be; he just played his game harder than the cowboys who tried to ride him. The way Xavier played the game gave the appearance of being mean. Xavier felt that if people wanted to call him mean, so be it. He had earned his title of the meanest bull in the world and he liked it. He enjoyed being feared by the riders and always savored the look in their eyes as they climbed onto his back.

One day, Xavier added a new twist to his act. As a rider tremulously boarded Xavier, Xavier looked up at the rider and winked at him. Some of the nervous riders that he injured in the past immediately climbed off when they saw the wink. The best riders who made the most money saw the wink, swallowed hard and climbed on.

Xavier's new winking idea blew his owner away. Everybody started asking him how he taught the bull to wink like that. The owner said he didn't teach the bull to wink; the bull just did it on his own. Nobody believed him. Xavier liked his new winking trick. The riders who rode him were more nervous than before and were clumsier. He was able to toss some of them around like rag dolls, because they had been so intimidated by the wink. The press caught onto Xavier's new winking trick and took full advantage of it. Xavier was being heralded as the bull with the knowing wink. The bull knew he was going to eat the rider alive.

Some of the best riders had figured out Xavier early in his career and only suffered minor injuries

such as sprained wrists, ankles and broken fingers. Those injuries were never sufficient to eject the rider from the competition. The highest money earners began to wink back at Xavier when he first winked at them. Xavier would then do a final double wink to those guys. Xavier respected the best riders who knew how to ride him and avoid major injury. Those were the guys who made bull riding an enjoyable experience for Xavier. It was just too easy for him to maim those rookies. It was boring for Xavier to wink at a rider and have the rider dismount almost immediately. Xavier felt that if he showed up to play, the riders better do the same or he would show them what mean really was.

The rookie riders who fell off after a riding for only a second always got a good kicking and stomping by Xavier. The bull felt that he had to maintain the high level of entertainment value provided by the sport. If those wannabe riders didn't want to bring their A-games, they would be punished. Xavier always paid attention to the crowd noise when he was in the arena. He craved the roar of the crowd and wanted it to last for as long as possible. If one of the minimal riders dismounted early out of fear, Xavier guaranteed that they would be bruised and broken. Again, Xavier felt that he wasn't a mean bull; he just played harder than almost everybody else did.

Xavier had accidentally fatally injured a number of rodeo clowns and blocking horses along the way. He never liked hurting the horses that were just animals like him doing their job. The foolish riders of the horses weren't skilled enough to maneuver the horses out of the way in time, while Xavier was going after a grounded rider to punish him.

As Xavier approached 10 years old, he began to slow down a little. He didn't have the same strength that he had at 3 years old. He sensed that some riders were noticing his minutely increasing slowness. The best riders were almost avoiding injury altogether. No rider had ever achieved a full ride yet. At least Xavier still held onto that record. He hated slowing down and didn't want the fast and furious ride to end. He wanted to be at full dangerous power and speed or he didn't want to be in the arena. He decided he would have to start actually getting mean to make up for his diminishing abilities. He would start by mauling the best rider in the industry and then gradually work his way down the list.

Xavier always knew who the best riders were. It was time to give the audience a little more spice. When the #1 rider climbed on, Xavier did nothing to distract the rider; he wanted to lull the rider into a false sense of security. For the first time, Xavier allowed a full ride and the crowd went wild. As soon as the rider dismounted, Xavier lunged at him, gored him with one of his horns, stomped him and kicked him in the head. The rider lay motionless in the red-stained dirt and the audience became silent.

At the next rodeo, Xavier waited in the corral for his turn and planned to take out the #2 rider. The grief-stricken father of the #1 rider whom Xavier had eliminated was sitting in his truck in the parking lot, peering at Xavier through the scope of his high-powered rifle.

53. Yuriko's Lips



53. Yuriko's Lips

Ventriloquists had tried for years to outdo each other by various means. Some would drink water while throwing their voices and others would eat something. No matter what they did though, none of them was much better than the other one. The act of talking while not moving your lips was difficult to say the least. There was always a compromise with a ventriloquist. The only thing that made them different from each other was their dummies. The dummies were the distraction, so the audience wouldn't look at the voice thrower's lips. Even the dummies could only go so far in making the ventriloquist look good. It was always obvious when a ventriloquist was bad at it.

Yuriko came onto the scene with the best ventriloquist act to be seen and heard by anyone since the beginning of such acts. He had vowed when he was a little kid to practice the art until he was better than anyone was at it. He practiced at home, school and even while he slept. He dreamed about performing his act someday and making a lot of money at it. He practiced his ventriloquism at the dinner table and entertained his family to no end. He researched as much as he could about ventriloquism and all the acts in history. He wanted his act to be unique and the best around. After Yuriko graduated from high school, he decided to take his act on the road.

He drove to the comedy club where he had successfully auditioned a month before. Since he was just starting out and young, he wasn't paid much money. His act was immediately a major success at the club. Everyone agreed that he was already the best ventriloquist that anyone had ever seen. Somehow, Yuriko could drink water, eat, chew gum or have other things in his mouth while doing the act and his dummy Yanno would appear to speak with perfect clarity. No one could believe how good Yuriko was as a ventriloquist. After only 6 months of working at the club, Yuriko was approached by a talent manager named Andy to take the act to a bigger venue. Yuriko agreed to sign a contract with Andy and they traveled to Branson.

Yuriko became a huge hit in Branson and was soon given his own theater to perform in. He was never lonely away from home because he always had his dummy Yanno to talk to. Everywhere Yuriko went, he brought Yanno with him. They were inseparable. When Yuriko went to restaurants, he always requested a table for 2. He would sit at the table and appear to freely converse with Yanno. Yuriko even went as far as ordering food for Yanno and feeding it to him. Yuriko had become famous locally, so when people saw him in public with Yanno, they thought everything he did was practice for the spectacular act. No one thought it was strange that Yuriko would sit at a table talking to and feeding the dummy. Yuriko talked to Yanno all the time.

As Yuriko sat in his hotel room, he said to Yanno, "We did it Yanno! We made it on the road! We're stars already!" Yanno said, "I told you we could do it. You just had to trust me!" As Yuriko and Yanno sat in the hotel room watching TV, they started arguing over what to watch. Andy arrived at the hotel for a meeting with Yuriko and went up to the room. As Andy was

standing at the door about to knock, he heard the arguing in Yuriko's room. He knocked on the door and the arguing stopped. When Yuriko let his manager into the room, his manager looked around and said, "Who were you arguing with? I don't see anybody in here!" Yuriko said, "I was working on something for the act." Andy said, "Oh." After the meeting, Yuriko's manager left the room and accidentally dropped his phone on the floor in the hallway. As he bent over to pick it up, he heard the arguing resume in the room. Andy shrugged his shoulders and walked away.

In the room, Yuriko said, "Why do you have to yell so loud?" Yanno said, "Shut up!" Yuriko said, "Do you think he believed me?" Yanno said, "Don't worry about it. You always worry too much! Of course, he believed you! You don't think he thought you were arguing with yourself, do you?" Yuriko said, "I don't know."

The next day, Andy watched the act at the theater and didn't notice any changes which included the arguing that he heard through the door. After the show, Andy casually asked Yuriko about the act and Yuriko said he didn't add the new stuff yet. Andy added that it would be a funny thing to augment the act. It was always funny when a ventriloquist argued with the dummy. Yuriko agreed, but said the material wasn't ready yet and he needed time to perfect it.

Yuriko was beginning to wonder if Andy was getting worried about him. Did Andy believe him when he told him that the arguing he heard was part of the act? The manager didn't have any creative control over the act, so it didn't matter. It was up to Yuriko to perfect and modify the act as he chose. The manager made the contracts and arrangements for the shows. Yuriko would have to be careful to avoid Andy's suspicion though. When Yuriko and Yanno were in the room talking, they would have to keep the volume of their conversations down. Andy was probably accustomed to the idiosyncrasies of artistic people; there had to be many flakes out there to perform their acts the way they did. Entertainers were a strange breed and had their quirks. The quirkiness is what made entertainers so interesting to watch and listen to. Yuriko was no different. He didn't think it was strange when he conversed with Yanno.

Yuriko had been having more and more trouble with Yanno lately. The dummy had begun to get big in the head with the increasing success of the act. First, Yanno wanted to sleep in a bed instead of in the stupid trunk. Yuriko had argued that Yanno should sleep in the trunk in case someone such as Andy came into the room. Andy might think it was funny that a ventriloquist's dummy would be sleeping in the bed with the ventriloquist. Yanno admitted that Yuriko had a point, but he didn't care. He was tired of sleeping in the stupid trunk. Yuriko and Yanno argued intensely over the issue, causing someone in the neighboring room to call security. When security arrived and looked in Yuriko's room, the guard only saw Yuriko in there. The guard politely asked Yuriko and his company to keep their voices down.

The next day, when Andy went to the hotel for another meeting, Yuriko and Yanno were arguing again. As Andy stood at the door, he could hear the loud arguing, but couldn't make out what

they were saying. Andy thought it must be Yuriko refining the new part of the act again. Andy then heard what sounded like people pushing each other in the room. Andy heard a lamp crash to the floor and Yuriko screamed in rage. Andy knocked loudly on the door, causing the arguing and noise to stop. Yuriko shouted through the door to Andy to wait a minute because he had to straighten up a little.

When Andy entered the room and saw the broken lamp, he asked Yuriko what happened. Yuriko claimed that he was working on the new part of the act where he was arguing with Yanno and swung the dummy around a little while arguing. He accidentally hit the lamp with the dummy's body and the lamp crashed to the floor. Andy noticed some marks on Yuriko's face as if he had been punched or slapped. Yuriko claimed his face was injured when he fell while trying to prevent the lamp from hitting the floor. Yuriko talked with Andy for a while about possibly moving the act to Vegas. Andy felt the act was the best around and could make more money in a bigger theater in Vegas. Yuriko said he would have to think about it first.

When Andy left, Yuriko and Yanno had a stellar argument about moving to Vegas. Yuriko wanted to move and Yanno didn't, because the dummy felt it was too hot there. Yuriko emphasized the greater amount of money they could make if they moved. They could have everything they ever wanted. Yanno was adamant about staying in Branson; that's all there was to it. Yuriko agreed to stay in Branson for the time being, but they would have to eventually come to a decision.

Yanno's 2nd complaint was the costume that he was forced to wear. It was always the same stupid costume that he had never liked from the beginning. Yanno demanded to have a different costume for each day of the week, just for a nice change. Yuriko stated that when a ventriloquist and dummy were first created as an act, whatever costume or clothing the dummy was wearing stayed the same. Yanno didn't like the idea. What was wrong with a ventriloquist dummy that changed its clothes? It would be a new twist on ventriloquist acts. Yuriko was reluctant, but gave in. Yanno wanted to go shopping immediately for his new clothes and preferred to go to a custom clothier to be fitted perfectly. Yuriko agreed and they spent \$2,000 on 14 new custom-made suits for Yanno. The clothier thought it was a little odd, but gladly prepared the tailored suits.

Yanno's 3rd demand was to move out of the hotel into a nice rented house to have more privacy. The hotel was definitely expensive, but convenient. Yanno was tired of the games he had to keep playing of worrying about being seen sleeping in a bed instead of the trunk. Yuriko didn't want to leave the hotel, because he still wanted to move to Vegas and renting a house would probably require a binding lease. Yanno flew into a rage and violently argued his point. Yuriko was beginning to lose his mind from struggling with the dummy all the time. Why couldn't Yanno be reasonable?

Yuriko scheduled a meeting with Andy at the hotel to discuss moving to Vegas. As Andy walked down the hallway to Yuriko's room, he heard arguing again, before he even reached the door. It sounded like they were really going at it in there. Andy thought it was odd to have such a violent argument as part of the act. The concept of adding the bit of the ventriloquist arguing with the dummy was meant to be humorous. It sounded like the arguing they were doing in there was more violent than funny. Andy wondered if Yuriko knew what he was doing with that new bit and if it should be used in the act.

In the room, Yuriko told Yanno that he planned to tell Andy to go ahead with plans to move to Vegas. Yanno thought the matter had been closed before and that they were staying in Branson. Yuriko said the matter was never closed; it was temporarily put on the back burner. The 2 began yelling and screaming at each other. Andy paused at the door and listened closely to the racket, unable to distinguish the words. Andy hesitated to knock on the door, even though Yuriko was expecting him. Andy began to wonder if Yuriko was starting to lose his mind in there. At first, Andy readily accepted Yuriko's quirks and considered them part of Yuriko's genius as a ventriloquist. Andy thought it was strange that Yuriko took Yanno everywhere and appeared to feed the dummy at restaurants, but it helped the act gain notoriety. When people saw the 2 of them together in public, Andy thought it was Yuriko's clever strategy to give the act as much exposure as possible.

The recent addition of the arguing bit seemed to be getting out of hand. The last few times that Andy visited Yuriko in the hotel, Yuriko had been practicing the arguing with the dummy. The arguing was beginning to sound like actual arguing, not just a funny part of the act.

Andy decided to not knock on the door, exited the hotel and called Yuriko from his car. When Yuriko answered the phone, his voice sounded hoarse. Andy told Yuriko that he had to cancel the meeting due to stomach pains, which he occasionally suffered from. Through the phone, Andy thought he heard someone talking to Yuriko in the background. Andy asked Yuriko if he had company and Yuriko said that he didn't. Andy heard Yuriko cover the phone receiver and heard a muffled, "Shut up!" Andy again asked if Yuriko had company and Yuriko denied it. They set up a meeting for the next day and Yuriko said he hoped Andy felt better by then.

Yuriko hung up the phone with Andy and continued bickering with Yanno, until security visited again, asking them to keep quiet. Yuriko didn't know what he was going to do about Yanno. Andy didn't know what he was going to do about Yuriko. Things were beginning to get complicated with all the personalities involved. Show business was an interesting machine overflowing with some really fascinating people.

Yanno's 4th request was to not have to wear all the makeup on his face that made him look like a clown. Yuriko said the makeup was required and he wouldn't back down on that point. It was the industry standard for all the ventriloquist dummies to have painted faces to make them appear

more animated. Yanno reluctantly relented.

Yanno's 5th issue was that he wanted to start wearing different hats that were coordinated with his suits. Yuriko agreed it would be a nice refinement to add to Yanno's overall look.

The next day, just before Andy was to arrive for the meeting Yuriko and Yanno got into it again about moving to Vegas. They yelled and carried on as usual. Yuriko wanted Yanno to calm down before Andy came over, so he wouldn't think anything was wrong. No one wanted the act to fail or lose momentum. Yuriko and Yanno were getting more and more popular. When they were in public together, the fans followed them everywhere. Everyone loved them and thought they were so cute, especially with the new changing wardrobes and hats for the dummy. Yanno felt justified in his requests for the new clothes and hats, pointing it out to Yuriko at every turn.

When Andy arrived and heard yelling again, he was nervous about what might be going on in Yuriko's hotel room. Andy paused at the door, afraid to knock, petrified by the noise of the arguing. Andy had spent many years in show business and had finally hit it big with Yuriko and Yanno. He would hate to lose all that glory because of something strange happening, which seemed imminent. The arguing escalated and Andy heard a banging sound on the door as if someone were slamming something against it. Andy had to break up whatever was happening in there. Maybe Yuriko was in trouble. Andy pounded on the door as hard as he could. The banging sound on the door continued. Andy yelled Yuriko's name as he pounded on the door. Yuriko wouldn't open the door.

Andy ran downstairs to the front desk and requested security to open his client Yuriko's door. Andy manically explained to the security person that he thought Yuriko was in trouble. There was a lot of screaming going on and something or somebody was being slammed against the door. On the way to the room, the guard informed Andy of how Yuriko's room kept getting reports of excessive noise. Andy wasn't surprised. He hoped Yuriko was okay in there. Maybe the person Andy heard talking in the background yesterday on the phone was in there assaulting Yuriko. Andy was really worried about the possibility of falling off the money train. He was also genuinely concerned for Yuriko's welfare. When they reached the room, Andy and the guard heard a lot of arguing going on, but there was no longer any banging sound on the door. Andy was relieved that at least that racket had subsided.

The guard pounded on the door, identified himself and demanded for the door to be opened. He pounded and yelled his command again and again. There was no response at the door and the yelling continued. Andy noted that all of a sudden, he only heard one voice yelling. The guard produced a key to gain entry to the room and yelled, "Hotel Security, I'm coming in!" The guard keyed the door's lock and burst into the room with Andy close behind him. Yuriko was lying motionless on the bed on his back; his face was white. His brother Yanno was sitting on top of him, choking him and screaming, "Die! Die! Die!"

54. Zachariah's Balls



54. Zachariah's Balls

From the first moment that Zachariah laid his eyes on a golf ball as a gopher pup, he fell in love with it. He made it his mission in life to find, collect and preserve all the golf balls he encountered. Being born under a golf course was a good starting point for his collection due to the enormous number of golf balls used at the course 365 days a year. The golf course was rated as one of the top 20 in the world and many tournaments were held there each year. The course had been designed by one of the greatest golfers of all time, Arnold Palmer.

Zachariah's collection started simply enough when he found that 1st ball in the rough between the 13th and 14th hole. It was a beautiful white Titleist sitting pretty in the tall grass next to the trees. He had just emerged from his hole that morning to eat some weeds when he heard the ball land in the grass. The entrance/exit hole to his den was in the trees, unseen by the humans. He looked around for humans, saw some in the distance and scurried over to the ball. It was glistening in the sunlight and perfect. He ogled it for a while, then gently picked it up in his mouth and brought it to his den. He placed it in the corner of the den out of the way where he could look at it and behold it. He instantly became obsessed with the ball and wanted more. That first ball years before was the beginning of a collection of millions of golf balls.

His immense collection contained most of the top brands including: Callaway, TaylorMade, Titleist, Nike, Cleveland/Sxiron, Mizuno, Adams, Odyssey, Ping and Cobra. Initially, his instincts forced him to be cautious and only retrieve balls that he found in the roughs and other grassy areas. Those areas alone couldn't satisfy his appetite for more golf balls. He added the ponds to the list of places to find golf balls. A surprising number of balls were hit into the water traps by the errant humans. He found that he was actually a pretty good swimmer and could hold his breath for about a minute under water. That was enough time to pick up 3 balls from the bottom of the pond, depending how deep it was. He found an old golf ball cleaning rag in the trees that he used as a sling to carry the balls back to his den. The rags were dropped or discarded by the golfers and were blown by the wind into the trees where they stayed hidden for years. The lazy golfers never tried to find their lost cleaning rags, just as they were too lazy to find the balls they hit into the traps roughs and wooded areas. The lazier the humans were in not trying to retrieve their unseen golf balls was all the better for Zachariah.

Zachariah found it irresistible to watch the golfers hit the balls around the course. He always watched from the safety of the treed areas to avoid detection. The balls were so graceful as they sailed through the air and elegantly rolled when they landed. He disliked the way humans abused the balls with the sticks. He wasn't finding enough balls in the roughs and ponds, so he endeavored to begin removing the balls from the course as they were hit down the fairways, which would be risky. He had to devise a plan where he could hide in the trees next to a fairway. When the ball landed, he could run from the trees, grab the ball and disappear into the trees

again. The trees he chose had to be thick enough to hide in and avoid detection by the humans.

At night, he roamed the golf course, to determine the lay of the land. It was indeed a beautiful golf course with many man-made features. He found that all the fairways of the golf course were bordered by trees, probably to make it more difficult for the humans to hit the ball from one end of the course to the other. Zachariah couldn't see why the humans chose to make things difficult for themselves. Why couldn't they just sit down and behold the golf balls the way he did? The trees would provide a good way for Zachariah to collect even more golf balls.

Zachariah immediately began his fairway theft plan. He waited in the trees for a ball to land on the fairway. While the ball was still rolling, he ran out, picked it up while still running and ran into the trees on the other side of the fairway. It was a perfect system. He found more of the ball-cleaning rags and put each day's collection of balls in a pile on top of the rags. At the end of the day, he carried his slings of balls to the various holes in the trees to be deposited in the cave network with the collection of other balls. He visited the trees bordering all the fairways and stole balls throughout the course each day. He wanted to spread his chaos around so that the humans would target no one area as a problem area. With 18 holes at the course, there were more than 18 fairways, depending how long the distances were between the tees and the flags. Zachariah walked for miles around the course each day, becoming exhausted, but feeling exhilarated by all the balls he added to his collection.

Since Zachariah started collecting golf balls and had added so many, he was forced to enlarge his den more and more. It grew into a larger and larger cavity underground, becoming more of a cave or cavern. It was only a cave as far as the shell of it, because it was completely packed with golf balls. There was no unused space in the cave. As Zachariah excavated underground, he spread out under the golf course. He would dig out an area, fill it with golf balls and then dig out another adjoining area. He ended up with a series of thousands of connected caves. The treed areas concealed all the entrance/exit holes to the connecting caves. As he excavated, he removed the soil up through the holes and spread it out over the treed areas to avoid detection by the humans. He was so thorough at dispersing the dirt on the ground in the treed areas that more bushes and shrubs began growing, which helped to conceal the holes.

Since his early days on the golf course, Zachariah had noticed some of the humans taking care of the grass and holes on the course. Sometimes he saw those guys use strange equipment to do whatever they were doing. He never knew what they did there, but he sensed that he always had to avoid being detected by them. None of the humans, only seen from a distance, had ever chased him. He assumed that the humans had seen him from time to time, but he always disappeared too quickly to be located. The holes in the treed areas had never been noticeably tampered with, which meant they must be undiscovered.

As he expanded his golf ball cave network under the golf course, he maintained a vigil over the

entrance/exit holes to make sure they were always functional. Each night, he visited all the holes in the treed areas to be sure of their functionality. He may have to disappear down one of the holes in an emergency if the humans ever caught on to him. He studied sections of his golf ball collection each day, savoring the beauty of the white globes. While in the safety of the trees, he traveled from hole to hole, went down in and brought up a few at a time to look at them in the daylight. He could only realistically get at the ones near the top of the packed-in piles of balls. He recognized the fact that he couldn't see all the balls of his collection, since most were concealed deep in the earth by the balls that were placed on top of them. It didn't matter; as long as he knew the balls were safe in his hands and not being smacked around by the humans with sticks, it didn't matter if he was unable to see most of them. The primary purpose of his collection was to keep the balls safely away from the humans.

When he excavated under ground, he was always careful to dig far enough below the surface to prevent the ground above from caving in at the surface. He didn't want the humans to detect anything going on beneath them. He had no way of knowing for sure other than his own natural instincts. As soon as golf balls were added to the newly dug void and packed in tightly, it firmed things up nicely. When he added golf balls to the caves, he always crammed them in to get as many as he could in there. It was a lot of work and risk gathering the balls in the first place and even more work to dig out the spaces to put the balls. He was determined to be as efficient as possible with minimal wasted effort.

When Zachariah stole golf balls from the fairways, he never paused to look at the humans up the course who had hit and lost the balls. He was too busy trying to disappear again. If he had observed their reactions, he would have seen countless frustrated and perturbed humans. The humans yelled and cursed; they threw their expensive golf clubs; some of them ran from the tee toward the fairway in a vain attempt to catch the golf ball-stealing gopher. Zachariah would have gotten a kick out of the many spectacles, but he was necessarily too cautious to be so frivolous with his time. His mission of creating and preserving the world's largest underground golf ball collection needed to be accomplished by hell or high water.

Golfers had begun registering complaints with the golf course that their golf balls were disappearing from the roughs and fairways at an alarming rate. What was the golf course going to do about it? The golf course insisted that they were doing everything within their power to alleviate the disappearance of the golf balls. Some golfers threatened to cancel their memberships at the course. Others demanded remuneration for the lost golf balls, which was absurd. It was clearly stated in the golf course rules that the course wasn't responsible for lost golf balls. It didn't seem that the golfers had a leg to stand on in getting satisfaction with their problem. The golf course super humored the complaining golfers as much as possible. There was no way that the golf course could start compensating golfers for lost golf balls. The people probably lost them in the water or in the woods. The golf course would be bankrupted if they

had to pay for everybody's lost balls.

Zachariah had thought for sure when he excavated underground for the cave expansion that he was far enough below the surface to prevent collapse. Golfers and golf course personnel began noticing fine cracks forming in the asphalt golf cart paths and concrete sidewalks. The greens were becoming uneven in places. The fairways and roughs began to get dips here and there. The greens keepers were unable to keep up with all the repairs that were increasing in number each week. The golf course had to hire more helpers for the greens keepers with their burden.

Eventually the politicians began chiming in with complaints and everyone knows how nothing ever gets done in society until a politician becomes inconvenienced or put out in some way. Apparently, the governor had been golfing with some businessmen who had legally bribed others into electing the governor into office via campaign contributions. You have to love those campaign contributions. The governor had smacked a nice one from the 12th tee and it landed on the fairway. In seconds, the governor and his party had seen some animal scurry across the fairway, take the ball and disappear again. Other golfers had been filing similar reports in larger and larger numbers. The golf course was pressured by the governor to take action. In the meantime, Zachariah continued on his merry way, constantly adding to his collection.

The golf course superintendent talked to other course reps about their maintenance problems and none seemed to have as many issues as they had at Zachariah's course. Because of the stealthy manner in which Zachariah went about creating his underground cave network, no one could detect how he was doing it. Due to the location of the course, the superintendent was unable to use poison to eliminate underground pests at the golf course. He was forced to use only natural methods such as physical traps, etc. The traps were only useful against moles, which had been eliminated years before. Normally, moles were the primary source of damage to golf courses due to the way moles tunneled close to the surface. Mole tunneling was easily detected by the ridge of dirt on the surface above the tunnel. Since the moles had already been eliminated before and there were no visible mole-type ridges, the golf course damage could only be caused by gophers. Since golfers were claiming to see gophers stealing their golf balls, the superintendent was finally forced to take necessary steps.

The course super eventually brought in dogs to try to find the holes used by the gophers on the golf course. The dogs were taken to the treed areas by the fairways, which was the most likely location of the gopher holes. The dogs immediately found the holes well hidden in the thick growth. It was determined that all the treed areas that adjoined the fairways contained gopher holes. A total of 279 gophers holes were located by the dogs and diagrammed on a detailed map of the golf course. Zachariah was wondering what was going on at the course. He had narrowly avoided being discovered by dogs on 3 occasions. He had to hide out on the edge of the golf course away from fairways. He was forced to curtail his golf ball collecting.

The next step was to use the natural pest removal method of applying pressurized water to the holes to flood the tunnels of the gophers. The method was supposed to quickly and humanely drown the gophers underground. The problem was that there were so many holes. The course super again consulted with pest experts about the problem. The experts had never heard of so many gopher holes existing at one golf course. Normally there would be only 1 or 2 holes per wooded area.

The experts recommended the use of a system of high pressure nozzles connected and sealed to the holes. The nozzles would then be connected to a network of PVC pipes, which would feed the pressurized water from the golf course's irrigation equipment. The golf course would have to be closed for a week to install the system, operate it and then remove the system when complete. The golf course super obtained quotes from firms that specialized in the work and it was determined that it would cost \$37,000 to complete the project. The competing firms said it would cost a lot due to the amount of PVC pipe required, which was thousands of feet.

Announcements were made to the golf course members and public ahead of time to give enough advance notice. The project was planned to take place in a month, which was timed for the golf course's least busy season. The closing outraged the golf course members; the superintendent assured the members that the closing was necessary to solve the pest problem.

When the contractor arrived to install the system a month later, he realized that he wasn't going to make as much profit as he hoped. When the project manager initially visited the course to estimate what the project involved, he didn't realize how much work was involved in getting into the trees to install the fittings and lines. He only looked at one of the treed areas next to the fairway for the 1st tee. Some of the other wooded areas were exceedingly thick with growth. It was going to require more guys to get in there to complete the work in the allotted time. After 5 days, the system was finally installed; the contractor assured the golf course super that it would be much faster disassembling the system. The system was ready to go into operation.

With the golf course closed for a while, Zachariah resorted to watching the humans installing things in his holes and all over his woods. He hoped that the humans weren't planning to do something to damage his underground golf ball collection. Zachariah heard one of the humans counting, "Three, Two, One, Now!" Zachariah started to hear water running everywhere. They were putting water in his tunnels! The golf balls! After 20 minutes of the water pressurizing underground, the ground began rumbling. The contractor thought he was feeling an earthquake. During normal use of the contractor's system, the pressurized water filled the empty gopher tunnels, flooded everything underground and drowned the gophers. Since Zachariah's golf balls had filled all the available space in the tunnels, there was no way to relieve the pressure from the water by flowing into the tunnels, which were assumed to be empty. Without warning, the entire golf course exploded with millions of golf balls flying in every direction.

55. Caleb's Capers



55. Caleb's Capers

Caleb was excited about his new mission; his boss Z had just handed the dossier to him and he was looking it over while Z finished his phone call. Z wanted to brief Caleb about the mission, its importance and the many possible pitfalls. As Caleb read the dossier, he became intrigued beyond his imagination at what he was about to become involved in. An evil genius named Tiberius had invented a device resembling a mobile phone but slightly larger, that could create an exact biometric image of a person's handprint, fingerprint, retina or other individually identifying feature. DNA from a drop of the person's blood or a strand of their hair was required to create the image. With that device, a person could unlock any number of the most secret locks in the world.

Tiberius was meeting on his island with associates of his criminal organization called Saturn. They were coming from all over the globe to purchase their own copy of the device. Z explained to Caleb how The Agency had a plant inside Tiberius' organization named Greeny who had been in place for 3 years undercover. Greeny had been planning to attend the meeting to buy one of the devices. Unfortunately, Greeny had been hit by a delivery truck while walking on a sidewalk and was currently in a coma. Caleb would have to undergo various physical changes and memorize a lot of data to successfully replace Greeny at the island.

As part of being a plant in an organization, the secret agents of The Agency maintained detailed info, which was fed back to The Agency on a regular basis. Caleb would have to commit to memory the information that Greeny had sent to Z over the 3 year period. Caleb was already the same height as Greeny, but would require slight hair dying, growing a moustache and the addition of some tattoos and mild cosmetic scarring. Greeny had been using an Irish accent, so Caleb would also have to adopt that character trait. Caleb had a month to read the documentation and take on the necessary changes. The mission was the riskiest that Caleb had ever accepted, but he loved the challenge.

After the month had passed, Caleb was ready and he was given the case with the \$10 million demanded by Tiberius for purchasing the biometric device. Caleb flew to the island in an appropriate millionaire-type jet that was covertly leased by The Agency.

Tiberius had invested over \$1 billion in the island, the specially constructed mansion, the atomic energy system that supplied the island's power and the assorted luxurious amusements. The mansion was built on an elevated platform and was surrounded by a reinforced concrete wall that was impervious to any tornado or hurricane. Additionally, the platform that the mansion sat on was scientifically engineered to withstand any earthquake. Tiberius spared no expense with his property and his associates were well accommodated when they arrived. The island had a runway that was the minimum distance in length to only permit millionaire-type jets, discouraging commercial jets from attempting any emergency landings on it.

The 10 members of the Saturn organization planned to spend 7-10 days at the island at the expense of Tiberius. Tiberius arranged to sell 10 of the devices to the members for a total of \$100 million. Once the members had their own devices, Saturn planned to execute a series of simultaneous robberies around the globe, the likes of which the financial world had never seen. The 10 members of Saturn were from The United States, Mexico, Brazil, England, France, Russia, China, North Korea, Japan and Germany. Caleb represented England in the guise of Greeny.

When Caleb arrived on Sunday at the island, he was greeted at the runway by a member of Tiberius' staff and escorted to his villa. Each Saturn member had their own villa to live in while they stayed on the island. The villas had safes large enough to fit the cash-filled briefcases. Each of the jets that brought the Saturn members to the island had to fly home and wait to return. Tiberius didn't want anyone to be capable of leaving the island without his say-so. Tiberius was a little bit maniacal, but was a genius at devices and crime. He had created his criminal empire in only 11 years and had accumulated enough ill-gotten gains to buy and improve the island with other billions stashed away in offshore banks. If Tiberius were an upstanding citizen, he would have been ranked as the 3rd richest man in the world.

Tiberius was a careful criminal and trusted no one, except for his twin sumo guards whom he had raised from abandoned children. The guards named Chip & Dale each stood 6'4" tall, weighed 280 pounds, were immensely strong, were as fast as cheetahs and most importantly would die for their adoptive father Tiberius. On numerous occasions, both guards had jumped in front of bullets, knives and darts meant for Tiberius.

Becoming a member of Saturn required background checks, references and proof of criminal value to the organization. Greeny had firmly established his position in the Saturn organization over a 3-year period, with the culmination of his work being the meeting on Saturday that Caleb (as Greeny) was about to attend. The members of Saturn only met once or twice a year, so they may not notice if Caleb didn't exactly resemble Greeny. As long as all the information provided to The Agency by Greeny was as current as possible, Caleb should be ok. Caleb had intensely memorized the info and should be up to snuff. The only person whom Caleb would have to be careful with was a man named Flaz from Russia. Greeny had unfortunately gotten closer to Flaz than he would have liked and there might be minor bits of information that Greeny hadn't relayed to The Agency. As were all the secret agents of The Agency, Caleb felt that he was talented enough to be able to improvise his way out of trouble as necessary.

Tiberius' island included large indoor and outdoor swimming pools with hot tubs, a polo field with horses, a racquetball court and a large aquarium, which connected to the ocean. Sharks swam in and out of the aquarium through the glass-topped tunnels that bordered the walkways.

Everyone had arrived on Sunday before and after Caleb and all were allowed to settle in before

any commitments were necessary. The next morning, everyone met with Tiberius in the main house for a sumptuous breakfast, followed by massages and swimming. Then after participating in recreational activities as desired, lunch and dinner were served throughout the afternoon and evening. Each day of the week passed pretty much the same way, with all of Saturn's members being treated to the finest food and drink available in the world.

By Saturday evening, the organization's members were ready for the big meeting with the demonstrations and sales of the devices. Everyone brought their briefcases to the meeting in the special large meeting room underground. The meeting room was 5 floors below the ground level and was soundproofed for security. Tiberius had an elaborate laboratory underground where he created the biometric device. The lab had displays set up with all the locks used by the most sophisticated banking and financial depositories worldwide. Tiberius planned to demonstrate how each lock could be opened by using his device. First, a lock would be set to open with a random Saturn member's retina, for example. Then, a drop of blood or a hair from the same member's head would be examined by the device. The device would calculate the DNA and generate an image of the member's retina, which would then open the lock. Other locks in the lab required handprints, fingerprints and voice keys to open them. All the locks were demonstrated to open with samples from all 10 members of the organization.

The members of Saturn were impressed and turned their money over to Tiberius, who deposited the \$100 million into a walk-in room safe. Tiberius produced the 10 copies of the device for each member and they were all instructed how to use it. One by one, they tested all the devices with all the locks with samples from everyone present, in the same manner that Tiberius had just shown them. Tiberius was adamant that everyone be fluent in using the device. When Operation Unlock went into motion, Tiberius wanted 100% efficiency. The testing went on into the night, until 3:00 am Sunday morning.

That Sunday night, they reviewed the plans for Operation Unlock. The 10 Saturn members had each targeted an institution for the operation. They had discussed the targets over the past 2 years, in case anyone had better ideas. The members had picked the institutions based on knowledge of their home territories and everyone agreed that each member had picked correctly. Each targeted institution had its own idiosyncrasies and security systems, but the key was the biometric lock to which they now all had keys via Tiberius' device.

For each target, the Saturn members would need to devise a specific plan for obtaining the DNA sample from the person or persons to whom the biometric lock was dedicated. Once the sample was obtained, the safe, vault or other stronghold could then be opened and emptied of its valuables. Before each member arrived at the island a week before, they had already devised their plans and only required the device created by Tiberius and the expertise to use it. A final plan review was all that was necessary by all the parties involved. In one month's time,

Operation Unlock would commence and upwards of \$1 billion in stocks, bonds, securities, cash, jewels and gemstones would be added to the coffers of the Saturn organization by its members.

With the funding from each successive operation, the Saturn organization could raise armies and acquire munitions to wreak havoc, cause unrest and eventually take over small countries. There would be no stopping Saturn. Tiberius never claimed to be their leader, only their organizer and provider of means. The first thing he provided was the biometric device. He had many more such devices in the works and only research could reveal them. Tiberius required a large amount of capital to conduct his research to perfect his electronic devices. He had the genius in him; he only needed the money and time for development. He wasn't able to hire a large research staff due to the obvious illegal aspect of his work. He did all the experimentation on his own, which is the way he preferred it, to eliminate dangerous loose ends.

The other members of Saturn preferred that only Tiberius developed the devices to safeguard all their futures by maximizing security. The seemingly high cost of \$10 million for one of the biometric devices was a necessary price to pay for the eventual world domination that the Saturn members could sense was about to happen. The electronic genius of Tiberius and his criminal organizational skills had long been acknowledged by the 10 Saturn members. They respected that he didn't want to be their leader, only their means to glory.

The Saturn members agreed that the key to Operation Unlock's success would be the simultaneity of the event. With so many major robberies taking place at the same time, law enforcement would be on its heels and incapable of understanding what was happening. The Police and Security forces wouldn't be able to react appropriately in time to catch any of them. It was a perfect plan to be executed by a perfect organization. Saturn's members had a restless sleep that Sunday night, with plans to fly home on Monday as their planes arrived.

On Monday morning, a final beautiful breakfast was served with fresh lobsters flown in to be added to the eggs for whoever wanted them. At the table, Flaz asked Caleb (as Greeny) a question about the lobster in his eggs. Flaz didn't remember Caleb liking lobster or shellfish and that he only ate common fish such as tuna, cod or halibut. Caleb told Flaz that he was only temporarily off lobster and shellfish in the past due to the contamination scares, but currently ate them again. Flaz looked directly into Caleb's eyes for a moment and sensed something he didn't like. Caleb noticed Flaz writing something on a piece of paper and had Chip hand it to Tiberius. The note said, "Greeny's on Mars," which was Saturn code for Greeny was a spy. Caleb watched as Tiberius read the note. The expression didn't change on Tiberius' face as he motioned for Dale to come to him. Tiberius whispered something in Dale's ear.

When breakfast was over, Tiberius raised a toast to the Saturn members who drank from glasses of champagne brought in by Dale. Tiberius said, "To Saturn!" They all said, "To Saturn!" Everyone clicked their glasses around the table and drank the champagne. Caleb suspected

something might be up, but he had to drink his champagne to avoid suspicion. After the toast and farewells, the Saturn members shook hands with each other and went back to their villas to wait for their planes to arrive to take them home. Within 5 minutes of arriving at his villa, Caleb passed out on his bed.

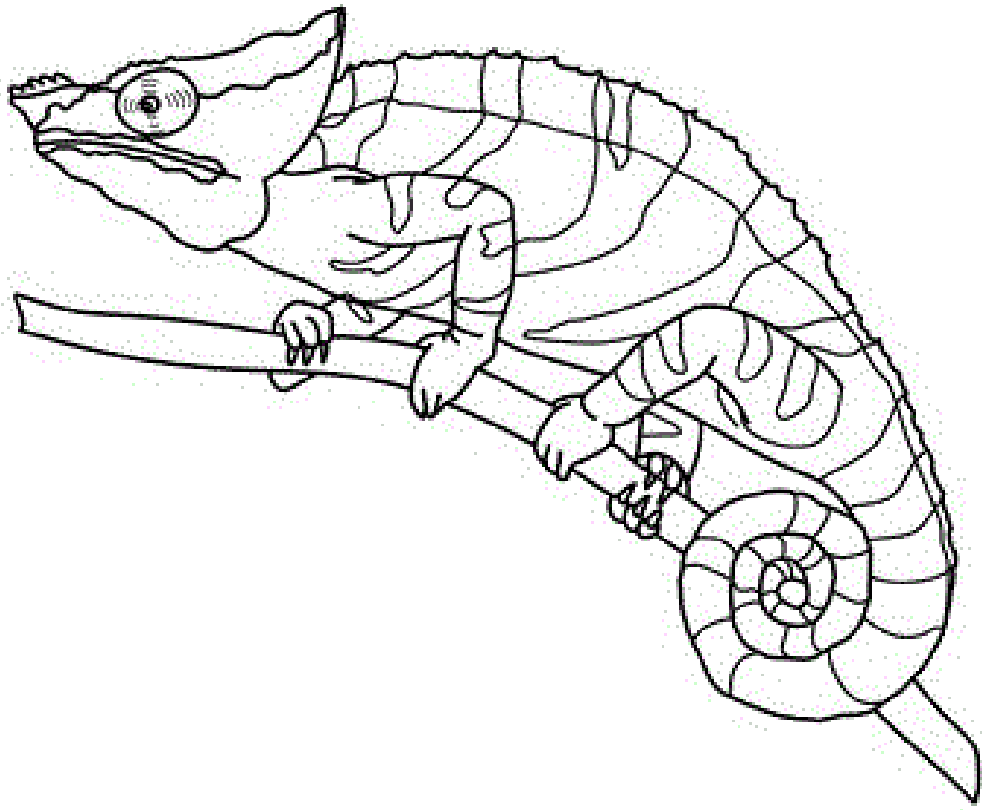
When Caleb awoke the next day, he found himself tied to a pole that he was slowly sliding down. His feet were bare and felt injured. When he looked down, he saw 2 sharks swimming in a tank of red-stained water. He spotted small lacerations in his feet that were dripping blood into the water below. Tiberius, Chip & Dale were observing through a window with grins on their faces. Caleb was unable to climb up the pole or to prevent himself from sliding down into the shark tank. Caleb watched as Tiberius, Chip & Dale walked away from the window, apparently satisfied that he was about to be devoured alive by the sharks. The sharks were swimming faster and faster as the blood increasingly stained the water. Caleb noticed a trap door on the side of the tank through which a 3rd shark swam into the tank. As Caleb splashed down into the water, he held his breath, hit the sharks repeatedly with his fists and swam to the door. As a 4th shark swam through the door, Caleb pushed aside the shark and swam through the door himself.

The door led into a tunnel that probably connected with the aquarium. As he swam, his breath began to run out and his vision became blurry. An opening! The tunnel opened out into the aquarium on one side and a landing on the other. He climbed the ladder on the landing side and pulled himself onto the landing, gasping for breath. He walked to the back of the landing, cautiously listened at the door and when he was confident, he crept through it. The hallway that he entered led somewhere, possibly the power room. He sneaked along the hallway encountering no one. Luckily, the island had few inhabitants aside from Tiberius, Chip & Dale and a chef.

The hallway turned to the right and Caleb saw a radioactive symbol on a door, which had to lead into the power room. Yes! Caleb peaked through the glass of the door and seeing no one, crept into the power room. Oh no! There was someone standing in the corner with a clipboard. The person appeared to be recording information from all the dials, gauges and monitors. The equipment in the room made a loud humming sound. Caleb easily sneaked behind the person, karate-chopped their neck and knocked them unconscious. Caleb looked around the room until he detected what he was looking for, the reactor temperature controller on the 2nd floor of the room. He climbed the stairs, walked to the controller and twisted the dial fully to the right. There was an override switch next to the dial which he flipped to disable. A final slider-type switch was pushed all the way to the right. That should do it. There was no way to stop it. He only had minutes before a catastrophic detonation would take place.

In seconds, the temperature gauges began rising as the core quickly headed for an irreversible violent reaction. The reactor core would crack and release radiation all over the island, likely annihilating every living thing. He had to get out of there!

56. Edgardo's Escape



56. Edgardo's Escape

Edgardo had only been a member of the family for a week when he found himself in a cigar box buried in the ground. The little girl who received the chameleon as a birthday gift thought she had found him dead one morning and hastily buried him. Little did the girl know, that part of a chameleon's defense system was to play dead. When the family dog began getting a little too rough with Edgardo, he decided to play dead, so the dog would leave him alone. The little girl happened by, found Edgardo playing dead, thought he was actually dead and immediately buried him. It must be a rite of passage for little kids to bury at least one pet in a cigar box. The little girl couldn't wait long enough to bury her first pet for the pet to actually die.

Edgardo was outraged by the impetuosity of the girl and demanded satisfaction. He pushed open the lid of his cigar box coffin, which the girl shallowly buried in the marigolds. He dug his way to the surface and entered the house through the flap of the dog door. Being a chameleon gave Edgardo the special ability to blend into his surroundings, no matter what the background colors were. Additionally, chameleons were capable of regenerating any lost body parts. Edgardo decided to mess with the family in every devious way he could think of. He planned to walk around the house, blend in as necessary and wreak havoc.

He walked up the stairs to the little girl's room to pay a visit to her belongings. He didn't have to wait for her to leave her room, because if she looked in his direction, he would be invisible to her. He scaled up the corner of her dresser, found her Ipod and Ipad and pissed on them. That should teach her a lesson to not bury a live animal again! As the girl was sitting on her bed, she was playing with her cell phone. Edgardo knocked a bottle of cheap perfume off her dresser onto the floor and scurried down the opposite corner of the dresser. The girl put her phone down on the bed and trotted over to the spilled perfume. Edgardo scurried up one of the bed corners, ran to her phone, pissed on it and ran down the opposite corner of the bed.

The girl shrieked when she saw the liquid on her Ipod and Ipad and began crying. After sniffing the devices, she realized that they had somehow been pissed on. She quickly turned to look at the glistening cell phone on her bed. She ran to the bed, picked up the wet phone, sniffed it and burst into tears. She bellowed, "Mom!" Edgardo chuckled, exited the girl's room and walked into her older brother's room. Her older brother wasn't home yet.

Edgardo saw some magazines under the boy's bed and walked closer to investigate. He flipped a few of the pages of one of the magazines, which had pictures of humans without clothes. As he flipped each page that had a picture, he alternately pooped and pissed on the pages. With his sharp toenails, Edgardo shredded the pages with pictures of the other 2 magazines. He climbed the boy's dresser and pissed on the boy's Ipod and Ipad. The boy probably had his phone.

Edgardo walked into the room of the girl's younger brother. He climbed the dresser, pissed on

the boy's Ipod, Ipad and cell phone. The boy was in the shower cleaning up after mowing the lawn. Edgardo opened each drawer of the dresser and shredded every article of clothing he could find. He then walked to the closet and shredded everything in there. When the girl ran downstairs to cry to her mommy, Edgardo sauntered into her room and destroyed all the clothing in her dresser and closet. He walked back to the older brother's room and laid waste to that boy's clothing as well. Edgardo was enjoying the business of revenge.

Edgardo ambled over to the bedroom of the girl's parents. In a series of separate trips, he climbed up and down the dressers in the room and took everything he could find. He threw all the items out the window and they landed in the bushes. Edgardo planned to bury all the items later, so no human would ever find them again. He slithered up the bedroom walls, barely getting enough grip and shredded all the paintings.

During Edgardo's entire time in the house, no one saw him, even when looking right at him a couple of times. Edgardo walked back down the stairs and went into the laundry room. The girl was crying to her mother in the kitchen. He found some black dye on the shelf, poured it into the washing machine and clicked the ON button. He did the same thing to the dryer.

The girl's father wasn't at home; he was probably with the girl's older brother at his soccer practice. Edgardo strolled into the living room and climbed onto the table with the remote controls. He pissed on all 6 remotes and the TV guide sitting on the table with them. He shredded the material of the couch, loveseat, recliners and the upholstery of the seats of the dining room chairs. He walked to the big screen TV and other entertainment system equipment. He unplugged and chewed through all the wires where they were connected to the pieces of equipment and at the plug ends of the wires. He climbed to the top of the big screen TV and pissed down into it. He then pissed down into the 7 other electronic devices. As hard as he could, he pushed on the base of the big screen TV and eventually got it rocking. It rocked sufficiently to fall off the stand onto the floor, and landed with a loud crash. The clamor caused the girl and her mother to run out of the kitchen to investigate.

While they viewed the destruction in the living room, Edgardo sashayed into the kitchen. He climbed up one of the lower cabinet doors to the sink to get a long drink of water. He giggled as he heard the girl and her mother yelling at each other. He walked to the stove, pissed on it, opened the oven door and pissed in the oven. He climbed down the back of the stove, unplugged it and chewed through the thick power cord. He climbed up the back of the stove and walked to the toaster. He pooped in the toaster, then unplugged it and chewed the cord. He performed similar destructive acts on the microwave, blender, coffee maker and toaster oven. He found a corkscrew in a drawer and scratched the entire L-shaped marble countertop with swirls and funny shapes. He scaled down to the floor and climbed up the butcher-block island in the middle of the kitchen. He pissed and pooped on the butcher block, smearing it in thoroughly.

He descended the butcher-block island and scampered to the refrigerator. He opened the door, climbed in and knocked over or opened every bottle of liquid, spilling everything all over the inside of the fridge. He ate some deli turkey, drank some lemonade and clambered out of the fridge. He squeezed around to the back of the fridge, unplugged it and chewed through the cord. The noise he made in the fridge caused the girl and her mother to return to the kitchen. They both screamed upon entering.

Edgardo walked unnoticed back to the living room and scrambled into the grandfather clock. He climbed up into the mechanism area, chewed through the belts, disconnected the chains and pissed on the gearing. He climbed out of the clock, walked around to the back and pushed it over in the same manner that he toppled the big screen TV. The clock landed on the glass coffee table and smashed it to pieces.

The girl and her mother ran into the living room. The girl's younger brother came running down the stairs screaming about his devices and clothing. He asked his mother and sister what happened to the TV and clock. The boy's mother asked him about his clothing. Edgardo casually walked to the kitchen and then down to the basement. He scampered over to the furnace controls, flipped the circuit breaker and pissed on the main controller. The furnace shut down. He climbed up to the water heater box and pissed down in it, causing it to also shut down. He unscrewed the oil filter on the oil tank and the oil began running out of the tank onto the floor. He ran away just fast enough to stay ahead of the expanding puddle to avoid getting his feet wet with oil. The entertainment system in the basement received the same brutal treatment as the system in the living room. It was easier to push over the smaller big screen TV in the basement, but it still made a loud crash when it hit the concrete floor.

The girl, her mother and younger brother ran downstairs to see what was making all the noise in the basement and burst into tears at the sight of the damage. Edgardo ran back up the stairs into the kitchen, climbed the kitchen wall and slid the lock on the basement door. He snickered as he heard them screaming to be let out. Edgardo heard a car pull up in the driveway, probably the girl's father and older brother. They came in the front door and Edgardo went out through the dog door flap to the car. Edgardo scratched his way up the driver's door and crawled into the car through the open window. The car keys were still in the ignition! He turned the keys, started the car, moved the lever on the steering wheel and the car began rolling backward. Edgardo jumped out the window and landed on the lawn. He watched the car drive itself backward down the driveway toward the street. Just as the back end of the old station wagon entered the street, a car came by and collided with it. The old station wagon was still moving and had enough momentum to crash into the car parked in the driveway across the street.

The girl's father and older brother heard the crash and ran outside to observe the spectacle. The driver of the car who hit the station wagon pulled over and called the Police. The neighbor

across the street ran outside and started yelling at the girl's father from a distance. The girl's older brother said he heard somebody screaming inside the house and ran back in. The girl's father walked over to the driver who was on his phone to the Police. The neighbor across the street walked over to discuss the matter. The girl's father, neighbor and driver stood talking and scratching their heads at what happened.

The girl's older brother ran to the kitchen and heard people banging on the locked basement door. He yelled at them to stop banging and unlocked the door. He looked around the kitchen at the destruction and asked his mother, sister and brother what happened. The mother asked the older boy if he saw what happened in the living room. He said he did and she said the same thing happened in the basement and kitchen. The younger brother talked about all the damage upstairs. Hearing what the younger brother said, the older brother ran upstairs to see for himself. In a minute, the older brother was heard screaming upstairs.

No one knew what was going on. They all ran outside to the father who was talking to the Police, the neighbor and the driver who collided with their old station wagon. The mother, father, girl and her 2 brothers were all trying to talk at the same time. The cop told everyone to calm down, because he had to process the report for the car accident first.

When the neighbor across the street was satisfied that the father's auto insurance would pay for the minor damage to the car in the driveway, he went back into his house. The father promised to move the old station wagon out of the neighbor's driveway when he was done with the cop. When the driver who had collided with the father's old station wagon was satisfied that the father's insurance would cover the minor damage to his car, he drove away. When the cop was satisfied that the reason the old station wagon rolled down the driveway, was that the father left the keys in the ignition and left the car in gear, the Police report was complete. The cop then wrote out a ticket for the father due to negligence related to his car. The cop radioed to the station that there had been an alleged burglary at the father's house and the cop was investigating it.

The cop took statements from everyone in the house who was present during the alleged burglary. While the cop was busy in the house, Edgardo sneaked into the garage. There was another car in the garage. Edgardo scratched his way up the driver's door and crawled into the car through the open window. The car keys were still in the ignition! He turned the keys, started the car, moved the lever on the steering wheel and the car began rolling backward. The car rolled out of the garage, down the driveway and smashed into the Police car parked at the end of the driveway! The cop heard the noise and ran out of the house with the family. They all ran to look at the damage. The cop looked at the mother and father and radioed to the station about what happened. He wrote out a new Police report detailing the collision and wrote out another negligence ticket for the father. The father handed the ticket to the mother, since it was her car

that rolled into the Police car. The cop radioed to the station what had happened. The father got into the car, put it in drive and drove the car into the garage. He removed the keys, lowered the garage door and walked back to the cop. They all went back into the house to resume reporting the alleged burglary story.

Edgardo climbed onto the riding lawn mower that was parked in the garage on the side opposite of the mother's car. He turned the key; the mower roared to life and when he moved a lever, the mower drove backwards toward the garage door. He jumped off the mower, which smashed through the garage door and rolled down the driveway. The riding lawn mower smashed into the Police car in the driveway! The cop and the family ran outside again to look at the latest damage. The cop, mother and father all scratched their heads. How did it happen?

It didn't matter to the cop how it happened. He radioed to the station what occurred, filled out another report and wrote another negligence ticket for the father. The father climbed onto the still-running mower and drove it into the garage. He removed the key and disconnected the battery. He returned to the cop and his family and they all went back in the house. Edgardo turned the key on the snow blower in the garage and it started with a loud blast. It was barely running, but it was running. When the cop and family heard the noise, they all ran outside to make sure the Police car wasn't being damaged again. When the father determined that it was the snow blower running, he ran into the garage, turned the key and disconnected the battery. The cop made sure everything else in the garage was disabled before they headed back to the house.

While everyone was still outside, Edgardo ran into the house through the dog door flap to get something to eat and drink in the kitchen. He climbed up to the counter, ate some cookies and bread slices and washed down the food with some water from the faucet. He then climbed down to the floor and waited in the living room for the people to return.

When the cop was done taking down everyone's stories for the report, he had the family show him around the house to survey the damage and attempt to corroborate their stories with the evidence. The cop had never seen such damage inflicted by a burglar who stole nothing. The cop didn't believe the family's stories and made his opinion known in the report. It appeared to the cop that the family had staged something to make a fraudulent insurance claim. The cop finished his report, informed the family what he thought they were trying to do and drove to the Police station. The family had sustained thousands of dollars of damage, with probably no insurance to pay for it, if the cop had his way. The family went out to eat dinner and saw a movie together. When they returned home later that evening, they let the dog out for a while, and then called him back in. They always sealed the dog door with the metal plate to keep the dog in at night. Edgardo saw his cue to leave the house when the dog was let back in, because he didn't want to battle with the dog. Edgardo scurried to the dog door to escape and was 1/3 of the way through when the mother slid the plate down.

57. Ferdinand's Mud



57. Ferdinand's Mud

Ferdinand had been visiting the Vietnam vet at the VA hospital for the past 9 months as part of his community service and had grown close to him. It was unfortunate that the vet was dying of lung cancer, but that's what smoking can do to a person. Ferdinand would have liked to get to know the guy a little better. The man's name was Brick and he had served in the Army in Vietnam toward the end of the conflict.

Brick had related a story to Ferdinand about some spoils that he had obtained during the war. Toward the end of the war, Vietnam was in chaos and a lot of money and other valuables were confiscated and hidden, while the government's eyes were turned. Many profiteers benefited from the war at that point. Brick and a Vietnamese man named Spunjee managed to put aside a number of millions of American dollars and secreted the money in 2 weatherproof Army munitions cases. They hid the cases deep in the jungle.

Before Brick and Spunjee were able to retrieve the money, and Brick was able to move his share to the U.S., the conflict ended and Brick was shipped home. Brick contracted lung cancer, became laid up and was too sick to make it back to Vietnam to retrieve the money that was hidden in the jungle. Brick couldn't remember where the money was hidden in the unfamiliar country of Vietnam. He always hoped that whenever he made it back to Vietnam, Spunjee would help him find the money.

It was all in the past and Brick's body was failing him. Brick was so grateful to Ferdinand for visiting him in his last days that he wanted Ferdinand to know the secret. Brick hoped that Ferdinand would be able to go to Vietnam, contact Spunjee and find the money for himself. Ferdinand found the story quite interesting and wondered if it was true. He thought that it must be true if Brick had told it to him on his deathbed. Ferdinand got as much information as he could from Brick about the possible whereabouts of Spunjee in Vietnam.

Brick passed away in the VA hospital and Ferdinand began his research. He got on the internet to find the city and village where Spunjee might be living. He found some phone numbers and called over there. He was surprised that most of the people he talked to on the phone knew how to speak English. It was spoken with an accent, but understandable enough to obtain the information he required. It turned out that the man named Spunjee who was Brick's accomplice had passed away, but his son Spunjee Jr. still lived there. Ferdinand briefly asked Spunjee Jr. if his father had told him any stories about Brick and their acquaintance and Spunjee Jr. said yes. That was all Ferdinand wanted to know over the phone. He didn't want any information to leak out to unwanted ears. Ferdinand made plans to fly to Vietnam to visit with Spunjee Jr. in 3 months. In his will, Brick had surprisingly bequeathed \$22,000 to Ferdinand, providing a nice amount for Ferdinand to expend on the adventure.

Ferdinand obtained a picture of Spunjee from Brick, which was the only means he had of identifying Spunjee Jr., who hopefully resembled his father. When Ferdinand arrived in the village, he had shown the dog-eared picture to the transport person who operated the 3-wheeled vehicle. The person kept nodding as if they recognized Spunjee or Spunjee Jr., so Ferdinand felt that he was on the right track. It was incredibly hot, humid and raining in the village. The smell of barbecuing meat was in the air and street vendors lined the avenue, hawking their wares.

It seemed like a sight out of a TV travel program with all the activity going on. A constant chattering of people, dogs, chickens and exotic birds was heard. It was truly an overwhelming experience for Ferdinand who was having a hard enough time dealing with the tremendous discomfort of the heat without all the other inputs piling on top. When Ferdinand called Spunjee Jr. from the airport, the agreement was to meet each other in front of the butcher shop, which would be easily identified by the hanging pigs in the front window. Ferdinand found the shop, where someone approximating the likeness of the Spunjee in the picture was standing in the rain.

Ferdinand was surprised to see the man, who resembled his father to a tee. As Ferdinand approached, the man asked, "Ferdinand?" Ferdinand replied, "Spunjee Jr.?" The man said, "Yes, but you can call me Spunjee!" Ferdinand reached out his hand to shake and said, "Hi, I'm Brick's friend." Spunjee shook Ferdinand's hand, asked if he was hungry and Ferdinand said he was. Ferdinand and Spunjee walked to a street vendor that sold what smelled like and resembled chicken on a stick. They bought some of the chicken, potatoes and tea to wash it down. Everything tasted good to Ferdinand who was starving.

They climbed into Spunjee's 3-wheeled vehicle and drove to his house just outside the village. On the way, they talked about the plan to recover the hidden money. Spunjee's father had told his son everything about Brick and the location of the money. Spunjee's father had created 2 detailed maps to the location. Brick had been shipped to the U.S. before they could go back into the jungle to get the money. Spunjee's father assured his son that Brick would return someday. Spunjee's father felt the money was half Brick's possession and didn't want to touch it until Brick returned. If Spunjee's father passed away before Brick's return, then the money belonged to Spunjee's son. Spunjee told Ferdinand that he didn't want the money, because it had tainted his father and had driven him to an early grave. Spunjee agreed to help Ferdinand retrieve the money, but wanted none of it. He wanted the evil money removed from his country and life forever. Spunjee believed that the money was part of a war that shouldn't have taken place and it was a curse on him. He had nothing but bad luck since his father passed; his mother was still in prison. He had no brothers or sisters and only clung to life through his spirituality.

Ferdinand explained how he had grown to like Brick over the relatively short time that he had known him. He was surprised that Brick had given him the secret and money to go find the war spoils. Ferdinand and Spunjee agreed that Brick and Spunjee's father had probably both become

tainted by the stolen money. Ferdinand felt that what happened to those old friends was in the past and he wanted to recover Brick's money, partly because Brick wanted it that way. The other part was the greed in himself and the lure of great wealth. If the amount of money in the 2 cases were as much as Brick claimed, it would set Ferdinand up for life. He could finally move to Florida and live in paradise. He was sick of the crappy winters in Wisconsin and was more than ready to start his life over again, the right way.

Spunjee listened compassionately to Ferdinand's story and felt that if Brick wanted Ferdinand to have the money, then so be it. Spunjee would do everything in his power to help Ferdinand find the money. Ferdinand had a plan to transport the money when they found it. He planned to hide the money under his clothing over a series of trips back and forth until it was all transferred to the U.S. He didn't want to risk putting the money in luggage or other carry-ons that would be searched.

Spunjee had the copies of the map that his father gave him; he gave one of the copies to Ferdinand in case of mishap. It would take them days to get there and they would have to carry large backpacks with food and water, especially water. It was always hot in that part of Vietnam and the jungle water was undrinkable. They headed out the next morning before sunrise to avoid prying eyes.

Spunjee advised that they proceed carefully through the jungle to better be aware of everything going on around them. The jungle was wild and full of flora & fauna that didn't care for the presence of humans. Spunjee advised to avoid touching anything. They wore long-sleeved shirts, full-length pants, boots and hats. It was better to be fully covered to protect from contact with insects and poison foliage. Of course, being fully covered made it even hotter, but it was a trade off. Snakes, scorpions, spiders, large biting insects and other hazards abounded in the jungle. They both used machetes to chop what they could out of the way. The jungle grew so quickly that their trail would be overgrown by the time they came back through.

Spunjee lead the way through the jungle, chopping with the machete, which made it a little easier for Ferdinand to follow. Ferdinand was in no way accustomed to the heat and humidity and was having a difficult time walking. Spunjee slowed the pace until Ferdinand could keep up easier. Spunjee said he was sorry for going too fast; he forgot that Ferdinand wasn't used to the climate. Ferdinand was sweating so profusely that he was amazed by it. He liked heat and some humidity, but that Vietnam was insane. He wondered how all those poor American soldiers could stand it for all those wasted years that they were there. Spunjee admitted that it was the rainy season and more humid than usual. Since he grew up in the climate, it was easier for him than it was for Ferdinand, but it was still uncomfortable.

After 3 days of living hell, they didn't seem much closer to the location of the 2 cases. Ferdinand hoped the whole story wasn't some insane joke played by too lunatics who had since passed on.

It was too complicated of a story to not be true though. You had 2 people from different cultures and countries with money stashed somewhere. The story had to be real. It was like a movie plot. Ferdinand kept checking the map, hoping they would at least hit the halfway point soon. After 2 more days, they were finally halfway. It had been a boring and grueling 5 days, with little talking, only whispering. Ferdinand wanted to ensure that no one knew what they were doing out there and hoped that they weren't being followed.

Ferdinand supposed that he had put his life in the hands of Spunjee. The 2 of them were essentially strangers, only known to each other through old friends. Ferdinand's greed for the alleged money had forced him into having to trust Spunjee; that's how greed worked. Greedy people had to take chances to get the alleged gold and hope for the best. Ferdinand was in the midst of doing the craziest thing he had ever done. He didn't belong in that insane jungle in Vietnam. He considered turning back and heading home, but the greed pulled him forward.

Ferdinand found himself thankfully getting more acclimated to the jungle and capable of walking faster, so they picked up the pace. After another 3 days, they were nearing the X on the map. It should be around somewhere. According to Spunjee, his father said that he and Brick had buried the 2 weatherproof cases in the ground under a boulder that would require 2 men to move. There it was! It had to be! Spunjee nodded that it was. Under a mass of vines and colored foliage appeared to be a boulder. Spunjee instructed Ferdinand to stand back, because the colored foliage was covered with a poison similar to poison ivy, but worse. Spunjee hacked the vines and foliage away from around the boulder. When it was clear, Spunjee motioned to Ferdinand. The 2 of them began rocking the boulder to lift it from its soil indentation. It was heavy! They rolled and rolled until it finally rolled forward. They rolled it for a few feet more.

They did it! Apparently, the 2 cases were about 3 feet below the surface. Spunjee unfolded the shovel and began digging the loose soil. In a short time, he clanged the shovel on something solid. It was there! Ferdinand couldn't believe it! The story was true after all. His hell over the past 8 days had been worth it. He wondered how much money was in each case. Millions? How many millions? It was really exciting.

Spunjee lifted one of the cases out of the hole, with the 2nd case still in the bottom. Spunjee said the case wasn't too heavy, since it appeared to be aluminum. The money inside was still weighty though. Then he lifted out the 2nd case, which got wedged a little on the sides of the rough hole. Both cases were out! Unbelievable! Spunjee stepped aside as Ferdinand flipped open the clasps on the sides and front of one of the cases. Ferdinand lifted the lid and lifted the olive drab wool blanket. There it was! The money! There must be millions in that one case alone! Thank you, Brick and Spunjee's father! Spunjee bowed in front of the opened case, then knelt on the ground and appeared to be praying. Ferdinand figured Spunjee was probably gaining closure on the whole money situation involving his father and Brick. Spunjee was finally able to put his father's

memory to rest. Spunjee's father had always wanted Brick to come back for the money; a friend of Brick's would have to suffice.

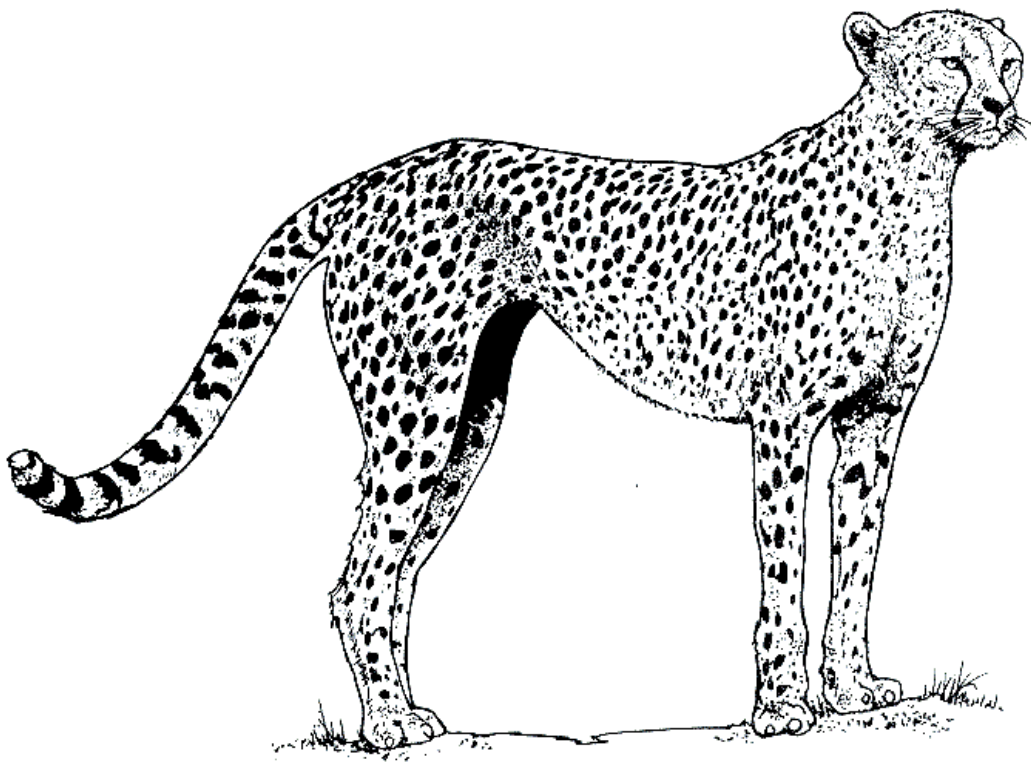
Ferdinand's greed fully kicked in at that point. His hands started trembling uncontrollably. He hastily opened the 2nd case and saw that it also contained millions of dollars. He tried to say something to Spunjee, but couldn't because he felt so spastic. It was time for Ferdinand to minimize the risk of loss. Brick had wanted Ferdinand to have the money and he would have expected Ferdinand to safeguard the money at all costs. While Spunjee was still kneeling and apparently praying, Ferdinand produced a box of 3 scorpions from his backpack. Ferdinand had purchased the poisonous creatures when he arrived in Vietnam, prior to meeting with Spunjee. Brick had suggested the purchase as an extra precaution.

Ferdinand opened the box, sprinkled the 3 scorpions between the back of Spunjee's neck and the collar of his shirt and then Ferdinand jumped backward. The scorpions must have instantly stung Spunjee, because he collapsed from his kneeling position, fell over and writhed on the ground. He screeched in agony and in a few seconds, Spunjee was gone. Ferdinand dragged Spunjee to the hole, pushed him in, and placed one of the latched cases on top of him. Ferdinand filled in the hole and slid the other case behind the boulder. He removed approximately \$300,000 in cash from the case, taped the money to his legs and torso, and then latched the case. He covered everything with vines and foliage that he freshly chopped from a distance away to attempt to make the immediate area appear natural. The jungle would grow over everything anyway.

Ferdinand loaded the water and food that he removed from Spunjee's backpack and headed back toward the village. Ferdinand was rich beyond his wildest dreams, but still had to come up with a story in case someone asked about Spunjee, which was unlikely. Spunjee had no relatives. He may have had friends, but that's where the accident story would come in. When Ferdinand arrived back at the village, if anyone asked about Spunjee, Ferdinand would pretend to be distraught and relate a story of scorpions stinging Spunjee in the middle of the night. Ferdinand had hurried back as quickly as he could and was ready to lead the authorities to Spunjee's body.

Ferdinand quickly marched along, barely looking at the map, due to the combination of his jubilation and concentration on the accident story. It was hot. He assumed he was heading back directly opposite to the way they came in. He was wrong. The jungle had already overgrown the trail. Where was he? In his panic, he began walking clumsily and hastily. It was getting too dark to see clearly, but he blearily plodded onward anyway. What was that ahead? Too late. Quicksand forms in waterlogged loose sand when the sand is suddenly agitated. When water in the sand cannot escape, it creates a liquefied soil that loses strength and cannot support weight. Ferdinand felt himself sinking. He couldn't pull himself out, gain a footing or move across the surface. He was trapped! Shadows crawled toward him in the darkness. Ferdinand vainly bawled for help, but there were no humans in the jungle, only the night creatures.

58. Garfield's Races



58. Garfield's Races

Mick had worked at the local zoo for 12 years as the big cat manager, meaning he took care of the lions, tigers, leopards and cheetahs. He was heartbroken when he found out the zoo was closing, which would not only result in the loss of his job, but also the happy home for many animals. The animals were to be dispersed throughout the nation to zoos that were in need of animals to replace or add to their current inventory. It sounded like simply getting rid of someone's shoe collection, but it was really much more. Mick loved animals and hated when zoos were forced to fragment, due to poor management or poor location. There had been a lot of pressure on zoos to disband and sell the animals to private parties, but many thought that might be an even worse fate for the beasts than the zoos.

The zoos were allegedly the only place that some animals could exist anywhere in the world. The problems of birth defects as a result of inbreeding caused by the fewer and fewer numbers of breeding animals began to become clear. Without genetic manipulation of the breeding animals to ensure healthy offspring, all zoo animals would eventually die out.

As part of his compensation package upon being released from the zoo, Mick was allowed to pick a suitable animal to take as his pet, if he desired. The managers at the zoo were all considered knowledgeable enough to raise any of the zoo animals that were in their care at the zoo. They had to be capable of affording the potentially high costs of the free animal, however. Mick chose one of the cheetahs named Garfield. Garfield was basically just a big dog and totally tame, because he had born in captivity at the zoo. Mick had some money saved up, since he was single and lived in a frugal modular home on a 5-acre piece of land. He could handle Garfield's expenses for a while without working. Garfield would have plenty of room to run and stretch his legs, which the cheetah loved to do. Mick's property had been fully fenced by the previous horse owners. Garfield was protected in the yard and no large animals could get in to bother him.

At the zoo, Garfield ate Purina Cheetah Chow and never ate a piece of meat in his life, which is probably why he was so tame. The cheetah always had room to run at the zoo, which kept him in top lightning-fast condition. Mick's property would give the cat even more land on which to run. Mick always wondered how fast Garfield could actually run, because the fences at the zoo had limited his top speed. Mick researched the speed of cheetahs and bought himself a radar gun/stopwatch. With the help of his grandfather, Mick timed Garfield's 0-60 time and 100-yard dash time. The results were impressive. Garfield was faster accelerating to 60 mph than any street production car in the world.

Garfield loved the wide open ground to run flat out; cheetahs were definitely built for it. Mick built a large doghouse for Garfield to live in which had all the comforts of home. Mick was outside playing with Garfield one day, when Garfield took off like a shot. In 2 seconds, he skidded to a halt in a big dust cloud halfway across the yard. Mick trotted over to see what

happened and came upon Garfield eating a rabbit that had strayed into his yard. Apparently, domestic cheetahs do like to eat meat. That was interesting to Mick who never before saw any of the cheetahs at the zoo eat wild game. Mick observed Garfield catching animals everyday after that including more rabbits, mice, moles, squirrels, chipmunks, snakes, occasional birds and woodchucks. Any animal that Garfield spotted in his yard was a potential natural snack for the cheetah.

Mick wasn't sure, but he sensed that Garfield might be getting even faster running in the big yard. He and his grandfather again used the radar gun/stopwatch. Mick attributed the speed increase to Garfield having more room to run and getting more exercise. Mick checked the cheetah's speed monthly and determined that Garfield continued getting faster. Mick began to wonder if it was because of the wild game with which Garfield was supplementing his own diet. When Mick worked at the zoo, the animals were provided the most nutritionally balanced diet that was scientifically ascertained to provide all the necessary nutrients. The zoo didn't care to go beyond the minimum affordable food for the animals that already provided everything the animals needed. Mick never knew why the cheetahs weren't fed raw meat; he assumed the animals didn't need it, since they absorbed everything necessary from the Cheetah Chow.

Garfield had been watching the hawks circling over Mick's property and wondered what they were doing. One day, he saw a hawk dive to the ground in his yard and take one of the rodents that he would have eaten. Garfield didn't like it. He invented a game for himself where he raced the circling hawks to the live animal in his yard. Whoever got there first, got to eat the critter. He won the race 19 out of 20 times, which was pretty good, considering some of the rodents were on the edge of the yard. Mick began watching Garfield race against the hawks and got an idea.

Mick loved all the cheetahs from his old zoo and hated to only pick one, but at the time, he wanted to make sure he could properly accommodate Garfield. Vet visits, annual shots and licensing for cheetahs were costly. Since he wasn't working yet, Mick didn't want to leave Garfield hanging, in case of a financial burden. He wished he could have adopted more of the zoo's cheetahs to keep them all together. If he had more money, he could locate Garfield's old zoo mates and possibly adopt one or more of them from their current location. Mick had plenty of room for the cheetahs to run and nice fresh country air for them to breathe.

Due to the location of Mick's house in the U.S., many people involved themselves in some form of racing 365 days of the year. Most of Mick's friends were gear heads and dreamed of making money someday as a racecar driver or a drag racer. Mick had become a zookeeper because he loved animals and never really care about cars one way or the other. His training had landed him a good job for a while and enabled him to buy a decent house with land and still have money saved up. His money wouldn't last though, especially if he planned to execute his idea of buying more cheetahs. He needed more money.

Mick had heard of the idea of people and animals racing against cars for shorter distances to see which would win. It was an interesting novelty. He began hanging around at the drag racing track on Saturday nights, talking to his racing friends. He asked them if they thought their cars were fast, etc. He got a feel for what they said about their 1/4 mile times/speeds, 0-60 times and other info. Mick knew his cheetah was fast and getting faster each week. He decided to place bets against his friends that Garfield could beat their cars in a race up to a limited distance, not the full 1/4 mile. His friends all had street cars that were modified, but nothing professionally powered. Based on Mick's research of Garfield's speed compared to cars, he felt his cheetah should be able to beat anybody's car in a race.

Mick began spreading the scuttlebutt about Garfield and how fast the cheetah was. His friends generally knew a little about how fast cheetahs were supposed to be, but no one knew exactly how fast. Mick had to lull his friends into thinking they could beat Garfield in a limited race. He would have to first judge the speeds of their cars based on their Elapsed Times at the track. He would then group the guys from slowest to fastest. Then, he would bet the slowest guy first and when Garfield beat that guy, Mick could bet Garfield against the next fastest car. That way he would be able to place a series of bets and each of his friends would try to outdo each other by attempting to beat the cheetah. Once he had beaten all his friends in bets, he could bet against the other guys at the track. Eventually, word would get around about the cheetah and everyone would want to race the animal, to prove they could beat it in a race.

Mick planted the seeds at the track, to get the buzz going about the bets, then backed off to allow the seeds to grow. He stayed at the house with Garfield and began training him to run in a straight line as fast as he could for a 100-yard distance, which would be the betting distance. If Garfield could get to the 100-yard mark before the cars, Garfield would be declared the winner. It didn't matter if the car passed Garfield after that point. The racers would have to agree to assign a mutual person to stand at the 100-yard marker to declare the winner. Mick had already talked to the owners of the track and they agreed to permit the races, although they would be unaware of any betting going on. The car would run on the asphalt track and Garfield would run next to the car on the other side of the guide rail for protection and traction in the dirt.

Mick had been noticing that as Garfield was eating more wild game, he was eating less Cheetah Chow. There was no way for Mick to force the cheetah to eat more of the dry Chow. If Garfield preferred to eat more natural food, Mick felt the cheetah must know what it's doing. Besides, Mick had become convinced that the more wild game it ate, the faster the cheetah ran. There was definitely a connection. Mick began to see the reality forming of the expansion of his cheetah collection. With Garfield running faster and faster, there would be no way for any car to beat him in a race. Mick would be able to rake in thousands of dollars and bring Garfield's old zoo friends back for him to play with. Mick felt that he was performing a humanitarian effort in trying to reunite the old cheetah friends.

Mick heard back from his friends on occasion and they all wanted to race against Garfield. In fact, as time passed, everyone at the track wanted to race against the cheetah. Mick's plan had worked! He would soon be able to race Garfield against the drag racing buffoons, beat them all and buy more cheetahs. He wanted to make sure that Garfield would be as fast as possible, though. He set up a 100-yard distance in the yard along the fence, which ran parallel to the driveway. He began racing side by side with Garfield to get the cheetah accustomed to running next to an accelerating noisy car. Mick's car wasn't as fast as his friends' drag racing cars, but it would work as a training tool.

For the next month, Mick raced next to Garfield and the cheetah easily beat him every time. The cheetah was phenomenally fast. Mick kept checking Garfield with the radar gun/stopwatch and the cat somehow kept getting faster. Garfield was to the point of no longer eating any Cheetah Chow, choosing to eat only the wild game he caught. Mick allowed the grass to grow outside the fenced yard to encourage more rodents, etc. to live in the tall stuff and eventually make their way into Garfield's yard for him to eat. Mick hoped that he wasn't making a mistake by allowing Garfield to revert to a completely wild, raw meat diet. He guessed that by eating a variety of animals, Garfield was likely getting all his necessary nutrition. The cheetah was healthier and faster than he had ever been in the zoo; there must be something going right with his self-imposed wild diet. Mick consulted with other zookeepers about Garfield's diet reversion. They universally opined that there was a possibility of Garfield becoming as wild as his diet.

Occasionally, when Garfield raced a hawk to a rabbit, etc., Garfield would pretend to come up short to the prey, only to accelerate at the last instant and snatch the rabbit and the hawk at the same time for his snack. Mick got a kick out of that new trick of Garfield's. The cheetah seemed to be getting more feral and instinctual as time passed. Soon, there were no hawks circling the sky in Mick's neck of the woods. Garfield had solved his own problem of having to compete with the hawks for food. He missed the thrill of competing with the hawks, until crows began entering the yard. On some good days, Garfield would obtain more wild game in the yard than he could eat and would have to leave some lying around for later consumption. Crows had become attracted to the smell of the rotting remnants and precariously began to seek it out.

Garfield hid low to the ground next to his house and waited for the crows to gather in a big enough crowd. When crows gathered in a group of 3 or more, they became carelessly competitive for the limited amount of fetid meat scraps. Their hunger surpassed their defense systems and they began to let their guards down. Garfield waited for the right moment, and then sprinted at the crow group, nailing 1 or 2 at a clip. He ate one and left the other one there to attract the next batch of crows. Garfield enjoyed the new game with the crows more than the old game with the hawks. The crows were so primitive and aggressive that they were unable to stay away from the smell of the meat. Garfield dispatched at least 2 crows each day over a few weeks time. Eventually, there were no more crows in the area.

Garfield was so into eating the wild animals in the yard that he began eating everything that moved, including snakes, turtles, frogs, toads, all birds, insects and worms. Mick was surprised to see Garfield devouring so many different things. It appeared that Garfield's diet had completely reverted to a natural diet. The opinions of the other zookeepers couldn't be correct that Garfield might become wild from eating only raw meat. He appeared to be the same tame cheetah as ever; he still liked to race against Mick's car. Garfield had become a little standoffish though. Mick hadn't been as chummy as he used to be with Garfield, perhaps because he was looking at him as a means of accomplishing something. Mick admitted to himself that Garfield represented a way of obtaining a large amount of cash that would ultimately benefit Garfield by helping him to see his cheetah friends again.

Mick's focus had drifted from considering Garfield as a pet to considering him as something similar to a prizefighter or thoroughbred racehorse. In Mick's mind, Garfield had become a possession on which to capitalize. Mick kept telling himself that he had been training Garfield to become faster to be more capable of winning all the upcoming bets. The reason behind everything was supposedly that he wanted to give Garfield a better life by buying his old playmates and bringing them to the yard with Garfield. Mick suddenly realized that his thinking had become muddled when the zoo closed. He didn't realize it at the time, but when he brought Garfield home months before, he was actually starting his own zoo.

What he initially considered as only trying to obtain money to buy Garfield's friends was in reality trying to get money to fund a new zoo. As he watched Garfield gleefully running around the yard eating everything, he realized that was the real issue. All those years of working at the zoo had given him so much compassion for animals, that the zoo closing was unbeknownst to him, quite damaging to his psyche. He wasn't trying to win money from betting just to buy more cheetahs; he wanted the whole kit and caboodle. He wanted his own zoo!

When Mick realized the full impact of the revelation, he felt weak in the knees and had to sit down on the ground. Mick rested on the ground with his eyes closed, holding his throbbing head in his hands. Garfield noticed Mick on the ground and bolted over to the fence. Garfield stopped short of the fence and slowed to a crawl, lowering his body to the ground. Mick opened his eyes when he heard Garfield quietly growling. The volume of Garfield's growling increased. Garfield was hunkered down on the ground pressing his face on the fence, growling at Mick. Mick became alarmed and tried to rise to his feet. Garfield stayed flat on the ground growling. With his eyes fixed on Garfield, Mick managed to get to his feet. Mick had never seen Garfield growl in that manner during the cheetah's entire lifetime at the zoo. Was he hurt? Sometimes, the big cats will growl unexpectedly when they are injured, such as from a thorn in the foot. Mick looked into Garfield's eyes and didn't recognize the cheetah anymore. Mick stood frozen in fear, unable to move or look away from Garfield's stare. Garfield's body appeared to grow tense and strained. The snarling cheetah leaped over the fence onto Mick's chest.

59. Harlan's Barrel



59. Harlan's Barrel

Since Harlan was a young boy, daredevils captured his interest more than anything did. He was terrible at school, always thinking about Evel Knievel or other motorcycle jumpers. He failed English class because he was obsessed with the Wallenda family of tightrope walkers. The guy who walked a tightrope between the 2 towers of The World Trade Center blew Harlan's mind. He thought those people who flew through the air without parachutes were cool. He enjoyed watching bizarre magicians like David Blaine do amazing stunts. He didn't know why he was so fascinated by the daredevils. Maybe it was because he was as bored with life as they were and needed to push all the limits.

Perhaps daredevils had psychological issues that pushed them to risk their lives. Could it be that the daredevils simply didn't want to work an office job and chose to just earn large chunks of money every once in a while? Were fame and fortune the lures for Harlan and the other daredevils? Was it fair to label daredevils as people who had no valuable skills and didn't want to learn any? The only skill of daredevils was their discovery that people wanted to see them risk their lives doing something stupid. Was a daredevil someone who necessarily had suicidal tendencies or just had a different way of looking at life than the average person?

Who are those people who are labeling other people as daredevils anyway? By definition, a daredevil is a reckless person who enjoys doing dangerous things. Driving in traffic could be considered as doing a dangerous thing. Plenty of reckless people go out driving everyday. Could it be reasoned then that anyone who drives a car is a daredevil?

Harlan felt that someone who was a daredevil definitely had issues of some kind. The issues were inside of the daredevil and it was up to the person to either deal with the issues or remanufacture the issues into something the public could sink its teeth into. Most of the time the issues were displayed to the public in a more interesting form. It was rare that daredevils dealt with their issues; otherwise, they wouldn't be on display to the public doing whatever inane thing they were doing.

Harlan had issues and knew that he had them; he didn't know what they were though. He was unable to define them. He knew they were there trapped inside him. He was unable to deal with the issues, as were most daredevils. He chose instead to become an object on display to give the public what he thought they wanted. Harlan was a daredevil who attempted to remanufacture his issues into a popular format for the public. For over 100 years, the public had always found favor with the daredevils who went over Niagara Falls in a barrel. Harlan would become one of those daredevils.

Once it became clear in Harlan's mind the great feat that he had to perform, he became obsessed with the concept of himself as a daredevil. The public demanded that he do it; he had no choice.

The public had a continuous need and insatiable appetite for the extreme. The public craved to be exposed to something bad happening everyday. Anything would do. The news was the harbinger of exciting things. People clung to their radios, TV sets, phones, computers, newspapers and anything else that would give them their daily fix for something bad happening. War, terrorism, plane crashes, mudslides, forest fires, floods, hurricanes, tornadoes, earthquakes, tidal waves, riots, murders, serial killings, kidnappings and any other bad things that people could possibly do to each other was fair game. People couldn't wait to wake up in the morning to find out how many people died somewhere for some reason. It didn't matter who it was. People wanted to hear that someone died. It was sick human nature and it didn't make sense. People wanted to hear that something bad happened to someone, anyone, except themselves or someone they knew of course. That's what was so sick about people.

Harlan couldn't wait to start planning for the big event. He was going to tell everyone he knew. Then everyone he knew would tell everyone they knew. Before he knew it, Harlan would become a celebrity for a feat that he claimed he was going to perform, before he even performed it. That was the beauty of sensationalism. Someone could become famous just by saying they were going to do something. People would get excited and start talking about what they heard on TV or the internet. People would say to each other, "Did you hear about so and so and what so and so was planning to do?" People would respond, "No, I didn't hear. Tell me more." And so on, ad nauseam.

The public waited for the arrival of the latest Harlan on each day of its sick life. Harlan would perform his feat on one day and the daredevil in waiting would jump through their hoop on the next day. It was a never-ending cycle with slots to be filled 365 days per year, forever.

Harlan read up on the history of Niagara Falls and learned about every person who went over the falls. Some people lived and some died, but most importantly, all had become famous and a part of history. Harlan became excited just thinking about the appearance of his name in print as the latest in a series of brave souls who had faced the perils of Niagara Falls. Harlan liked the sound of that. Yeah, he was a brave soul. Anyone who would go over the falls in a barrel had to be extremely brave, possibly even worthy of a medal like a soldier, yeah. Maybe he would get a medal for being so brave; it was possible. They gave out medals to all sorts of people who did brave things, like Firemen and Policemen. Harlan plainly believed that going over the falls was a medal-worthy deed.

Going over Niagara Falls in a barrel isn't something people did every day. There was a reason. It was illegal and punishable by a fine of \$10,000. Not to mention that it was insane. With all the research that Harlan had read on going over the falls, he neglected to read about the illegal part and the insane part. He chose to read in-depth only about the survivors, conveniently skimming over the non-survivor information. At least the non-survivors made it into the record books.

When Harlan started telling everyone he knew about his upcoming daredevil feat, he didn't receive the support that he had hoped for. Everyone thought it was a stupid idea and believed he was insane to attempt it. However, everyone he told did start telling everyone they knew and the sensationalism ball began rolling. Even though everyone advised Harlan against doing the stunt, they still wanted all the information on when it would take place. Nobody wanted Harlan to go over the falls in a barrel, but everyone wanted to see it happen. It's similar to when nobody wants a tornado to hit their house, but can't wait to watch the videos of other people's houses being destroyed. People were sick; they couldn't help it.

Harlan planned his trip over the falls for July 4th, to represent his independence over his old boring life and the new freedom gained by his fame. That would give him 4 months to prepare his barrel-type device. He had considered using an actual barrel similar to the one that the first woman used in 1901, but didn't want to take any chances. The area under the falls had changed over the past 100 or so years and was more excavated and rougher. There had been millions of tons of rock eroded off the shelf of the falls and all of it was at the bottom. It was so savage down there, that it was amazing anyone could ever survive.

Harlan's barrel wouldn't be a barrel at all; it would be a strategically connected structure made of inner tubes. He would place himself inside the first tube and sit in the thing as if he were going to roll down a hill in it. Then with help from his assistant, his grandmother, successively larger tubes would be placed over the first tube, then the next tube, etc. Each added tube would be rotated 90° from the previous tube. The tubes would be put into position partially deflated, to enable placement and then inflated. As each tube was put in place, it would be taped with the strongest duct tape available. The duct tape that Harlan purchased was as strong as steel. He wanted to use tape instead of any stiffer binding mechanism to permit maximum flexibility. A total of 8 tubes would eventually encase Harlan.

Harlan's research had shown that the majority of the injuries sustained by the daredevils who went over the falls were the result of being battered around inside their barrel. People had used all different variations of containers that were referred to as barrels. The typical mentality was to go over the falls in a container so solid that the daredevil would be safe from penetration by rocks into the barrel. In reality, it was better to have a flexible system to allow the energy to absorb and deflect, instead of resisting with brute force. It was similar to the car designs of the latter decades where crumple zones were engineered into the vehicles to absorb the energy of impact. The early cars were pieced together with thick steel and chassis and when they crashed, the energy was transferred to the passengers.

Harlan's barrel would provide 100% flotation and cushioning against impact. He estimated that he had to be able to hold his breath for 2 minutes to survive, if he were under water for any duration. He had always been able to hold his breath longer than anyone he knew, but he wanted

to practice to be ready for anything. Harlan's barrel was pure simplicity and elegance. It had been fully engineered to perform flawlessly and yet it looked like a kid's toy. That was the beauty of it. When Harlan showed people diagrams of the barrel, everyone laughed and thought the barrel would be a deathtrap. He manufactured test models of his barrel and dropped them off the Peace Bridge into the Niagara River. He placed a dozen eggs inside the innermost tube that he would be sitting in. Out of 3 test drops, only 2 eggs broke.

His barrel was pure genius. He amazed himself with the sheer combination of raw simplicity and aerospace-type engineering. Harlan was proud of himself in the way that he had figured out how to design his barrel based on research, observation and common sense. He had taken videos of the 3 test drops and showed them to the same people who had scoffed at his drawings previously. Everybody was suddenly impressed at the genius of his barrel. He knew what he was doing; he didn't always appear to, however. He had a difficult time explaining his ideas, because his mind raced along faster than he could get the ideas out of his mouth.

He began to garner attention and acclaim when he posted his 3 test drop videos on the internet. People were beginning to believe that the crackpot Harlan could actually be a bona fide daredevil of the highest caliber. Harlan was being caught up in the notoriety more and more. He used the free media to spread the word for his event. It was just a matter of time that he would be approached by someone with a financial deal of some sort. The only issue with getting a deal was that The Niagara Falls Parks Commission only allowed sanctioned events once per generation as a part of the history of Niagara Falls. There were no plans to permit another event for a while. Harlan's event would have to be a rogue undertaking.

In Harlan's delusional state of mind, he thought what he was doing was going to be a big deal and that people would be clamoring for it. To be sure, people wanted to see the latest fool doing something stupid to get attention. Nobody ever wanted to pay for it though. There was enough death, destruction and carnage each day on CNN to satisfy almost everyone at minimal cost. Poor Harlan had hoped to become the new Evel Knievel or Nik Wallenda. Alas, he was just another schlep, trying to get his 15 minutes of fame in the stupidest way imaginable.

Harlan saw himself becoming much bigger than he was capable of becoming. He was so into the whole daredevil thing that he was missing the big picture. He thought he was creating himself into a daredevil persona similar to his childhood idols. Those days of his idols have long past. Nobody could relate to that old motorcycle-jumping idiot from the 60's & 70's ever again. Those were different times that were lived by different people. The Knievel era was a period when people needed a hero to help get their minds off the political turmoil. People have changed since then and only considered a daredevil to be a fleeting novelty, not a hero.

Harlan was one of many pitiful goofs who were trapped in the old days, the best days of their lives. He wanted to make himself into one of his heroes of the bygone era. It was impossible.

Even though the viewers of his drop test videos lauded his barrel design, it didn't mean that the people found him to be some kind of hero. Even if he went over the falls and survived, it still wouldn't make him into the hero that he strove to become. Harlan just couldn't get it into his head that what he was attempting to do was illegal, stupid and bordering on suicidal.

People began bothering him with psychological questions. Why was he doing it? Was he doing it for the money? Was he married? What did his mother think? What did his father think? What were his friends saying? Was he afraid? Was he religious? Did he make out his will yet? Did he have any room in the barrel for someone else? Did he know how to swim? How long could he hold his breath? Did he have an unhappy childhood? Did he have life insurance? Was he crazy? Was he on any medication? Was he off his medication? Did he believe in God? Was he a Nazi? Was he a republican? Was he a democrat?

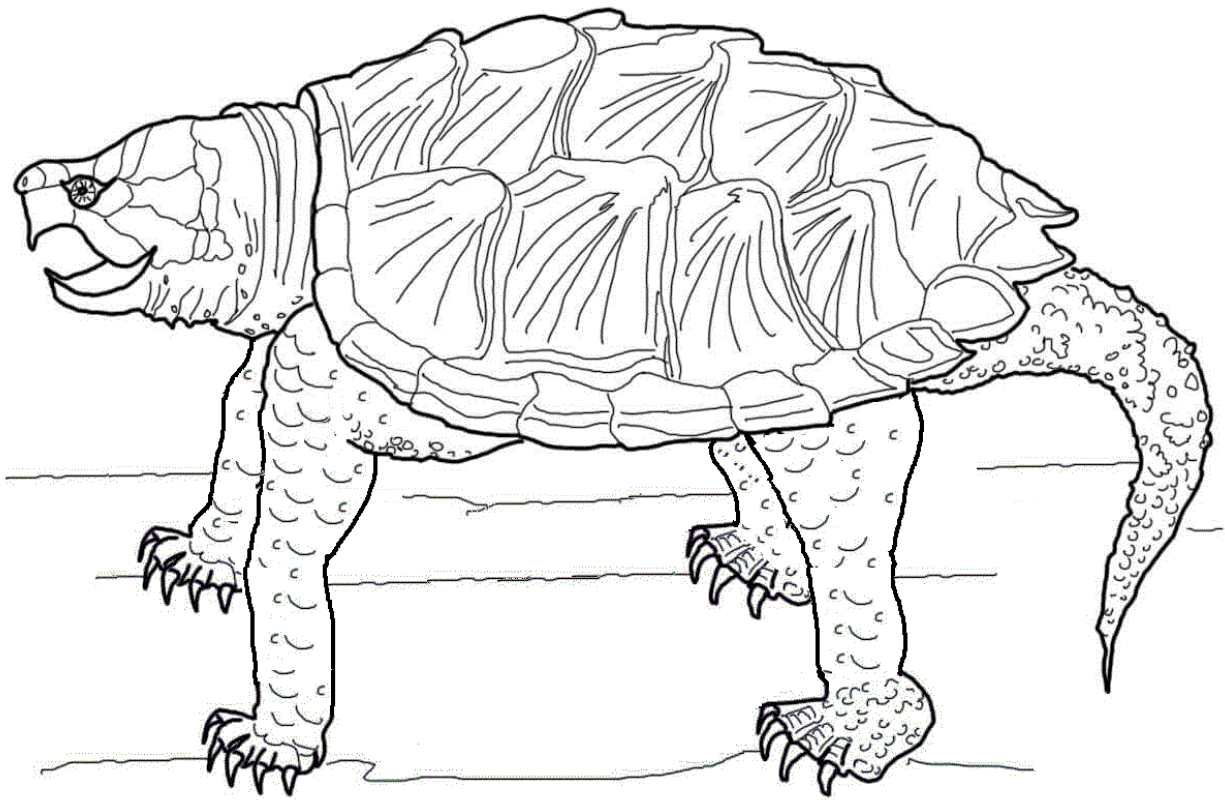
He was a hero! He shouldn't have to be exposed to such questioning. Why were they asking him those questions? They should be asking him what he was going to do when he becomes famous. They should be asking him for autographs. They should be asking him how he came up with such a brilliant idea.

Harlan didn't have time for the questions. He was still working on holding his breath and finding better duct tape. The duct tape he was using was strong, but not sticky enough. He searched until he found tape that had slightly less strength, but was a lot stickier. The tape had to be sticky enough to hold the tube structure in place to prevent his body from slipping out between the tubes. He found a tape that was really sticky and smelly. It must be really good stuff.

When the day finally came, Harlan and his grandmother went to the location upstream of the falls. It was an unusually hot July 4th. Harlan climbed into the first tube and his grandmother built the remaining structure. They waited in the hot sun for the just the right moment. Harlan wanted to be sure that enough people were gathered to witness the event, but no Police, who would immediately arrest him. His grandmother had rented an elaborate video camera. The people who were gathered on the shores all had their phones and cameras ready. As Harlan sweated in the July heat, the smell of the new tape became stronger and stronger. He assumed it was because the glue in the tape was curing. The glue was more volatile than he thought.

Harlan waited as long as he could until the Police showed up, and then his grandmother pushed him out into the river. The people on the shores cheered. Harlan did it! He had become a daredevil just like his idols! He would become famous! He was excited beyond his wildest dreams. He could hear the roar of the falls, but couldn't see out from his nest of smelly inner tubes. The heat was unbearable. He was getting closer. It was so loud! What was that smell? He was at the edge of the falls. Was something burning? Just as Harlan went over the crest of the falls, his inner tubes burst into a fireball from the overheated glue in the tape. The crowd at the railing cheered.

60. Irwink's Yard



60. Irwink's Yard

Landon had been the proud owner of the junkyard since his pappy passed it on to him way back a spell. The junkyard was by far the biggest and most well stocked junkyard in those parts. Landon had every make, model and year of any car or truck that anybody could ever want a piece of. His 320-pound alligator snapping turtle by the name of Irwink was in charge of security. Some of the junkyards out there used the old-fashioned dogs to watch their yards, which was fine for them. Landon's pappy had latched onto Irwink and never looked back. The beauty of using an alligator snapping turtle for junkyard security was obvious. You had the best of both worlds with Irwink. He was meaner than any dog and his long legs gave him greater speed than any dog. Throw in his bulletproof shell and you have a perfect security guard.

Irwink's natural instincts made him consider the entire area contained by the immense fence system to be his territory. As everybody knows, animals tend to be territorial and will do everything in their ability to defend their territory. Irwink had acute hearing, eyesight and sense of smell. Being a turtle also gave him vibration detection. Nothing went in or out of the junkyard's premises without Irwink knowing about it. It was impossible to fool him. He learned all the tricks that humans could play over the past 44 years. Due to the excessive number of signs posted on the property and fence, Irwink had free reign to do whatever he felt like doing to trespassers. The signs said, "No Trespassing under Penalty of Bad Turtle!"

The turtle had a reputation of being a savage. Rumors abounded that he had been known to eat people who trespassed. People questioned Landon about the legality of having such a wild beast as a guard animal. Landon claimed that his pappy had straightened it out with the Judge and Sheriff over a jug of his famous homemade recipe a long time back. Landon was fully within his rights to protect his property any way he saw fit, short of himself using deadly force, as long as he provided adequate signage that designated the animal hazard. Having an animal on the property to deal out the punishment was completely legal. It was just like being at the zoo. People knew the hazard when they drove onto the property. All people had to do was pay for the parts like law-abiding citizens and there would be no trouble. It was no different at Landon's junkyard than it was at the corner Piggly Wiggly. Customers walked into the establishment, found something to purchase and paid for it like everybody else. It was simple.

That part of the country's economic condition is was what led to the occasional theft of the auto parts. Sometimes, a wealthy car restorer came in to get a rare choice part for say, a '53 Vette or similar car and tried to sneak out without paying. Landon understood the value of his inventory. There was no equivalent to an original part for restoring a valuable antique vehicle. The most valuable of all vehicles sold at auctions were the ones that were supposedly all original. Landon's junkyard was the most valuable resource for rare used car parts in the entire Confederacy. Millions of dollars had been made by car collectors and restorers via cars that were

restored from parts obtained at Landon's junkyard. Landon had learned a long time ago from his pappy about how greedy some people are. Landon asked a lot of money for his junk, because it was premium junk. It was the law of supply and demand that enabled him to get what he charged.

It was Irwink's job to protect the valuable junk 24-7-365. The turtle was more than happy to oblige. Irwink had something in him that was instilled by Landon's pappy to consider the junk to be Irwink's possessions, in addition to the property. It was a strange concept to think that an animal would become possessive of junk. It was normal for dogs to be protective of their territory, but not necessarily protective of the objects within the territory. A typical dog barks or growls when it sees someone nearing or entering its territory. When the invader left the dog's view, the dog quieted down. The dog wouldn't care if the invader picked something up off the ground. Not Irwink; he would care. Irwink took everything personally.

Irwink watched everything that was going on at all times. The junkyard was set up so that he had a clear view of all the vehicles and drives. If he spotted anyone putting any parts into their toolboxes or coats, he immediately ran over to them and hissed. When Irwink hissed, it in no way sounded like a typical turtle or a cat hissing. From being so old and big-bodied, Irwink's hiss had developed into a sound like a chainsaw cutting into a log. It was hard to describe to someone who had never heard how loud a chainsaw could be up close. It didn't take people long to realize that Irwink meant business when he was hissing. The perpetrator had only a few seconds before Irwink would attack. The safest thing a person could do was lift their arms in the air and allow Irwink to examine their body for concealed stolen parts.

Irwink never made a mistake; he never erringly attacked someone who was innocent of theft. The turtle knew what he was doing after so many years on the job. Irwink was as valuable to the junkyard as a tough old beat cop was to a troubled inner city. Irwink had injured many people while they committed thefts. The criminals were arrested and prosecuted for their minor crimes. It was too bad for some of the people to lose their hands and/or feet, because they were unable or too cheap to pay for the parts. Irwink felt that he was the judge, jury, executioner and inflictor of the punishment. During business hours, the most damage that Irwink inflicted was body part loss. It was when he was on patrol at night that people's entire bodies disappeared.

Many wealthy thieves tried to sue Landon for their lost limbs, fingers and toes, but the judge always ruled in Landon's favor per the lifetime agreement established by Landon's pappy and maintained by Landon. Landon met often with the Judge and Sheriff to share some of the shine from his pappy's famous recipe. Landon had many gallons of his pappy's tonic put aside for those special occasions.

Landon had a crew of guys helping him at the junkyard, all of whom had to pass Irwink's inspection when they left work for the day. Irwink hopped into the back of their trucks, sniffed

around in the cabs and gave each guy a physical once over. Landon's crew didn't look forward to the physical check, but it came with the good paying job. Due to Irwink's long legs and huge size, when he was standing close to somebody, his head was at crotch level. It was always a nerve-wracking experience to undergo Irwink's physical. Irwink's skull was as big as a human's was and his jaws opened wide enough to bite a man's head clean off.

For years, there had been reports of missing persons in the vicinity of the junkyard, but none was ever attributed to Irwink. On more than one occasion, Landon had personally seen Irwink eat trespassers who climbed the junkyard fence and had become caught on the barbed wire. Irwink didn't play with them; he pulled them down from the fence, quickly bit their heads off and gobbled them down, clothes and all. The turtle wasn't sadistic like a cat that would torture its prey. Irwink was always hungry and was never satisfied by the amount of food that Landon gave him. Irwink ate any stray animals he encountered while patrolling the junkyard. Customers at the junkyard often tossed Irwink snacks as peace offerings. Irwink watched those people extra closely, because he suspected everyone and suspected people even more if they bribed him.

Landon and Irwink had an understanding at the junkyard. Irwink acknowledged that Landon was the son of Landon's pappy. Irwink had loved Landon's pappy and missed him, even though nobody would be able to guess that. Landon had inherited Irwink from his pappy as the guard for the junkyard. Irwink didn't consider himself Landon's pet, as he had been the pet of Landon's pappy. Landon fully realized that fact as he grew up at the junkyard and had been nipped a few times by Irwink. While Landon's pappy was still alive, he always warned Landon to stay clear of Irwink. The turtle only had one master in its life and its master was gone. Irwink permitted Landon to take care of him, but Landon still had to stay clear of the ornery turtle.

Landon had a visit from one of the out of town car collectors, whose left hand had been removed by Irwink while the collector was trying to pilfer an item. The collector wanted some sort of monetary payment from Landon to compensate for the loss of his hand. The collector claimed that he had been unable to sue Landon due to Landon being in cahoots with the Judge. Landon admitted that he and the Judge did go back a piece, but was unaware of any legal wrongdoing. Landon then blankly stared at the collector, indicating that he was done talking to him. The collector stormed out of Landon's office and drove to the Judge's office to demand satisfaction. Landon snickered to himself.

The collector had a chat with the Judge about the Judge's upcoming election and how the District Attorney may be running for the office. The Judge had been around for a long time, dating back to the days before Landon's pappy. The collector claimed that he heard word that the DA had a good chance of being elected, thus kicking the Judge out of his long held office. If the Judge could somehow find a way to force Landon to make some kind of compensation for the loss of the collector's hand, the collector would make a generous campaign contribution on the Judge's

behalf. The collector claimed he could almost guarantee that the Judge would be re-elected.

The Judge didn't like being told what to do by anybody, especially by some out of town rich boy. The Judge had already been acknowledging to himself that his popularity had been slipping a little in the town. The DA may actually have a chance of ousting him from his precious office. The Judge had wanted to retire in office, to be able to collect the maximum amount of retirement benefits. The Judge needed one more term to lock in those maximum benefits. Maybe there was something of value in what the collector was saying. There was a problem though. The Judge and Landon were practically best friends. The Judge's friendship had actually started with Landon's pappy and had continued with Landon.

The Judge told the collector he would definitely think about the collector's kind offer. When the collector left the Judge's office, the Judge immediately got on the phone with Landon. The two had a rather lengthy conversation about the veiled blackmail deal offered by the collector. Landon was incensed that the thieving out of town so and so would dare to come up with such an idea. The Judge was equally miffed.

In that part of the country, it was dangerous for non-locals to attempt to buy their way into or out of things. The locals had their hard ways established by decades of proven good ol' boy networking. Any other way didn't work and couldn't work. The fact that the collector thought it would be so easy to buy his way into getting even with Landon was indeed laughable. The Judge and Landon kept the information about the collector strictly between them. No one else needed to get involved. They would settle the problem their way.

Landon had dinner at the Judge's house that Friday evening and they discussed what to do about the collector. The Judge told Landon that the fool wanted money or free parts from the junkyard; it was Landon's choice. Landon wished the thief would leave well enough alone. The collector had been caught in the act of stealing from Landon and then he wanted to steal more. The fact that the collector had lost his left hand had nothing to do with it. It was an accident that Irwink had bitten off the man's hand while the man was in the act of committing a crime. Accidents happen. The collector was obviously accustomed to having things his way. He had made a mistake by visiting Landon's junkyard on that fateful day and being too cheap to pay for something.

It really irked Landon when those wealthy car collectors came to his junkyard to find a rare part to add to a car that would make it worth millions of dollars and then try to steal the part. It was a lot of work and money for Landon to constantly seek out and buy cars for his continuously expanding collection. His pappy had collected cars for decades before Landon took over. Landon had expanded the property and added hundreds more cars on his own. Those guys come from out of town and think Landon is their servant at their beck and call. It didn't work like that where Landon came from. Landon's work crew and friends who hung around the junkyard

always winked to each other when one of those rich boys came strolling in. The price for the parts automatically doubled for those guys, because they could afford it.

Landon and the Judge talked into the night as they shared a jug of the recipe brewed by Landon's pappy. The Judge was upset that the collector was actually attempting to blackmail him. It went beyond basic campaign contributions. Like all politicians, the Judge had accepted bribes in the form of campaign contributions throughout his entire career. It was part of the beauty of America and its political system. Bribery in the form of campaign contributions was the main reason that some politicians become politicians in the first place. The collector was using the promise of contributions in a different way, however. The collector was implying blackmail, plain and simple; the Judge wouldn't stand for it. Blackmail was illegal and the collector had overstepped his bounds. There was only one way to conclude the issue, the good ol' way.

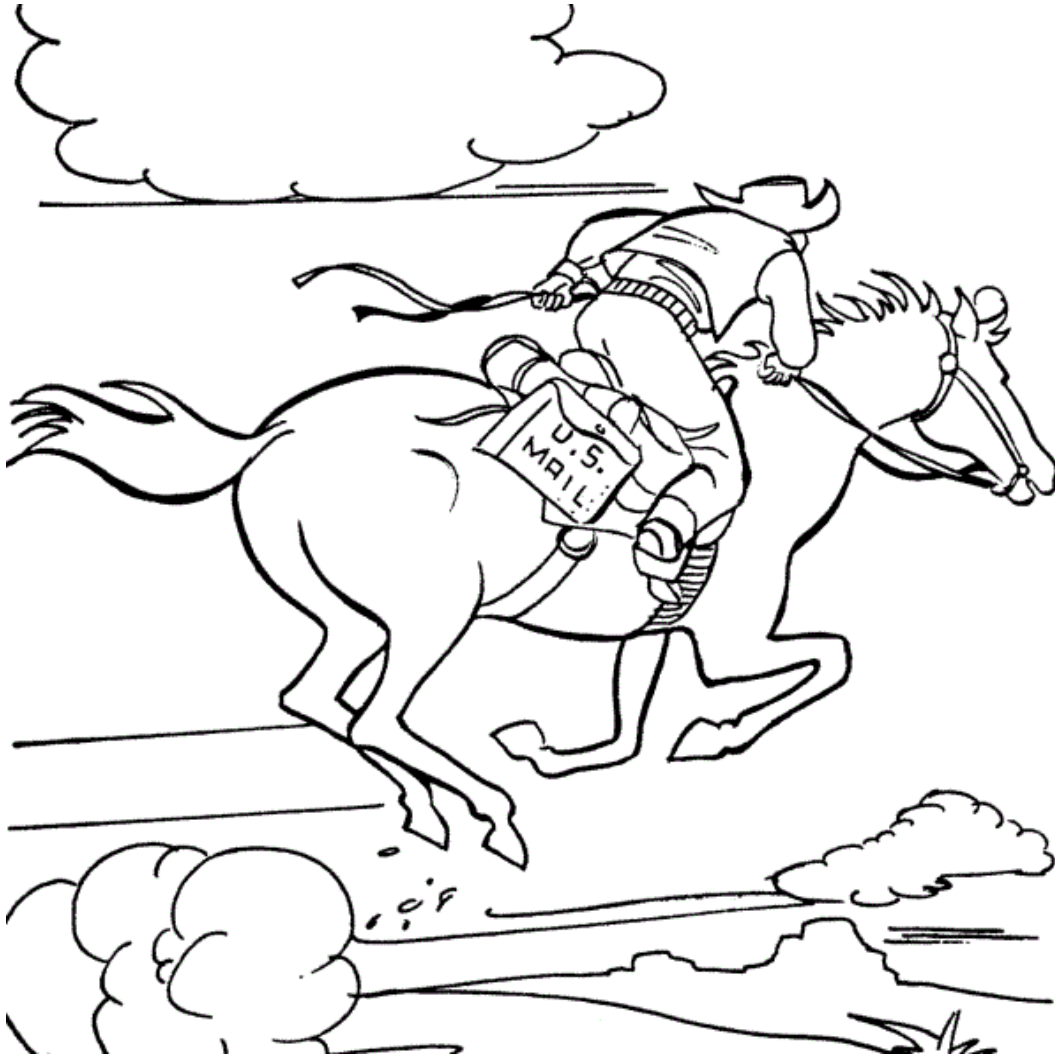
The Judge invited the car collector to his office to discuss the offer. The Judge informed the collector that Landon had agreed to allow the collector to have whatever parts he wanted, free of charge. At the appropriate time, the collector would make his campaign contribution. The collector agreed to the deal, confident that he had once again gotten his way. The Judge planned to pick up the collector at his place of business in the parking lot and then drive the collector to Landon's junkyard where the three of them would close the deal.

Irwink was usually fed once a day by Landon in the evening after the crew had gone home. Landon's office had a back door that he opened for Irwink to come into the office to eat his daily 50-pound bag of Purina Turtle Chow. After Irwink had inspected the crew and allowed them to leave, he waited at the back door for Landon to finish the daily paperwork. When Landon was done with the day's business, he opened the back door for Irwink to come in and eat dinner.

The Judge arrived at the junkyard with the collector after the crew had gone home and they walked into the office to close the deal with Landon. They discussed the arrangement and all shook hands. As a sign of his sincerity, Landon offered the collector a mint condition gearshift knob from the glass display case. The collector cheerfully picked one out of the collection and put it in his back pocket. Landon stated that the collector could come by at any time to get whatever parts he wanted and that Landon would help him in any way he could. After thanking Landon, the collector and the Judge headed out the front door.

Landon opened the back door and Irwink walked in. The turtle looked at the 2 men walking out the front door. Irwink saw the bulge in the back pocket of one of the men, caused by the gearshift knob and he also saw that the man's left hand was missing. Irwink recognized the man as a thief whose hand he had bitten off and the thief had just stolen again! The turtle broad-jumped through the air and tackled the collector to the ground. Landon closed his eyes and covered his ears as Irwink proceeded to make the squealing man disappear. The Judge drove out the front gate of the junkyard without looking back.

61. Javier's Mail



61. Javier's Mail

"Wanted: Young, skinny, wiry fellows not over eighteen. Must be expert riders, willing to risk death daily. Orphans preferred." When Javier read the poster, he was convinced that being a Pony Express rider was what he wanted to do more than anything. He would be making \$100 per month, which was 3 times what his friends were making as cowhands, loaders and farm help. For the first time in his young life, he would be a part of something important. He hadn't done anything of note in his life, unless graduating from high school was noteworthy.

He thought back to that sunny day in town when he read the poster. It was warm and dry. While reading the poster, he had been sipping on a sarsaparilla that he bought at the 5 and dime. His fiancée Gwendolyn was standing next to him wearing a light blue plaid dress. She had a matching bow in her blonde hair and she smelled like lilac water. They were taking turns sipping from the cool drink through a straw. She didn't want him to sign up, but knew it was the only way to get the money in time.

Javier wished he were back there with his girl, instead of being in the middle of nowhere, in the cold driving rain, on the back of a speeding horse. The mail pouch had to get through. His employers stressed the importance of the mail pouch. They often said that, if it came to be, the horse and rider should perish before the mail pouch did. The Paiute tribe had caused him and his fellow riders a boatload of trouble. Javier had managed to talk 2 of his friends into joining the Pony Express with him and they were both deceased already. He was the only one left of his trio of school buddies. He felt really bad about that.

The Paiutes were clinging to the last vestiges of their territory as hard as they could. The Pony Express was vulnerable and the riders weren't protected from attacks. Javier had heard about his 2 friends at the last station. According to the reports, Felix had put up a good fight and managed to get the mail pouch through to his next station, but he had too many arrows in him to survive. The Paiutes were waiting on top of the ravine that Felix rode through and he was a sitting duck. The arrows flew at Felix from both directions, striking him numerous times. Due to their reverence for horses, the Paiutes intentionally missed Felix's steed.

Gary fared somewhat better than Felix did, only in the manner that fewer arrows had hit him. The arrows that hit Gary were sufficient to cause him to kick the bucket, however. The Paiutes had been tipped off by businesses that didn't want the Pony Express to succeed. Poor Gary didn't realize how many Paiutes had been waiting for him beyond the next knoll. Gary barely completed his mission of getting the mail pouch to his next station. When he arrived at the station, he handed off the mail pouch, fell off his horse and expired in the dirt.

Life in the Pony Express was great if the riders lived to spend their high wages. In the early days, all the riders completed their missions of getting the mail pouch to the next station. The problem

was that the riders didn't all survive. The risks were high, but the promise of great pay seemed to be worth the risk. The young fearless men who had nothing to lose were the perfect candidates to take the precious mail pouches from station to station. It was an 1,800-mile journey from St. Joseph, Missouri to Sacramento, California. The trip required dozens of daring men on a lot of fast horses. It was an important time during the formation of the United States and progress was being made in every aspect of the expanding society. The fact that letters could be transported over such a great distance in 10 days was worth the high cost to some businesses.

Javier was cold and wet on the horse, hanging on as tightly as he could. His hands, arms, shoulders and back ached. He had been riding for 8 hours and still had a long way to go. At least the horses were able to rest; unfortunately, he wasn't. That's why he got the big money. His fingers were losing sensation from gripping the reins so tightly for so long. The middle finger on his left hand had been broken when he fell while changing horses at the last station. His right ankle became sprained in the same fall. His neck was tingly and gradually becoming numb, probably as a result of landing on his head during the fall. The right side of his face was scraped when he landed in the gritty dirt.

At least Javier was no longer seeing the stars that had been in his eyes for the first hour after the fall. He was really hungry. The pain from landing on his head was initially so severe that he became nauseous and barfed out the cornbread that he had quickly swallowed 2 stations before the fall. There was no time for him to stop while he was on the trail. The horses ran as fast as they could with the riders only going along for the ride and steering. He would try to get something to eat again at the next station, maybe some stale beef jerky or a nice lard sandwich. He had a water skin on the horse with him, but it was tricky to drink while speeding along on the rough trail.

Sometimes Javier wished he were the horse on the ground instead of the fool in the saddle. The horses of the Pony Express had it relatively easy compared to the riders. The horses just ran along with a skinny guy and some weight on their back for a little while, and then they had time to rest. The riders kept switching horses at the stations, only transferring the mail pouch, which was actually cleverly configured to serve as the saddle. The 4 locked corners of the mail pouch contained 5 pounds of mail each, for a total of 20 pounds of mail. A 900-pound horse carried a 125-pound rider with 20 pounds of mail and another 20 pounds comprised of a water skin, a Bible, a horn for alerting the relay station and a revolver. The Pony Express was an incredibly ingenious system that worked flawlessly, except for the occasional Paiute and bandit attacks, bad weather, poor trail conditions and other hazards, which were dealt with by the highly paid riders.

When a customer paid the high cost to the Pony Express to transport a letter in 10 days, they didn't care what happened along the way, as long as their letter made it, which it did 99.9% of the time. Thanks to the intrepid and tireless riders, the Pony Express became legendary while it was

still in operation. The riders were like nameless faceless beings, expected to perform their duties without complaint or backtalk. The high pay for the job was the only reason that some men started riding and continued riding. Once those big paychecks started rolling in, it was hard to think about losing them. The bitter cold, blazing heat, concussions, insomnia, bumps, bruises, burns, breaks, cuts, scrapes, sunburn and chafing were worth it.

At the next station, Javier jumped off, removed the mail pouch, ran to the fresh horse, positioned the mail pouch, hopped on and bought a lard sandwich from an old woman who had a wicker basket full of them. He started eating the sandwich as the horse sped down the trail. His broken middle finger caused his left hand to lose grip on the sandwich and he dropped it after only eating 1/2 of it. At least he had something in his belly again. He managed to drink a pint of water from the skin after a quart of it dribbled down his neck from the bouncing of the horse. He felt a little energized, though still hungry. He knew it was better to not ride on a full stomach, to avoid getting cramps.

He remembered the time the previous week when he mistakenly ate a 2-quart can of chili while waiting for a horse at a station. He washed the chili down with a quart of lemonade. When he started riding, he knew right away that he was in for it and had cramps for the next 6 hours. He had to keep telling himself to eat more jerky, bread and other dry stuff to minimize the volume in his stomach. He had to remember to get by on a lean mean diet when he was riding.

His neck was getting numb and his right ankle was swelling up in his boot. The numb neck was actually a good thing, because the numb it got, the less he felt it. The ankle on the other hand was hurting more and more as it kept swelling. The tight boots didn't help matters, but they had to be tight to stay on his feet. The bouncing on the horse was a challenge. His legs did most of the work and his butt barely made contact with the continuously moving horse. He essentially stood in the stirrups the entire time he was on the horse. Sitting on the horse was an absolute impossibility for obvious reasons.

Once, some bandits had blocked Javier's trail. He had seen them from a distance and had his revolver already out and ready to fire. He had been hunting since a young age and was an exceptional shot with any firearm. Operating a revolver while on a speeding horse wasn't the best way to display his shooting expertise. Javier fired at the head of the man on the left and shot off the tip of his ear. He then fired at the head of the man on the right and shot off the man's hat. Then Javier fired at the neck of the man in the middle and grazed the left side of it, drawing some blood. The 3 men rode away as fast as they could in the opposite direction. Javier hoped the men had learned a valuable lesson about messing with the Pony Express.

Javier had ridden for the Express throughout the year and had encountered all the possible conditions of weather. Once, he rode in a blizzard for 3 hours and by the time it was over, his eyebrows, mustache and beard were solid blocks of ice. His long hair had icicles hanging in the

back. His nostrils were frozen shut and he had to breathe through his mouth the last hour of the blizzard. His eyes were so red and squinted that he could barely see. His lungs were so abused by breathing cold frozen air that he developed a cough that stayed for a week. His feet were cold and wet the whole time and he suffered frostbite on the tips of 2 toes of his left foot and the big toe of his right foot. He always wore 3 pairs of socks after that adventure. Luckily, he had the nice insulated leather gauntlet gloves provided by the Express. His hands were the only part of his body that didn't get cold.

Another time Javier rode for 6 hours in a thunderous rainstorm. The trail was muddy and slippery the entire way and the horses couldn't run as fast as usual. It was very dicey riding on the slick path and he thanked his lucky stars that he didn't fall off any of the horses. The horses were incredibly agile and could always be relied upon to get their riders to their destinations. There was so much mud splashing every which way that he had been covered from head to toe by it. When the rain finally stopped and the trails dried, he dove into a horse trough at one of the stations to rinse off. He had mud in his ears so bad that he heard very poorly for a while, until he had the doc clean his ears out with an ear nail.

Once, Javier was riding during a summer thunderstorm and had been picked up off the ground with the horse. He was spun around a few times and placed back down unharmed, facing the opposite direction on the trail. No one believed that story for some reason, but it happened exactly the way he told it. The Midwest was known for its twisters and funnel clouds and many riders had faced similar perils on a daily basis.

Javier had to keep telling himself that he was doing it all for his fiancée and her operation. Nobody knew how much longer the Pony Express would be in existence. There was talk of the Telegraph System making obsolete the need for carrying letters. The writing had been on the wall for a while and it was just a matter of time that Javier would lose his high-paying job. Javier had been in the Express from its inception and had \$700 of his wages saved to put toward his future wife's surgery. The operation cost \$1,000 and he needed to ride for at least 4 more months to get the rest of the money. Gwendolyn's parents didn't have any money, so it was up to Javier to foot most of the bill. If Gwen didn't have the surgery, her outlook would be grim. Back then, people didn't live to old age on a regular basis, usually because they couldn't afford the expensive medical care.

If only the Pony Express could stay in business until he earned the money. Javier's boss promised him that he could have other jobs with the side businesses of the parent company. The other jobs wouldn't pay anywhere near as much money and it would take a lot longer to save up the surgery money. Gwen needed the operation sooner, not later. The only reason Javier stayed in the Express was to earn a lot of money in a short time.

In case he lost his job before he acquired the money, Javier had a possible backup plan in place

where he would become a bandit with a rider he knew. Javier had learned everything there was to know about the transportation routes out there and knew where all the best ambush sites were. The last thing he ever wanted to do was steal, but sometimes desperate times required desperate measures. He would only attempt to steal from a stagecoach, if anything. He couldn't believe he was even running those thoughts around in his head. He had been raised to be an honest, hard working person by honest, hard working parents. His parents would roll over in their graves if they knew what he was thinking. He couldn't help it though. He loved Gwen, she loved him and they were set to be hitched. They planned to establish a nice household and raise up a few youngsters.

Javier would hate to have to lose all those dreams because of the lack of money for the operation. He wondered why it was so hard living out there and wished life could be easier. He had to perish the thought of becoming a thief. That was a stupid idea. The Express would likely be in service for as long as he needed it. As long as Gwen could stay healthy until the operation, they would be ok.

He had to focus on his ride. He was getting too far ahead of himself by worrying about losing his job. He and Gwen would be ok. He hated that she had to worry about him all the time out on the trail. Javier tried to tell her as little as possible about what happened while he was working. The problem was that the Pony Express had become such a sensation in such a short time that everyone was talking about it. The stories that people were telling each other were based partly on fact and mainly on fiction. Unfortunately, the stories included the Paiute attacks. The riders could handle most of the adventures on the ride without too much difficulty. The bandit attacks were limited to certain sections of the 1,800-mile route. The Paiute attacks were becoming worse as the natives were struggling to regain their last bits of homeland.

The Paiutes knew that it was futile to keep attacking the white men, but it was all they had. It was a sad state of affairs that the Paiutes had lost all their land and culture, but America was going in a forward direction. The nation was developing at a meteoric pace and nothing was going to slow it down. The Paiutes were the greatest threat to Javier and his fellow riders, due to their anxiety and unpredictability. The riders never knew when and where the Paiutes were going to strike. The Paiutes had been raiding the Express stations from the beginning of the Express business. Sometimes the stations were demolished, the white men were eliminated and the horses were stolen. Other times, the Paiutes only stole the horses from the stations. The Paiutes always attacked as efficiently as possible with their available resources.

Javier had to put the hazards out of his mind and concentrate on forgetting about his finger, ankle, and neck issues. He was looking forward to buying a nice hunk of beef jerky at the next station. The rain became torrential and deafening from the horse's hooves splashing in the mud. It was so noisy that he couldn't detect the Paiutes sneaking up behind him on the trail.

62. Kelvin's Lick



62. Kelvin's Lick

Hal was really excited to pick up his new wolf named Kelvin from the naturalists at Yellowstone. Ever since the wolves had been reintroduced to the United States, the animals had been flourishing. Their numbers had increased too successfully in some parts of the Park, requiring some of the wolves to be adopted out. Most of the wolves were relocated to other areas of the Park to provide balance, but some simply had to leave for too many reasons. The ones that had to leave the Park were kindly enough creatures; there were just too many for the Park to economically deal with.

Hal had been a licensed dog breeder and veterinarian for a few decades and was the type of person that Yellowstone could trust with a wolf. Hal was starting a breeding program to capitalize on the recent trend of people wishing to own a hybrid wolf. A full-blooded male wolf was bred with a female Malamute to produce a hybrid wolf, which ended up being 98% wolf. It looked like a wolf, but had the calm & reliable temperament of a sled dog. The hybrid wolf was completely safe with children and other pets. It was more of a gimmick than anything; people wanted to say they owned a wolf to put that fear factor in their friends. The owners of the hybrid wolves put stickers on the backdoors that said, "Beware of Wolf!" Some got custom license plates such as, "WOLFLVR", "WLFOWNR", "WOLFEN", "ILVWLVS" and other corny concepts.

Hal didn't care what the people did after they paid his breeding fee to have Kelvin mate with their Malamute. Hal guaranteed the litter of puppies resulting from Kelvin's input to be 98% wolf per the contract. Hal planned to charge \$500 for each time that Kelvin did his thing with a customer's female dog. Hal already had a list of 325 people waiting. It was potentially a highly profitable undertaking. Because he had been in the veterinary business for so long, he knew a lot of people. He had told all his clients about his upcoming breeding program and many of them signed up. Other clients passed the word to their friends and before long, Hal had a gold mine in the waiting.

Hal brought Kelvin home and showed him into the house. The wolf had a nice bed in the corner of the kitchen with his food and water dishes. He had a nice bunch of rawhide chew toys waiting in a pile. The wolf could go wherever it wanted in the house. Hal planned to treat Kelvin like his pet dog, not just a stud animal.

The Park people had said how tame Kelvin was and Hal was surprised to see how right they were. As soon as Hal brought Kelvin into the kitchen, the wolf ran around the house, came back to the kitchen, drank some water and ate some Purina Wolf Chow from the food dish. Then Kelvin lay on the kitchen floor on his back, allowing Hal to pet his long fuzzy belly. It was love at first sight between the man and the wolf. It was a thing of beauty. The wolf absolutely loved having his belly petted, a sign of submission that Hal was the Alpha of the family.

Hal wanted Kelvin to get settled in for a week, before he began earning the big stud fees. Being a vet enabled Hal to order all his food and chew toys at a great discount. He needed that discount to order a lot more chew toys for the wolf. Kelvin destroyed all the toys on the first day. Hal would have to order only the toughest rawhide toys available. The wolf's jaw strength was so phenomenal, that it could probably destroy anything that Hal could come up with. Hal knew the value of a dog or other canine having something to chew to relieve their anxiety.

Chewing on tough rawhide gave Kelvin the satisfaction of eating a natural food product. The wolf wouldn't get any thrill from eating the small dry Wolf Chow pellets. Hal wanted his wolf to have a tame and happy mentality for when the customers brought in their female Malamutes for breeding. Hal didn't expect any problems with viciousness being exhibited by Kelvin during the mating process. Kelvin may be a little more aggressive than the female Malamute was used to from another Malamute, but it would be a similar experience. Wolves were essentially just dogs after all. Wolves had gotten a bad reputation due to the fairy tales of "Little Red Riding Hood" and the "Three Little Pigs," etc. The horror movies about a wolf man didn't help matters either.

Hal settled in on the first day with Kelvin, content that he had made the right decision to acquire the wolf. Hal made himself a cup of coffee and went into the living room to watch The Olympics on TV. Hal sat on his recliner, tilted it back and drank his coffee. Kelvin hopped onto the couch next to Hal's recliner, curled up in a ball and looked at Hal. Hal wondered if the wolf liked the taste of coffee and offered him a sip from the mug. Out of curiosity, Kelvin sniffed, and then lapped a few ounces of coffee from Hal's mug. Hal liked his coffee with Equal sweetener and nonfat milk. The wolf seemed to like the flavor of the coffee, which was no surprise. The coffee tasted good to Hal, so a wolf would have to like it.

As the first week progressed, Kelvin and Hal really got along great together. Hal installed a dog flap door in the kitchen door to allow Kelvin to go out into the fenced backyard at will. Hal had a nice 6-foot tall chain-linked fence, which kept everything on either side of the fence where it was. Hal and Kelvin played fetch with different objects and Kelvin was actually exceptionally good at catching a Frisbee. When Hal worked as a vet, he took care of some of the animals in a small out-building on his property. He planned to use that building for the breeding of Kelvin and the Malamutes. The out-building had a special stall in which the dogs could do their stuff. As long as the female Malamute to be bred was in heat, the whole process would only take minutes. Hal assumed that Kelvin would know what to do and wouldn't waste any time playing around with the Malamute.

Since Hal had such a huge backlog of orders, he scheduled appointments for 2 breedings per day. At 7 days per week, he could knock the backlog down in 6 months. At some point, he would start taking new orders to maintain a consistent operation and eventually cut back to 5-day weeks. As with any new business, a great deal of work was necessary at the beginning to get

things going. Hal had full confidence in Kelvin's ability to perform. Hal had put in a lot of time talking with breeders and wolf experts about his plans. Some people thought the idea was crazy and others thought it might be a good thing to make people more aware of wolves and their benefits.

Hal continued giving Kelvin a few sips of each of his 4 daily cups of coffee. The wolf really loved the stuff. Hal didn't mind giving the wolf treats occasionally to establish their bond together. Kelvin was turning out to be a great pet. He was a great watchdog and was always alert to sounds outside. Every once in a while, Kelvin would hear or smell something undetected by Hal, and go flying out the dog flap door into the backyard. The wolf always instinctively ran to the back of the huge fenced yard to look at the woods.

On Sunday at 9:00 am, the breeding program began in Earnest. A woman brought in Kelvin's first beautiful female Malamute to breed. They all went to the building with the stall, loaded the female in, and then Kelvin. In no time flat, Kelvin was done. The woman was surprised how quickly the process transpired and frankly, so was Hal. Talk about easy money! Normally a male dog would only be used for breeding no more than once per day, but nature had made wolves slightly different. Wolves were capable of successfully breeding 4 or 5 times daily, but Hal wanted to guarantee Kelvin's potency by limiting the wolf to breeding only twice per day.

Hal and Kelvin played in the backyard with a Frisbee until the next customer arrived at 5:00 pm. Hal wanted to allow a full 8 hours for Kelvin's juices to fully replenish themselves. It was all part of Hal's exhaustive research. Hal and Kelvin had some more coffee and lunch while they goofed off. Since Hal was a vet, he knew everything about the physiology of breeding dogs. He provided a 100% guarantee of impregnation by Kelvin as part of the contract and would attend to the birthing of the puppies if the customer wished, as part of the fee. Hal had obtained an official document from Yellowstone and the AKC that authenticated Kelvin's status as a 100% wolf for breeding purposes. The wolf's DNA was on file for verification if the customers requested proof. The 5:00 pm breeding went off without a hitch. Hal was in the money.

Hal had been having an unusual craving for steak lately that he hadn't had since he stopped eating beef 3 years before. He was unable to resist the urge to buy some nice steaks at the Piggly Wiggly in town. He bought some T-bones, Porterhouses, New Yorks and Filets. He spent \$200 on beef and put most of it in his freezer. He put 3 T-bones on the charcoal grill in the back for supper. In the past, he had always liked his meat cooked medium, but for some reason he needed to see some red. He left the steaks on for only a couple minutes per side and quickly plated them. They were still oozing juices as he hungrily bit into one of them, not even waiting to cut a piece with a knife and fork. The meat was rare and it was good, really good. Hal tossed one of the steaks to Kelvin and he wolfed it down in 3 sloppy bites, bone and all. Hal couldn't believe how good the bloody steak was and he greedily gulped down the 2nd one. He tossed both of his

bones to Kelvin who happily crunched them and swallowed them down.

Hal couldn't figure out what had come over him. He had quit eating beef for moral reasons and there he was gorging on it barely cooked. He ran into the house to the freezer, brought out the rest of the meat and put it all on the grill. He was drooling while watching the meat sizzle. He hurriedly flipped the steaks on the completely covered grill. He picked up one of the steaks off the grill with the insulated mitts and began eating it like a sandwich. He tossed another steak to Kelvin; the wolf gladly accepted it and swallowed it down. Hal couldn't stop eating the barely-warm rare steaks. He was beginning to get dizzy from the meat fever.

When Hal had finished eating the \$200 of steaks, he stumbled back to the house with Kelvin and had a long nap. Hal didn't wake up until the next morning at 8:00 am, with just enough time for a shower and coffee before the 9:00 am appointment. Kelvin had created a habit of looking forward to his sips of coffee. If Hal forgot to offer Kelvin some coffee, Kelvin barked until he got it. They got through that day and the next couple of days, with no issues related to the breeding. Kelvin was indeed a natural stud; he was going to make Hal a lot of money. Hal's meat craving continued to occupy his brain and body.

Hal never had much facial hair growing up, only a mustache and chin beard. He had never been able to grow a full beard. Lately though, he was finding that he had to shave more often. He wanted to look good for his new business, so he felt that he wanted to have a clean-shaven look. He never had to shave more than 3 times per week in the past to maintain a neat look. To stay clean-shaven currently, he had to shave every day.

After the first 4 weeks, the business appeared to be a smashing success and Kelvin thoroughly enjoyed his work. The wolf never had so much action with female animals when he lived in the Park. Living with Hal was the best thing that ever happened to him. He had everything he needed as far as food and mating needs, but he still missed his fellow wolves. Hal was serving as the Alpha of their 2-dog pack, but it wasn't the same as being able to run with his own kind. Kelvin often went outside and stared at the woods in the hopes of seeing other wolves. He did see other animals that were native to the Park running back and forth through the woods and the backyard outside the fence. It was similar to living in the Park, except without the wolves.

Hal didn't even think about the fact that Kelvin might miss living in the Park. Hal looked at it from a business standpoint, in that he had helped the Park by taking Kelvin off their hands. Hal in turn had helped himself by creating a business that featured Kelvin. It was past the point of worrying about it. Hal had enough tribulations with his meat cravings and excessive facial hair.

Another month passed of business as usual and a lot more money came into Hal's household via Kelvin's mating fees. They were gaining on the backlog. The customers kept referring other potential customers to Hal for future breeding. Financially, things looked amazing down the

road.

If Hal didn't have enough problems already with the meat cravings and the shaving, his fingernails and toenails began growing faster. He used to be able to only have to cut his fingernails once a week and his toenails once a month. The frequency had increased to cutting his fingernails and toenails daily. He couldn't figure out what was happening to him.

Hal and Kelvin maintained their daily rituals of sharing coffee, which had increased to 8 cups per day. The increased coffee consumption was good for Kelvin's sweet tooth, but bad for Hal's sleep. Hal began dreaming about running through fields & woods and about chasing animals.

Hal had a big shock when he emerged from the shower one morning and caught a glimpse of his back in the mirror. His back was covered with a fine hair! He always thought those guys with hairy backs were disgusting and he had become one of them. He reluctantly continued looking in the mirror and saw fine hair on the back of his legs as well. He shaved and when he brushed his teeth, he noticed that his canine teeth might be jutting out more than usual. Naw, it couldn't be! Hal dressed and had his coffee with Kelvin in the kitchen while eating raw hamburger from a plate. Hal's meat cravings had evolved into eating the meat without cooking it. He was to the point of eating only raw meat and nothing else. Hal was beginning to disgust himself by eating so much raw meat, but it was the only thing he wanted to eat. He wondered if his breath was foul from the blood in the raw meat and brushed his teeth again.

Hal trimmed his fingernails and toenails to be neat for the morning breeding session. After the 9:00 appointment, he had another cup of coffee with Kelvin. At noon, he had to shave again, because the hair on his face was growing like a field of weeds. After Kelvin's 5:00 pm appointment, he had to trim his fingernails and toenails again. Hal made an appointment to see his doctor in 2 days to get to the bottom of all the strange changes taking place in his body.

Hal bought a side of beef from the butcher, had it processed into parcels and put the meat in his new freezer. The craving for raw meat had become overwhelming. Hal couldn't seem to get enough of it. Whenever Hal ate some steaks or other meat, he always gave some to Kelvin, so that the wolf could share in the succulent bounty.

Hal had his evening coffee with Kelvin at 7:00 pm, watched The Olympics on TV for a while and went to bed at 10:00 pm, his usual time. Hal had a hard time getting to sleep, but when he finally fell asleep, he lapsed into the most realistic dream he ever had. He was outside of the house with no clothes on. He wasn't cold, because of the layer of fine hair on his body. He was in the woods in the back of the house with Kelvin. He and Kelvin had just caught a deer and started eating it. Kelvin tore into it first to make it easier for Hal to eat from the carcass. Then Hal woke up from the dream. It wasn't a dream! He was naked in the woods in the back of the house with Kelvin. They were eating a deer together.

63. Leonid's Air



63. Leonid's Air

Leonid thought back to his early days of flying his crop duster plane. Those early days were easy. He was the only pilot in the farm town who could dust the farm fields as quickly and inexpensively as he could. His brother owned the local Agway store and supplied the chemicals to him at cost. Leonid built the plane from an assemblage of well-used parts that were collected from airfield junkyards that were scattered around the state. Leonid's uncle was a part owner of the airfield from which Leonid flew his plane, so Leonid was able to purchase the plane's fuel at his uncle's cost. Everyone knew Leonid in the small town of farmers and agricultural workers. Leonid knew everyone and they all supported his crop dusting business the best they could, even though it was only a seasonal need.

The business went along pretty well except for the time when one of the tanks of flammable pesticide caught on fire. That was a real humdinger. Leonid had been flying low over the field at his usual altitude when a spark came off one of the loose spark plug wires on the engine. Well, by cracky, the spark ignited the leaky pesticide tank and the flames were off to the races. By the time Leonid knew what was happening, the entire bottom of the plane was burned off down to the frame. Soon, Leonid felt the heat from the flames and had to make a detour away from the farm field toward the lake. Leonid flew just above the water of the lake until the bottom of the flaming plane was doused enough to extinguish the fire.

It was a feat of expert flying the likes of which nobody in those parts had ever seen. He had saved his plane and the remaining pesticide in the tank. He flew to his uncle's airfield where he quickly repaired the plane and finished spraying the field. Everybody at the airfield talked about Leonid's professional flying ability and how he avoided a disaster. Leonid thought little of the adventure and merely chocked it up to experience.

Leonid flew in a barnstorming exposition during the off-season to keep his wife and 11 kids fed. The niece of Leonid's wife performed a wing-walking feat on the wings of Leonid's plane as he sallied back and forth through the air. The climax of the show occurred when Leonid flew the plane through the opened front and back doors of a large barn with the wing-walker still on top. It was a truly spectacular site to behold. The wing walker only fell off the plane once, when she landed on her head on top of the barn. She suffered a minor concussion and had a lisp for the rest of her life. She also developed a temporary rash whenever she ate rutabagas or broccoli.

Leonid had several narrow escapes during the barnstorming shows, including one occasion on a windy day when one of the barn doors was blown shut. Leonid's precision flying ability enabled him to clear the gap of the opened door with only slight wingtip damage. No one could believe he made it through the tight opening. The crowd thought it was all part of the show and gasped when he explained afterward that it wasn't. On another occasion, the barn he was storming partially collapsed due to old age and almost caved in as he flew through it. He had to fly on the

ground with the rear gear dragging, to make it through the barn unscathed.

It wasn't long before Charles Lindbergh had given Leonid a call to become a pilot for the Air Mail service. Lindbergh had scoured the nation for the best pilots to take part in the important new service. With mail being delivered faster than ever, business boomed. The Air Mail was the greatest thing to happen to the country since the Pony Express. Leonid worked at that interesting job for 3 years without a mishap. He became known as "Lucky Leonid." He ended up flying more miles than Lindbergh and was given a commendation by the president. The Air Mail service paid him a fantastic wage and he was able to buy a new house for his oversized brood. For the first time, he purchased individual pairs of shoes for his children, so that they could all walk to school together without wearing rags on their feet. He was the only father in town to accomplish such a feat with such a large family. He was the first homeowner in the county to have an expensive electric refrigerator.

When WWII arrived, the government drafted all available pilots to enlist as officers to fight the battles in the Pacific Ocean. Leonid didn't want to leave his family, but the desire to serve his country and make a lot of money was too great. He didn't really have a choice anyway. The government was confiscating everyone and everything to fight the war. Japan had made the bold move on Hawaii and they were going to pay dearly for their arrogance. Leonid received an officer's commission and a huge paycheck. His pay included bonuses of flight status pay, hazard pay, overseas pay and carrier pay. He made enough to buy his kids their own underwear and clothing instead of having to share the items. His girls really appreciated not having to wear boy's underwear anymore.

Flying on and off an aircraft carrier was a whole new ballgame for Leonid, but he was more than up to the task. After attending the mandatory flight school, he passed with flying colors. He graduated at the top of his class. He won the prize of Top Gun, which came with a \$1,000 coupon for use in any Piggly Wiggly store in the country. Leonid's wife got a lot of use out of that money. Leonid's extensive flying experience and natural ability gave him an edge over almost all the other pilots on the carrier to which he was assigned. All of the best pilots had been crop dusters and some had been aerobatic pilots. None had flown for the Air Mail service, with the exception of Leonid.

Leonid flew a plane from a Navy Base in California to his carrier and staged missions from the carrier. All the replacement planes were added to the aircraft carriers in that manner. It was the most efficient method to keep the carrier out to sea continuously, refueling and restocking as required. The carrier traveled in a group of vessels, all supporting each other in one way or another. The carrier provided the main fighting force of the group via the airplanes on board. The planes took off from the carrier on bombing and strafing runs, and then flew back to the carrier to reload and head back out again. Taking off from the carrier was usually uneventful;

landing was the tricky part. Depending how rough the seas were, and they were always rough, bad things could and did happen.

Leonid witnessed many crashes, a lot of ship damage and some loss of life during his time on the carrier. The trickiest part of landing was when the plane was preparing to touch down on the deck. It was difficult to time the event, but ideally the deck of the ship would be in a roll downward and the plane could ease down onto the deck. When the carrier's deck was in a roll upward from the motion of the ocean, the pilot had to prepare for a slamming touchdown. Since the plane was always heading in a downward direction, an upward moving deck provided an unwanted negative force. The planes were built to withstand some negative forces on the undercarriage, but eventually needed repairs.

The worst situation was landing on the upward moving deck in a plane that was unknowingly damaged and ready to go at any instant. Those planes sometimes collapsed on the deck in a fireball. Luckily, the carriers were engineered with an extensive fire suppression system and all the water of the ocean available to put out a fire. Sometimes, planes came in and one side of the landing gear collapsed, causing the plane to skid at an angle. The plane then slid into a fully fueled and loaded plane with a pilot aboard, causing an explosion. The pilots were sometimes trapped in the burning planes, hoping for a quick fire suppression.

Leonid was flying during tropical storm conditions on one night. The carrier was rolling 30 feet up and down in the waves. He took off from the carrier fine, but on his return in the dark, he could barely make out the landing lights through the pouring rain in the blackness. As he got closer, the deck radio tried to guide him the best that he could. The worst case happened with the carrier rolling up as Leonid came in. The landing gear collapsed on impact and when he slid into the 3rd restraint cable, the nose of the plane was snared by it. The plane flipped over forward onto its nose and slid at an angle toward the edge of the carrier deck. The plane slid in a shower of sparks to the edge, where it stopped. Leonid climbed out of the plane shaky, but unharmed. If Leonid's plane had slid into the water, he would have surely freaked out.

He was fearless in the air, but positively petrified of water. When he was a young feller fishing with his friends at the local watering hole, his line became snagged on a log. For years, everyone had unsuccessfully tried to catch "Big Blackie," the giant catfish that allegedly lived in the hole. Leonid cautiously crept into the water, feeling the cold mud squishing between the toes of his bare feet. The water got deeper with each step. When he was up to his chest, he reached under the log to free his line and his foot slipped. He slid under the water and was momentarily trapped under the log. His friends grabbed onto his fishing pole, which he was still clinging to for dear life. His friends pulled him out of the water and onto the shore, where he shivered in fear for 20 minutes. He had been afraid of the water ever since. Leonid's flight training involved various water exercises, which he managed to pull off, but he still didn't like the water.

After the crash on the carrier, Leonid requested to rest for a couple of hours before going back into duty. When he went out to fly again, the weather had actually worsened. When he returned from his strafing mission, he overshot all 3 restraining cables, crashed down onto the deck and slid into the ocean. His plane splashed into the water and began to sink. He was wearing a flotation device as part of his gear, which kept him afloat as he disengaged from the plane. The plane sunk to the bottom of the ocean as he floated in the dark cold water. He became delirious and started screaming obscenities. The carrier launched a helicopter immediately and he was rescued within 15 minutes. He was so distraught by the experience that he had to stay in his quarters for a week to recover. He was physically unhurt, but mentally rattled.

After he returned to flight duty, he was never the same and was always afraid of crashing in the water again. He served the remainder of his duty on the carrier until the bombs were dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, which ended the war with Japan. Leonid received many medals and commendations for his illustrious service and returned to his family as a proud service member who had valiantly served his country. He was honorably discharged after his 4 years of active duty.

When he arrived home, Leonid resumed his crop dusting and barn storming work, to keep some money flowing into the family unit. He made a lot of money while in the military and his wife saved most of it. He was the type of person who liked to be always busy doing something that resulted in making money. The dusting and storming work enabled him to keep flying, which was his greatest satisfaction in life, aside from his wife and kids.

The airplane industry was really taking off and air flight was rapidly replacing train travel. The industry needed all the pilots it could get its hands on. Building commercial airplanes was easy; finding qualified pilots to fly them was another thing. The airlines consulted with the military to acquire lists of names of pilots from the war. Leonid was contacted within 2 months of his return home. The amount of money that he was offered was quadruple the amount he was making as a flight officer. The benefits included sick leave, 4 weeks vacation, personal leave, health insurance, life insurance, pension and lifetime flying miles for his family to use at will. It was the most thrilling time of Leonid's life and he was planning to take a huge bite out of it.

Leonid was 45 years old with 30 years of flying experience and was considered one of the best pilots in the world. Most of the pilots who survived the war were good pilots, but the carrier pilots were always considered the best, due to the precision required to land on those rocking and rolling aircraft carriers. The contract that Leonid signed with the airline would soon be responsible for setting up Leonid and his family in a big new house. The airlines treated the pilots like royalty, giving them free cars, uniforms and hotels when they were away from home. Leonid never thought life could be so grand. He went through life just doing what he loved to do and things fell into place by themselves. He was sitting in the fabled catbird seat.

After a time of flying with the airline, Leonid had adopted a new mindset. He realized that he was responsible for the lives of 100 people when he flew the plane. He wasn't flying solo anymore. He had to be more careful and couldn't be as reckless as he was in the past dusting crops or storming barns. People trusted him with their lives. He didn't want to think about the concept too intensely or it would begin to bother him. He began to realize the value of the psychological training sessions that the airline had all the new pilots go through. Having the responsibility of getting so many people to and from their destinations was potentially stressful. In a given year of flying, Leonid will have transported 100,000 people. That was a lot of lives to safeguard. There was no other job on earth like that.

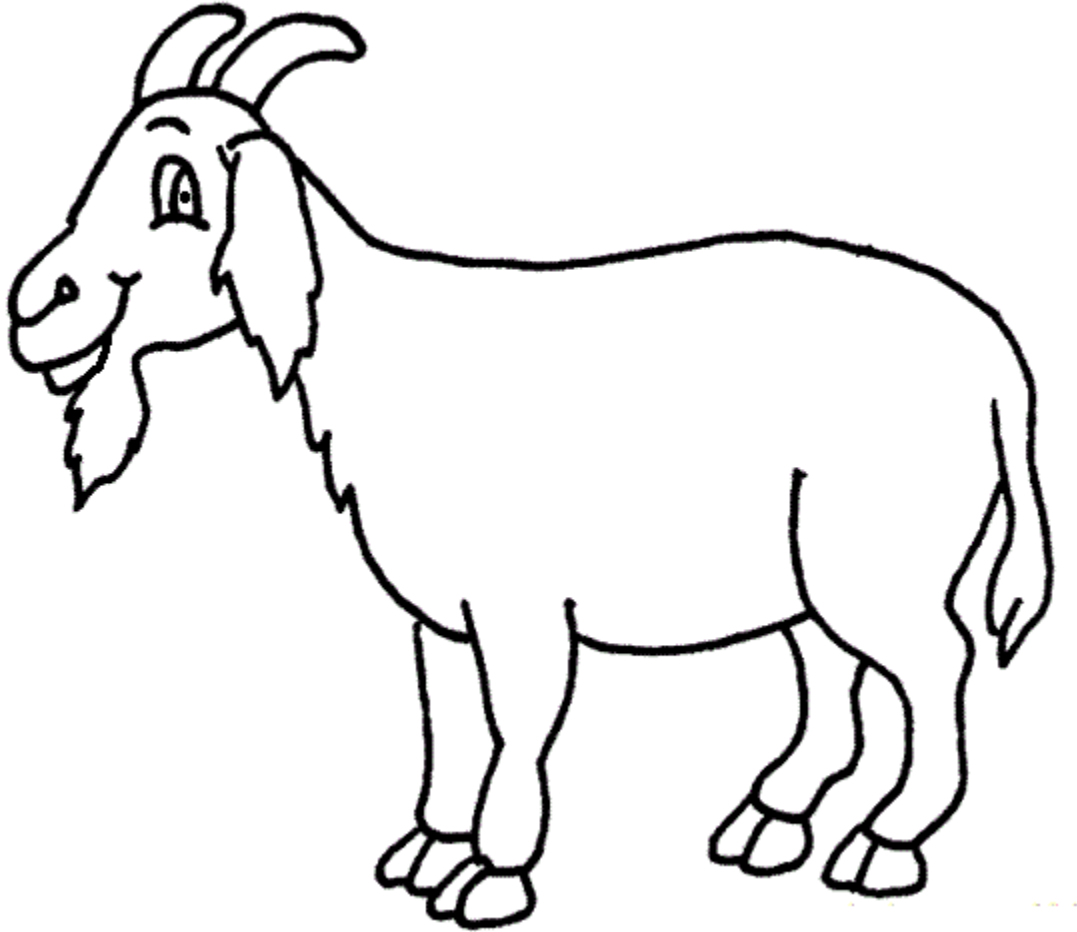
Leonid had to relax. There was a reason for the psychological training and the periodic refresher training courses. Being a pilot was just a job and he had to calmly look at it that way. He couldn't let it get to his head. The most common reason for plane accidents was pilot error, not weather or mechanical failure. Weather may initiate a problem with an airplane, but it was up to the pilot to resolve the situation expertly. A part may malfunction or fall off the airplane, but the pilot always had to save the day, or else. Leonid knew he was the best pilot out there; he just had to keep a cool head.

If it was raining like crazy and the runway was so saturated that the airplane hydroplaned while it was landing, the pilot had to rationally go through the procedures and not overreact. The plane was heavy and even though it was hydroplaning, it could still be steered if the pilot kept a steady grip on the steering wheel. The younger pilots at times panicked and overcorrected, causing planes to go off the runway. The calm ones focused and waited for the plane to slow down.

Leonid never had any problems with taking off and landing. The airline had enrolled all the pilots in a rigorous flight school to expose them to all the potential hazards. Leonid's years of flying his crop duster, Air Mail planes and planes on carriers had given him nerves of steel. He had flown for the airline for 2 years without a mishap, which was the best record of any of the industry's pilots. The early years of flying the new commercial airplanes were challenging for the designers of the airplanes as well as for the pilots. A lot was learned about what airplanes could do on paper compared to what they could actually do in the air. Everyone agreed that landings involved the most potential hazards, but occasionally takeoffs posed a problem. Alas, Leonid's spotless record had been blemished by one of those takeoff problems.

As Leonid thought back to those early days, he hoped that his plane would be found in time. Leonid, the co-pilot and the navigator sat in the cockpit breathing through their oxygen masks. The passengers in the cabin were doing the same. Their plane was slowly sinking into the Atlantic Ocean. They took off without a hitch from JFK heading toward Paris and while ascending, they hit a flock of geese over the ocean. All 4 engines were catastrophically damaged and they plummeted into the water. There was nothing they could do.

64. Napoleon's Scream



64. Napoleon's Scream

When Oscar first bought his goat Napoleon, he thought it was a cool idea. His apartment complex permitted the renters to have animals of 25 pounds or less. When Napoleon was purchased, the goat only weighed 5 pounds. Napoleon had gotten somewhat bigger since then and now at 30 pounds, he was pushing the rules. The complex people weren't running around with scales weighing the renters' pets, so who really cared anyway? Most of the renters had cats, which were totally quiet. Napoleon started out quiet, but became noisier as he grew.

The goat had become territorial as many animals get when they live somewhere for a while. He instinctively wanted to announce to trespassers it was his territory that they were entering. Oscar's apartment was on the 3rd floor of the apartment building near the elevator. Before the elevator door opened, a bell chimed to alert people to the door's opening. Every time Napoleon heard the sound of the elevator doorbell ringing, he instinctively bleated to protect his territory. When Napoleon was young, his bleat was cute; at his larger size, he sounded like a woman screaming every time he bleated.

Nettie was a kindly old woman who had lived on the same floor as Oscar in the complex for 30 years. She never bothered anyone or made noise and always paid her rent on time. She was a model tenant. She had a lot of pull with the complex owners, who appreciated and respected their good paying customers. Nettie had occasionally heard Napoleon bleating when he was younger and thought the goat was a cute little bugger the one time that she saw him. Oscar always kept Napoleon indoors and had the goat trained to use a litter box. Oscar's two-bed apartment was huge and the goat had a lot of room to run around. The goat had lived in the apartment for most of its life and didn't miss being outdoors.

Nettie had seen Oscar bringing women into and out of his apartment when she went to and from the laundry room in the basement. Nettie liked Oscar as a fellow tenant and always thought he was a pleasant, clean-cut young man. They always said hello to each other when passing in the hallways. Oscar occasionally helped Nettie carry her laundry when she asked for help. Things went on normally between the 2 of them as neighbors. They interacted with each other the way a boy would behave with an aunt that he only sees once a year at Christmas time.

One Friday evening, Nettie happened to be bringing her laundry down to the basement while Oscar was bringing one of his girlfriends to his apartment. Oscar and Nettie passed each other in the hall and said hello. Nettie pressed the down button for the elevator. At the same moment that the elevator arrived and the bell chimed, Oscar opened the door to his apartment. As Oscar escorted the girl into his apartment, Napoleon screamed when he heard the sound of the elevator bell. Nettie heard the scream as Oscar closed the door to his apartment. After all the years of knowing Oscar, Nettie had never thought Oscar could have been violent in any way. Nettie wondered if Oscar had just struck or hurt that girl in some way to make her scream like that.

Nettie went about the business of doing her laundry and assumed the scream was an isolated incident. She didn't want to believe that Oscar could have done something to that girl. He didn't seem the type. Nettie wondered if she needed to be worried about Oscar. Could that boy actually be a violent person? Nettie hoped that he wasn't and attempted to dismiss the thought from her mind. She couldn't though. Living alone her entire life after high school and never marrying had given Nettie a limited outlook on life. She had never lived with a man and never trusted them beyond a boyfriend/girlfriend relationship, which was shallow at best. Her first instinct was to believe that Oscar had hurt the girl and made her scream. That must be what happened.

As Nettie laundered her clothes, she decided to keep the volume of her TV and radio lower in the future, to help her keep tabs on Oscar. If Oscar were in fact beating or hurting that girl or other girls, the authorities would have to be informed. When Nettie finished her laundry and returned to her apartment, she muted her TV and listened to the hallway while watching her gossip show. She didn't hear anything and drifted off to sleep. When she awoke at 2:00 am, it was still quiet and she went to bed.

The next morning, Nettie felt that things would never be the same between her and Oscar. Nettie had made her decision that Oscar was an abuser and she couldn't wait to catch the villain in the act. The week passed and on Friday evening, Nettie left her apartment with her laundry per her usual routine and happened to encounter Oscar in the hallway with a different girlfriend. Nettie said hello to Oscar who helloed back and Nettie pressed the down button on the elevator. At the same moment that the elevator arrived and the bell chimed, Oscar opened the door to his apartment. As Oscar escorted the new girl into his apartment, Napoleon screamed when he heard the sound of the elevator bell. Nettie heard the scream as Oscar closed the door to his apartment.

Nettie couldn't believe her ears! Another scream! That was it then; Oscar was an abuser. That scream was all the proof that Nettie needed. She shuffled back to her apartment with her laundry basket and went inside. She dialed 911 and asked for the Police to come to the apartment building. Nettie told the dispatcher that she believed a woman was in danger and that the Police needed to get there in a hurry. Nettie impatiently waited at a window for a sign of the Police arriving. She sat in a chair peeking through the curtains for 10 minutes until the Police finally arrived with lights flashing on the car, but no audible alarm. Nettie agreed that no alarm was really necessary, since she had only heard the one scream. Nettie didn't hear any more screaming or abuse going on after the one scream. It would be difficult to hear any sounds through the well-insulated walls of the high-end apartment building in which she lived.

The Police arrived at Nettie's room, she let them in and explained her case to the 2 officers. One officer stayed with Nettie while the other paid a visit to Oscar. The officer was let inside Oscar's apartment, stayed for 10 minutes and left after seeing no evidence of any incident taking place. Oscar had answered the door with lipstick on his face and neck, indicating that he had probably

been in the middle of smooching with his girlfriend. The officer returned to Nettie's apartment and informed her what he observed. Nettie claimed that she had heard screams on 2 occasions coming from the apartment with 2 different girls over there. She thought for sure that something bad was happening to the girls. Nettie explained to the Police that she would never frivolously waste the valuable time of the Police. She hadn't called the Police after hearing screaming on the first occasion. The Police told Nettie that they understood where she was coming from. They didn't detect anything unusual in Oscar's apartment; they would fill out a report and if there were any future incidents, they would be part of the record. The Police appreciated Nettie's concern as a citizen and her diligence was acknowledged.

Nettie was in a huff. She thought for sure that she heard screaming over there. It was the 2nd time, to boot! Could she have been mistaken? She couldn't have been! She had heard people screaming all the time on TV. She knew the sound of a scream when she heard one. She wondered if the Police had mentioned her name to Oscar when they talked to him. Should she say something to Oscar about it or act as if nothing happened and that she didn't know anything about it? She decided to play dumb. If Oscar asked her anything about it, she would pretend to know nothing. That was the safest way. She was old and Oscar would think she was feeble.

The next Friday evening, Nettie left her apartment with her laundry per her usual routine and ran into Oscar in the hallway with yet another girlfriend. Nettie thought that boy really got around! Nettie remembered boys like that; she never associated with those sleazy boys, she only liked the nice boys. They said hello to each other in passing as usual. Nettie felt that was a good encounter and she was in the clear. He didn't say anything about the Police all week and nothing just then. Whew! She had been worried over nothing.

Nettie pressed the down button on the elevator. At the same moment that the elevator arrived and the bell chimed, Oscar opened the door to his apartment. As Oscar escorted his friend into his apartment, Napoleon screamed when he heard the sound of the elevator bell. Nettie heard the scream as Oscar closed the door to his apartment. "Oh my God!" thought Nettie. Oscar did it again! He hit that girl! He must have! What else could that be? Oscar hit her and she screamed. Nettie scurried back to her apartment and called the Police. She made the same report as before. When one of the officers returned from Oscar's apartment, he had nothing to report. Nettie asked the officer if he was sure. The 2 officers looked at each other and grinned. Nettie assured the officers that she heard a woman screaming and it was the 3rd time of such an occurrence. The officer who returned from Oscar's apartment told Nettie that he saw nothing that indicated any kind of a struggle between the people in the apartment. No one was bruised, scratched or disheveled looking. The Police thanked the nice little old lady and left her apartment.

Nettie was at a loss. She called the Police twice and they found no evidence of foul play. Nettie was positive that she heard screaming 3 times emanating from Oscar's apartment. Was she

imagining the screams? If so, why? Was she beginning to lose it in old age? Was she subconsciously jealous of Oscar's love life and she wanted to scuttle it? What was going on in that building? Maybe Oscar had his TV playing loudly and that's where the screaming was coming from. Yeah, maybe that was it! The only time she heard the screams was when Oscar opened the door to his apartment. She never heard screams before or after his door was open. That had to be it then. The screams had come from Oscar's TV.

The next Friday evening, Nettie left her apartment with her laundry per her usual routine and met Oscar in the hallway with his latest squeeze, who was even prettier than the last one. Nettie and Oscar exchanged their usual greetings and Nettie pressed the down button on the elevator. At the same moment that the elevator arrived and the bell chimed, Oscar opened the door to his apartment. As Oscar escorted the young woman into his apartment, Napoleon screamed when he heard the sound of the elevator bell. Nettie heard the scream as Oscar closed the door to his apartment. Nettie clomped as quickly as her orthopedic shoes could move her to Oscar's apartment. She had to see and hear for herself what was going on in that apartment.

She knocked on the door and suddenly realized that she didn't have a reason for knocking on the door when Oscar asked. Oh yeah, laundry detergent! Oscar answered the door with a pleasant look on his lipstick-stained face. He looked surprised to see Nettie standing there. She asked him if he had any laundry detergent that she could borrow. He invited her in and went to get some detergent from his laundry room. The one-bed apartments like Nettie's weren't allowed to have washers and dryers, as Oscar had in his two-bed apartment. Nettie looked around, sniffed and listened. She couldn't detect anything amiss. The only thing she smelled was that cute goat Napoleon and the excessive amount of perfume on Oscar's girlfriend. Nettie said goodbye to the girl, petted the goat, thanked Oscar for the detergent and walked out into the hallway, completely befuddled.

She had definitely gone stark raving bonkers! She must be senile. She had to be. She heard what she thought was the sound of a woman screaming and she immediately entered Oscar's apartment. There was no woman in the apartment who looked like she just screamed. There was no loud TV with screams coming out of it. The only sound was Lionel Richie's, "All Night Long" on the stereo.

What was Nettie to do with herself? Should she ask Oscar what was going on? What would he think? He would think she was a psycho; that's what he would think! What if she asked him if he heard any unusual sounds? That was an innocent enough question, wasn't it? Or was it? What if she asked him questions and he put 2 and 2 together and figured out it that it was she who called the cops on him? Then what would happen? What would he do then? Would he do nothing or do something? Would she be the next one screaming? She was definitely going off the deep end. It was just a matter of time that the men in white coats were going to come for her.

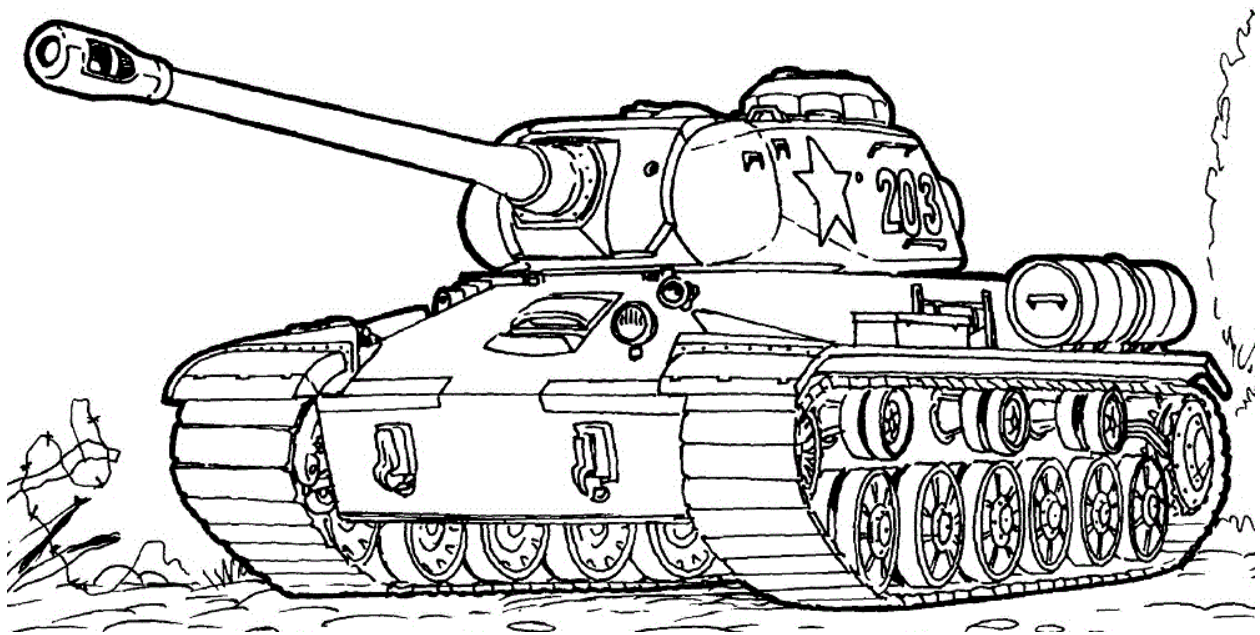
Maybe she should just let things settle down around there. That's it then; let things settle. Things will take care of themselves. If she weren't careful, Oscar would be the one making phone calls about her. He would be calling the appropriate people to take her quietly to the loony bin.

It was difficult for Nettie to simply allow things to settle. She had been a gossipy busybody for most of her 76 years. She had to know what was going on in her building. What could she be missing? Was it just a coincidence that whenever Oscar's apartment door was open, she heard screams? Maybe the screams weren't coming from Oscar's apartment. Maybe a woman was being harmed in one of the other apartments. Of course! How could she miss that? She just happened to hear the screams when she was in the hall with her laundry. It was a mere coincidence that Oscar's door was open when she heard the screams. She must have been hearing screams coming from another apartment, when she thought they were coming from Oscar's apartment.

If that indeed were the case, when she asked him if he heard screams, maybe he would say he heard the same screams that she heard. Nettie would then have had a viable reason to ask Oscar if he heard any screams. She shouldn't have to worry then that he would think she was crazy. However, what if on the other hand, he didn't hear any screams? Would he think she was nuts? Stop it Nettie! She didn't have anything to lose. She had to be careful, because she was entangling herself in a circular argument. The only way to settle the issue in her mind was to ask him outright if he heard any screams. If he said yes, then she would be justified in assuming that there were screams coming from someone's apartment, but not necessarily from Oscar's apartment. If Oscar said that he hadn't heard any screams, then it was up to her to believe him or not believe him. That's what was so confusing about her argument. She wanted Oscar to say that he heard the screams. She would believe him if he said he had. But, if he said he hadn't heard the screams, then she may or may not believe him. Nettie was filled to the brim with anxiety. Her doctor would be concerned that she was getting so involved in a possibly imaginary scenario. The week passed with Nettie embroiled in a state of hopeless confusion that she brought on herself. Maybe the screaming would stop.

The next Friday evening, Nettie left her apartment with her laundry per her usual routine and saw Oscar in the hallway with a pretty girl. Nettie casually nodded to Oscar who cordially nodded back. Nettie pressed the down button on the elevator. At the same moment that the elevator arrived and the bell chimed, Oscar opened the door to his apartment. As Oscar escorted the lass into his apartment, Napoleon screamed when he heard the sound of the elevator bell. Nettie heard the scream. That was it! She hobbled with her laundry as fast as her decrepit body could carry her to Oscar's apartment before he closed the door. She wanted to ask if he or his girlfriend just heard a scream. Nettie didn't make it to Oscar's apartment. She started getting awful chest pains and had to stop walking. Before she rounded the corner into Oscar's hallway, she dropped her overflowing laundry basket and collapsed on top of the scattered pile of her soiled laundry.

65. Odell's Coffin



65. Odell's Coffin

The commander of the M-4 Sherman tank named Odell, nicknamed Scarface, the driver, nicknamed Baby Face, the co-driver, nicknamed Mad Dog, the gunner, nicknamed Machine Gun and the loader, nicknamed Pretty Boy were under heavy fire in the 1942 desert of Morocco. It was 100 degrees outside the tank and 130 inside. The tank was in the middle of a raging dust storm. The 5 tankers were clad only in their shorts and drank water sparingly, even though they were sweating profusely. They had been trained to survive on as little food and water as they could, in case of stranding. The last thing that any tanker wanted to happen was becoming stranded in the desert. When a tank was stranded, it meant they were either cut off from the rest of their tank platoon or they were the last surviving tank of the platoon, and they were forced to go it alone.

They were running low on everything, especially fuel, but were really giving it to the enemy. Odell's strategy that came directly from command had been to park the tank in the low point of the sand dune, which was similar to the low point of a wave in the ocean. From that low point, they were almost invisible. They had been firing accurately and expended 70 of their 90 3-inch rounds. They had knocked out 14 enemy tanks, according to reconnaissance. Once they were done with their remaining 20 rounds, they were to head back to base to reload, refuel and replenish the food and water for the crew. After 4 hours rest, they would head back out.

The enemy had been successful in that part of the Sahara for months and The Allies had been unable to unseat them from their stronghold. Odell's tank had been as successful as it could have been under the conditions. Heat and blowing sand were the enemies of the equipment in the desert and dust storms were common. It didn't take very long for the desert to swallow up anything in its path. In several hours, they should be done firing and would be ready to pull back.

A squadron of German bombers flew overhead and deposited hundreds of 500-pound bombs on Odell's platoon. Major explosions went off all around Odell's tank and the sound was deafening. A series of unfortunate events took place as a result of the bombs dropping: the 3 other tanks in Odell's platoon were vaporized by repetitive bomb hits; Odell's tank was hit and the hatches were sealed shut; the engine was hit and conked out; the tank's radio went dead; the main 3" gun was hit; the machine guns were hit; the area around the tank was hit so many times by bombs that the low spot the tank was sitting in became filled with sand. The tank was completely covered with a mountain of sand. The only positive thing was that the 5 tankers were somehow still alive.

As the bombs fell, it was the sequence of how they hit the sand dunes that protected the tank from the repetitive hits that would have pounded the tank to bits. The tank had been completely disabled, but the main shell was intact enough for the men to survive. The dust storm intensified and covered the entire area with a vast sand dune, completely concealing Odell's tank. In 45 minutes, the dust storm had made the area look as if nothing happened. There was no evidence

that the bombs had dropped - no craters, no shrapnel fragments, no destroyed tanks, trucks, jeeps or bodies.

Odell and his crew were not only stranded, they were trapped in the tank. With the hatches welded shut their only choice was to wait it out and hope to be found soon. If only the radio were still functional, they could radio their situation to command. They were unaware of the conditions outside the tank. They assumed they were still visible in the low point of the dune. Hopefully the enemy wouldn't take advantage of their diminished capacity to fight. The enemy was known to crack open the damaged tanks and heave hand grenades inside. There were typically no survivors after that game was played.

Odell figured it was just a matter of time that command would find them. It was hot in the tank, but they were all used to the heat of the desert. For some reason, it actually seemed to be getting a little cooler in the tank. Perhaps some sand had heaped over the tank from the bombing and had provided some shade from the blazing sun.

"What do you think, Scarface? Are we going to make it out of here alive?" asked Baby Face. "Sure we will. We just have to wait it out. You boys know how the Army is. Hurry up and wait," said Odell. "You aren't kidding," said Mad Dog. "Man, just when we were almost done, we get bombed," said Machine Gun. "Yeah! I have to piss," said Pretty Boy. "Boys, if you have to piss, use the shell hatch down in the corner over there. If you have to poop, don't," said Odell. "Yeah, there better not be anybody pooping! Or they're going to have to answer to me," said Baby Face. "Settle down, Baby Face!" said Odell. "Yeah, settle down Baby Face; we're all stuck here together," said Pretty Boy. "Shut up, Pretty Boy," said Baby Face. "You shut up," said Pretty Boy. "Everybody shut up for a minute. That's an order!" said Odell.

The men were getting on each other's nerves. They had been in the tank together for a day and had almost completed their mission. Getting bombed was the worst thing to happen. It would have been different if the tank hadn't been sealed up like a sardine can. At least they would be able to peek out of the hatch to see if it was clear and then take a piss or poop outside the tank. The tank was equipped with a small shell hatch in the bottom for the men to eject the spent 3" shells or piss & poop down through. The hatch was meant to be used while the tank was moving, not stuck in one place. In addition, there was no space under the tank, since the bombardment had blown the sand tight to the undercarriage. Any pissing or pooping down through the shell hatch would go directly into the sand packed to the bottom of the shell hatch. The piss would soak down into the sand, but the poop would just sit there. In either case, the smell would permeate into the limited air space of the men.

When Pretty Boy lifted the shell hatch to take a piss, he saw the sand packed to the bottom of the tank. "Uh, Scarface?" asked Pretty Boy. "Yes?" asked Odell. "I think we have a problem here," said Pretty Boy. "What is it?" asked Odell. "I think we're packed in!" said Pretty Boy. "What?

You're kidding! Let me see. Step aside," said Odell. When Odell lifted the shell hatch and saw the sand packed to the bottom of the tank, he sighed. "I was afraid of that. Boys, we're in a bit of a sticky wicket," said Odell. "What do you mean, Scarface?" asked Mad Dog. "Yeah, what are you talking about?" asked Machine Gun. "The bombing sealed us on the bottom," said Odell. "That means before we piss or poop down that shell hatch, we have to dig down as far as possible to get the sand out of the hole and bring it up into the tank. That way, we'll have as much space as possible for the poop. The piss will seep down into the sand." "Got it, Scarface," said Pretty Boy. Pretty Boy proceeded to reach down into the shell hatch and dig as much sand as he could get to. When he was done, he asked if anyone had longer arms. Baby Face said, "Let me try." Baby Face was able to dig a couple more handfuls. They piled the sand in the corner.

Odell announced, "It would be best if everybody held it for as long as they could, to limit how much we have to put down there." "Ok, I'll wait," said Pretty Boy. "The next standing order is that we have to ration the food and water," said Odell. "We had a 3-day supply when we started yesterday and we are down to 2 days remaining. I want everybody to go on 1/2 rations to extend what we have left for 4 more days." Everybody mumbled their agreement. "All the hatches are sealed and the only way out is to execute the Emergency Turret Removal Plan," said Odell. Nobody was familiar with the plan, possibly because it was such a farfetched idea and it was never expected to be executed. "What's that?" asked Baby Face and Mad Dog simultaneously.

"We're never going to get out of here by waiting; command may not be able to get back to this area if the Germans keep occupying it," said Odell. "There is a way to make an opening in the turret if everything goes our way; if it doesn't, we're done." "What do we do?" asked Machine Gun. Odell walked to the compartment under the steering wheel, opened it and removed a large wrench. The wrench was 2 feet long, with an open end wrench head on one end and a ball peen hammer head on the other. Odell held up the heavy steel wrench and said, "We use this wrench to loosen the 96 nuts and bolts that connect the turret to the tank body. We then slide the turret about 8" and squeeze up through the space. It's a piece of cake!" "Let's go," said Machine Gun. Machine Gun took the wrench from Odell and started on one of the nuts. "It's too tight Scarface," said Machine Gun. "Put 2 guys on it," said Odell. Baby Face helped Machine Gun push on the wrench. "It's turning!" said Baby Face. "Barely!"

After 30 minutes, they removed the nut. "Hammer the bolt up into the turret," said Odell. Machine Gun hammered the bolt several times until it went up into the turret. "All it has to do is clear the tank body; then we can slide the turret," said Odell. "At that removal speed, it's going to take 48 hours to remove all the nuts. Can you guys speed it up?" said Odell. Mad Dog and Pretty Boy took the wrench and said, "We'll try!" Those 2 guys didn't do much better. The bolts were thick with fine machine threads and since the nuts were so close together, they had limited space to turn the wrench. Odell was concerned. The 5 men alternated in 2-man teams to work on the nuts non-stop. The work was incredibly painstaking and strenuous.

After the 2nd day in the tank, they only had 30 nuts off. That pace was slower than anticipated. The stench in the tank was a combination of piss, poop, sweat, oil, gasoline and gunpowder. There was no place in the world where a person could experience such a smell. Who would want to? The men were weakening from the food and water rationing and heat in the tank. The temperature had stabilized to 95 degrees and was unbearable. At least the heavy-duty tank batteries kept the lights on. They would be sunk without lights to see what they were doing.

Odell suggested that they go around the room and tell their stories from home. He went first by talking about his wife, 2 boys, dog and house. He missed them back in Idaho and hoped they were ok and not too worried. Of course, Odell's family had no way of knowing anything about the fix he was currently in. Odell hoped he and his crew would escape from the tank or be found by command before they rotted in that steel coffin like an old can of tuna. Odell intended to send both of his kids to college, an institution that he was unable to attend himself. He wanted the best for his kids and when he retired from the Army, he planned to open some kind of small business to supplement his Army retirement.

Baby Face had a nice wife back in Montana, but no kids yet. They were planning to start a family when he got out of the Army after the war was over. He was drafted out of his nice job as a car mechanic at the Ford dealer in his hometown. He hoped he would be able to get his job back when he got out. If he didn't, he could always get a job at another car dealer or work for a local mechanic. His young wife was having a hard time with him being away from home. She was staying with her mother and was lonely.

Mad Dog's fiancé back in Missouri missed him like nobody's business. She wrote him letters every day and couldn't wait to see him again. They planned to get married when he got back to the states, which would hopefully be soon. There was no way of knowing when he would get back though with the way the war was going.

Machine Gun had a nice girlfriend who had been the homecoming queen at their high school in Alabama. He had known her for their junior and senior years there. She had been the varsity cheerleader captain and honor grad. She was in nursing school and hoped to become an emergency room nurse at their hospital. They may or may not get hitched depending on the war.

Pretty Boy had no one current girlfriend. The reason that he had his nickname was because he had so many girlfriends back in Michigan. He carried a little black book with him everywhere. He read off the names and descriptions of his last 10 girlfriends and made the other 4 guys in the tank wish they were back home with their girls more than ever. Pretty Boy's motto was, "Home is where the heart is." The other guys supposed that meant that people had to have faith in something to get through difficult times. Those 5 men couldn't have been having a more difficult time.

After the 3rd day in the hot stinking tank, they had 64 nuts off. The poop was being packed down into the shell hatch pretty tightly and really reeked. They had 32 nuts to go with 1/2 of their reduced rations remaining. The men were weaker and more tired than they had ever been in their lives. They had to keep going. Their hands were sore and partially blistered from the wrench. They were deafened by the noise of hammering the bolts through. The men tried to sleep as much as they could, to preserve their limited energy, but sleep was difficult with the constant heat, racket and stench. The men were losing hope.

Odell assured the men that they would get all the bolts off and get out of that tank. Victory was right there, staring them in the face. They had to persevere, because their women were waiting for them. That was the reason they were in Africa in the tank in the first place, to protect the freedoms of their women and the women all over the world. Women are what men fought and perished for. Women are what made life worth living for men and vice versa.

The men responded to Odell's morale boosting and greatly respected him as their tank commander. They managed to pick up the pace slightly and removed the next set of 10 nuts quicker than the previous 10. They kept going as hard as they could, though they were almost running on fumes. It was a lot of responsibility being a commander of men during wartime, especially when difficult situations were encountered where all seemed lost. The men occasionally needed to be talked to as a father or mother would talk to their child. Or they needed the guidance that a religious figure would give to a member of their flock. Sometimes they needed to be coaxed as a guy would coax his friend into asking a girl out on a date. They occasionally required to be dared as a little kid would dare another little kid to eat something.

After the 4th day in the tank, they finally got the 96th nut off. The men were nearly fainting and Odell wondered if they would even be capable of sliding the heavy turret the necessary amount to squeeze out. Odell gave them another pep talk; they were at the home stretch and it was time for the boys to become men. Their women were waiting for all of them on the other side. The 5 of them leaned on the turret and pushed. The turret didn't move. They tried again and again, to no avail. They hammered around the perimeter of the turret to loosen possible corrosion. It didn't work. Either the men were simply too weak to move the turret or the movement of the turret was somehow blocked by unseen forces outside. They were trapped.

On the 5th day, the food and water were gone. The beaten men lay in the flickering light waiting to expire. Odell heard something above the turret. Was that the sound of digging? Someone was digging! The other men also heard the digging. They heard clanging sounds on the turret as if from shovels. They heard voices muttering. They were saved! The men struggled to push on the turret and it moved! It actually moved! They kept pushing until they saw an inch of daylight. They stopped pushing when they heard a foreign voice yelling through the opening. "Achtung! Amerikaners! Attention! Americans!" It was the Germans!

66. Preston's Presents



66. Preston's Presents

Rusty and Rocko were getting desperate. It was Christmas Eve and they had no gifts for the orphans, thanks to those dastardly thieves. It never failed. Every year somewhere in the country, a story appeared on TV how Christmas gifts slated for children were stolen for no good reason other than the inherent evil of some people. Rusty and Rocko had worked for weeks to collect the toys. They obtained permission from numerous local businesses to put the big boxes for the gifts in their lobbies. It was surprising how generous some people could be at Christmas time and how rotten others could be.

The lock on the storage room with the gifts at the center had been jimmied. Someone made off with all the gifts except one, the Barbie Corvette. The thieves must have run out of room to take the toy, which was rather large. At least some lucky orphan would get that toy. Of course, it would have been an even better gift with the Barbie doll that went with it. Rusty and Rocko needed to find a Barbie somewhere to go with the car. They also needed to find a roomful of gifts to give to the rest of the kids. It was too late to get any more donated gifts. They had planned to give the gifts out at the Christmas party at the center the next day.

Rusty began crying at the loss of all the gifts. He felt really bad for the kids who had been looking forward to getting anything at all for Christmas. The orphans who lived at the center had no parents for various reasons and relied on as much love and affection as the workers at the center could give them. The kids always got a real boost at Christmas time when they received the gifts. Rocko tried to console Rusty and ended up crying himself. There they were, the 2 of them sitting on the floor crying next to the Corvette, in a large empty room. It was a sad sight indeed.

Rocko suddenly got an idea and reluctantly related it to Rusty. Rocko had a trained pet ferret named Preston that could learn to do anything. Preston could do all the basic tricks that dogs could do, plus many more. The ferret had a skinny body and could squeeze through surprisingly small spaces. When it was young, it had been able to squeeze under doors that had only a 1-inch clearance. At full size, it could still squeeze through a 2-inch space. Its body must have been designed by nature to live in narrow tunnels in the ground.

Rocko suggested that they become like Robin Hood and pilfer gifts from the rich neighborhoods with Preston. Since it was warm where they lived, most people had their windows partially open but locked. The ferret could squeeze through the partially open windows and bring the Christmas gifts from under the Christmas trees to the window. All they have to do is slit the window screen for Preston. He would do the rest. They wouldn't have to worry about setting off any alarms as long as they only used windows that were partially opened already.

Rusty was so distraught that he agreed to do it. Even though it was a form of breaking and

entering, those rich people would be ok. They could afford to buy their spoiled kids more gifts. It was an emergency situation for the orphans. Rusty and Rocko went to Rocko's house to give Preston a quick lesson. They went to one of windows at the back of Rocko's house, to minimize discovery by nosy neighbors. Luckily, the area behind Rocko's house was treed. Rocko locked his window at the partially open setting to simulate actual theft conditions. Rocko didn't cut his screen however. Preston easily squeezed through the window space after they lifted the screen. First, they had Preston bring the dustpan from the kitchen floor to the window. Then they had him bring an actual wrapped gift from under Rocko's tree. In 20 minutes, they had Preston trained.

Rusty and Rocko went to the rich neighborhood and parked down the street in a dark area. They exited the car with a large garbage bag, a utility knife to slit the screens and Preston. It was 2:00 am and everyone in the neighborhood appeared to be asleep. They walked behind the houses where they could walk down the line of backyards. The first house had no open windows. The 2nd house had partially opened windows and they sneaked up to it. Rusty slit the screen and Rocko lifted Preston to the window. Preston squeezed through the screen opening and through the window and went inside. In 5 seconds, Preston returned with a gift. He handed it up to Rocko, who put it in the garbage bag. Preston continued retrieving gifts until the bag was 1/4 full. They hit 3 more houses until they filled the bag. They went back to the car, emptied the bag into the back seat and covered the gifts with a blanket.

They robbed 12 more houses in the same manner and filled the entire back of the car with gifts. They did it! They had all the gifts they needed for the orphans later that day. Rusty and Rocko returned to the center, put the gifts in the storage room, locked it and went to their respective homes. Rocko brought Preston home and gave him the special treat of a can of sardines, which he loved.

Rusty and Rocko arrived at the center at 7:00 am to prepare for the Christmas party and gift giving at 10:00 am. They wanted to unwrap and examine the stolen gifts to make sure they were suited to the individual orphans. They then would rewrap only the gifts that were to be given out. They made an interesting discovery in one of the gifts.

Lady Priscilla arrived at party time to watch the orphans unwrap the gifts and to make her annual generous donation to the center. Her annual \$10,000 bought a lot of much needed food and clothing for the orphans. The orphans absolutely loved her.

When the gifts were opened, Priscilla noticed the American Girl doll that one of the girls had unwrapped. It looked coincidentally similar to the doll that Priscilla had planned to give to her daughter, but the doll had just been stolen on Christmas Eve. Priscilla had specially ordered the doll with a custom Judo costume and had it personalized with her daughter's name. Priscilla asked the girl with the doll if she could look at it. The girl was crying so intensely from joy, that

she didn't want to let go of the doll. Priscilla asked the girl to please just show her the back of the neck of the doll. The girl showed Priscilla and sure enough, on the neck was the name of Priscilla's daughter. That seemed like an impossible coincidence. After the party and gift giving were over, Priscilla talked cordially with Rusty and Rocko.

Priscilla asked the duo where they got the American Girl doll. They said they had received the doll as part of a collection of gifts that was donated anonymously by local businesses. She looked suspiciously at Rusty and Rocko and decided it wasn't worth it for her to pursue it any further with them. She had no way of proving that it was the same the doll as the one stolen from her house. As long as the girl who received the doll was happy was all that mattered. It was just that Priscilla had wanted to make her daughter happy as well and couldn't.

Priscilla thanked Rusty and Rocko for their work at the center and they thanked her for the donation. She departed from the center and went home to wait for the Police to arrive. The Police told Priscilla that her house was one of the many houses burglarized mysteriously on Christmas Eve. She demanded a forensics team to give her house the white glove treatment. Due to her generous annual donations to the PBA, they felt obligated to her. The forensics team came in and found no evidence of a foreign human presence, only evidence of Priscilla, her husband and her daughter. They did find a single strand of fur from a weasel, ferret or mink. She told the Police it was probably from one of her mink coats upstairs. The Police investigation had been inconclusive. Priscilla gave the Police a list of what was missing and they left.

After the party was over at the center, and Lady Priscilla left, Rusty and Rocko discussed what to do with the interesting gift they found. The first stolen gift that they had unwrapped at 7:00 am that morning was a DVD player. Out of curiosity, they plugged the player in to make sure it worked. Normally, they never received donated gifts like DVD players to give to the orphans. They probably wouldn't give the DVD player out as a gift. There were other stolen gifts that were also inappropriate to give out. There was a DVD in the player that featured Lady Priscilla in a compromising position with a man who wasn't her husband!

Priscilla had looked all over the house for the DVD that her male friend had made of them in a compromising position at the out of town motel. She had told him not to film their escapade, but she had been too caught up in the moment to think clearly. She had to find that DVD before her husband found it. If he found it, their marriage would certainly be in dire straits. The only DVD she could find was the Disney DVD. Priscilla had bought a DVD player as a Christmas gift for her daughter to use in her room and thought she had inserted the DVD of Disney World. Priscilla planned to have her daughter open the gift of the DVD player, hook it up and play it to see the Disney DVD. Priscilla and her husband wanted to surprise their daughter with a trip to Disney World. It was every girl's dream. The DVD player had been stolen with the other gifts. Could it be that Priscilla had mistakenly put the wrong DVD in the DVD player?

Rusty and Rocko felt pretty cocky about the way they had pulled off the Christmas gift heist with the aid of Preston, but vowed never to do such a thing again. What they did was clearly illegal; they had only done it to give the orphans the nice Christmas that they sorely deserved. They gave Lady Priscilla a clever response with the anonymous gift angle. How could they have known that her stolen doll would be handed out with her standing right there to identify it? Dumb luck, that. The more pressing issue was that of the interesting DVD. Lady Priscilla portrayed herself to the public as being a holier than thou character with all her philanthropy. As much as Rusty and Rocko appreciated Priscilla's donations to the center, they realized in one fell swoop with that DVD that she was actually a phony. Maybe she only donated to the center as a necessary tax write off. Maybe she didn't actually care about the orphans. As they discussed Priscilla's newly discovered faults, they got an idea.

What if they were to blackmail Lady Priscilla somehow to get a nice sum of money out of her in exchange for the DVD? The only problem might be the way in which they obtained the DVD. Priscilla would have to suspect that whoever possesses the DVD found it in the stolen DVD player. However, there was no way to prove that Rusty and Rocko stole anything from Lady Priscilla's house. The sneaky way that they used Preston left no incriminating evidence behind. All the Police knew was that Priscilla had reported a burglary that may have been falsified. The only evidence was a screen with a slit in it, which was essentially no evidence.

Rusty and Rocko had to devise a plan where they would let Priscilla know that a mysterious person was in possession of the DVD. The mysterious person wished to exchange the DVD for an amount of cash. How would they safely make the exchange? Would she notify the Police of the blackmail plan? That would be dangerous for her. Would the Police guarantee her confidentiality in such a situation? Maybe it was too risky for Rusty and Rocko to try the blackmail. There were too many questions and unknowns. How could they get more money out of her without going to prison in the process? All Rusty and Rocko desired was to provide the orphans with the best life possible. If they could only get more money for the center, say \$100,000, they could redo all the bedrooms of the orphans and give them a nicer place to live while they waited to be adopted.

That's it! The same way that they sneaked the gifts out of Lady Priscilla's house was the way they would make the exchange - with Preston. They would mail Priscilla a letter with instructions. They would have her place the money in the form of untraceable gold coins in a box and wrap it like a Christmas gift. On the designated day, Preston would go into the house through the window as before and remove the gift in the middle of the night. On the following night, Preston would deposit the DVD in the same wrapped box back in the house. They would keep a copy of the DVD and if anything went wrong, they would immediately deliver it to her husband. If they caught wind of any Police involvement whatsoever, her husband would get the DVD. It would have to work!

Unfortunately, there was that one stickler of the stupid American Girl doll. Lady Priscilla had expressed suspicion toward them, not much, but enough to suggest that they may have stolen her doll in some unknown way. Priscilla had no way of proving that they stole her doll, but the DVD had been stolen at the same time as the doll. She would have to think that the doll stealer and the blackmailer with the DVD would have to be one in the same. If they tried to blackmail her, she may get jerky and come after them somehow. She was a wealthy woman, thanks to her inheritance and her husband's business empire. She may have underworld connections capable of making problems go away. It was too risky!

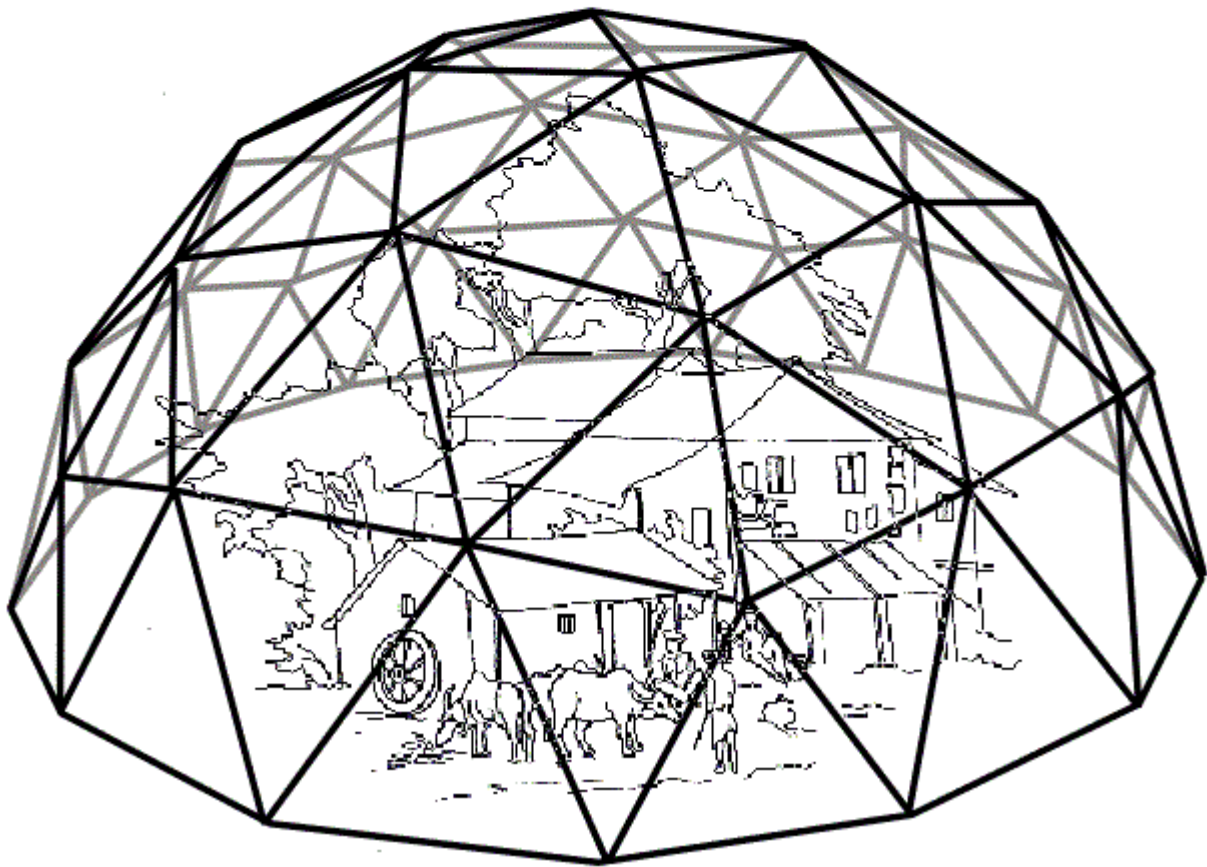
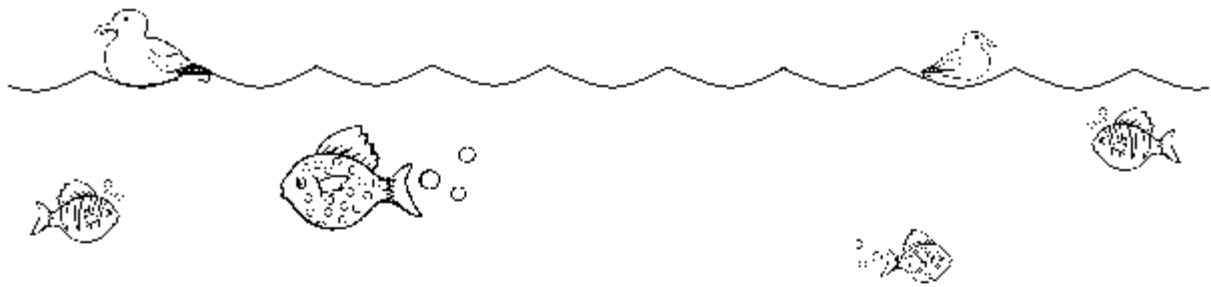
All Rusty and Rocko wanted was some money for the kids. The more they thought about the blackmail scheme, the more chicken they became. That stupid doll threw a big rusty wrench into the works. Aha! What if they waited for a month for the dust to settle related to the burglary investigations. They could claim that an anonymous donor dropped off some things at the front door of the center, which happened all the time. Some of the gifts that were stolen by Preston and weren't given out as Christmas gifts at the party could be some of those things that were allegedly dropped off. Included in the things dropped off would be the DVD player, of course. They could innocently pretend that Priscilla's stolen DVD player had been dropped off by the burglars. They then say that they accidentally discovered the compromising DVD in the player.

They would approach Priscilla directly and offer her the DVD player and DVD in the hopes that she would make a sizeable donation to the center in exchange for complete confidentiality. They would also hope that in the future she would increase her annual donation appropriately. Would that work? It wasn't exactly blackmail. It was a completely plausible argument. Everything could have happened in exactly the way they would describe it to Priscilla. The only reason she would have for suspicion was the stupid doll again. No, it was too risky!

Rusty and Rocko talked and talked until they came up with an unexpected solution. What if they approached Priscilla's husband with the DVD? They could only hope he would be so disgusted by her behavior that he would be thankful they pointed out her infidelity to him. Perhaps in his state of graciousness, he would make a sizable donation to the center.

They called Priscilla's husband the next day for a meeting at his office at 2:00 pm. They brought Rocko's DVD player to the office and played the DVD for Priscilla's husband. Upon seeing his wife with another man, he stood up from his desk and clutched his chest. He gestured to Rusty to get something from the jacket on the coat rack. Rusty found a vial of small pills inside the jacket and handed it to Priscilla's husband. He took one of the pills, put it under his tongue and sat down at his desk. He asked Rusty and Rocko if they had shown the DVD to anyone else. They said they hadn't and he immediately placed a call. In 5 minutes, 2 bulky men wearing bulging suits came into the office and nodded at Priscilla's husband. He nodded back at them and instructed Rusty and Rocko to go with the men and await further instructions.

67. Querko's City



67. Querko's City

Querko had fought the politicians and naysayers for long enough; his city under the sea was in motion. He had put aside several of his billions toward creating his commune in the ocean. After consulting with the leading ocean and weather experts, he located a place in the Pacific Ocean where the minimum amount of turbulence existed. The top of his domed city was situated 100 feet below the surface of the water. That was the minimum distance to avoid all nuclear fallout and shipping traffic issues. The city wasn't located on any shipping lanes, but it was an added precaution. The dome was of geodesic construction, meaning it was constructed of triangular sections of high-strength glass, in a spherical shape. The dome was 1 mile in diameter and 1/2 mile high from the ceiling to the ground level. The dome was essentially cut in half horizontally. The thick triangular glass sections could be replaced one at a time if necessary, due to the ingenious way they were designed. The structure could withstand anything.

The technology that made life possible in Querko's city was located below the ground level of the city. There was equipment for manufacturing oxygen from the outside seawater that worked in balance with the plant life to maintain the necessary oxygen levels. Some machines used reverse osmosis systems to produce clean water from the outside seawater. Other devices processed the solid and liquid wastes of the inhabitants into fertilizers for the agriculture and plant life. Light was provided by sunshine during the day that shone down through the top of the dome. Millions of the highest quality solar cells were arrayed wherever they would fit in the city. The solar cells provided the majority of the electricity. A complex geothermal design provided heating, cooling and hot water for the city.

All the systems of the city were coordinated and automated in the simplest ways without the assistance of computers, which could break down and cause chaos. Each component was designed with redundancy factors of 2 or more. Querko's genius for physics, chemistry, electronics, finance and knowing how to acquire only the correct information enabled him to become a billionaire and design the city by himself from scratch. He reviewed the specifics of previous attempts at Biosphere projects and eliminated the waste. Because he was able to spend unlimited funds on his city, it worked from the beginning.

Querko ran advertisements in all the media for 500 married couples who would be willing to participate in his commune for a period of 5 years. Querko had his dream team of lawyers create an ironclad contract for the 1,000 people to sign that would release Querko of all potential liability in addition to other things. The people would be able to exit from the project at any time. There was no entry fee to get into the project, due to its experimental nature. Querko wanted to prove to everyone that it was possible to live in the city without the fear of nuclear or other fallout.

The city was designed by Querko to accommodate up to 5,000 inhabitants, which meant that

each couple could have up to 8 kids comfortably. There would be no money, banks or salaries. Everyone would be equal and learn to perform everyone else's tasks, save for the healthcare folks, to encourage learning and growth. There would be no radio, TV, internet or other distractions, only a telephone system. There would be no guns or any other weapons. The only knives would be those used for eating. The emphasis would be on learning and artistic endeavors. Querko installed a library with 100,000 books where the people would be able to discover everything they needed to know about surviving in the domed city and more. Querko believed as Benjamin Franklin did that consistent quality intellectual stimulation was the key to true happiness. As long as people learned something new every day, they would be happy for the rest of their lives. Each day people would meet to write and read poems and stories, compose and sing songs and plays, etc. Art would be taught and practiced extensively, including painting, sculpting and photography. Exercise would be a daily requirement. Querko wanted to go back to the old days of ancient Greece and build a better society through knowledge and enrichment, not business wealth from stomping out the little guy.

The temperature of the city could be controlled to grow anything. Gluten and allergy free vegetables, fruits, nuts (not peanuts), and the super grains of oats, millet, quinoa, amaranth and buckwheat would be grown in the fields and orchards; rice would be raised in the paddies; chickens and turkeys would supply eggs and meat; cows would provide milk and cheeses; vast amounts of fish would be raised in the aqua farm laboratories. The city was a self-contained complex where specially chosen people would be able to live the rest of their lives if they chose to. Querko's plan was to conduct the experiment for 5 years; people could stay as long as they wanted after that time. He hoped to prove that his city would work and people would see it as a better way to live. Querko was convinced that once his city concept had been proven, a trend to live under water would begin and he would be at the forefront.

The 500 married couples who wished to participate had to fill out a 10-page questionnaire with basic questions about why they want to do it, etc. Querko hired a group of psychologists to prepare the all-important Reality Section, as Querko referred to it. It was the most important part of the document to Querko. When the couples filled out that section, it would reveal their true survivability in the city. Naturally, many people might think it would be cool to live in the domed city. Only the people who believed in their hearts that the city was a viable alternative to living on land would be chosen. Part of the selection process also involved a lengthy interview.

The people who were ideally suited to live in the city were the same people who would have always preferred communal living. Take any of the hippies from the 60's, 70's and beyond and they would be perfect choices. There were always people somewhere who were bored by society's games and competition. Some were sick of trying to better their friends and relatives. Who made the most money? Who wore the latest clothes and sneakers? Who drove the most expensive car? Who had a boat or camper? Who had a camp to go to in the summer? Who took

the most vacations and where did they go? Who lived in the most expensive house? Who had the latest cell phone? Who had the biggest TV? It was ridiculous. The people who were unable to compete in civilization for reasons of finances or education did the best they could and still lost at all the levels of competition. Those were the folks who were chosen to live in the city.

Some people felt that being a person who loved their neighbor should be enough, but it wasn't. People pretended to love their neighbors and would chant the phrase over and over in a religious institution every Saturday or Sunday, then tailgate or cut someone off in traffic on the way home. Or they would flick a lit cigarette out their window and it would be sucked into the open driver's window of the car behind them. Or they would play with their cell phones while driving home from their religious institution and swerve into oncoming traffic. There certainly wasn't much loving of thy neighbor going on; society was full of phonies. The anti-society people were the ones that Querko needed, not necessarily the militia types, but people who wanted a change.

The 500 couples had to be capable of having children, because the children would be brought up for possibly the first 5 years of their lives in the city. Any couples that already had children were welcome to bring them, but the children would have to be fully informed of what they were getting into. The kids had to be made aware of how drastically different their lives would possibly become. The city would prove to the world how incredible a child could become from growing up in a purely intellectual and loving atmosphere. The kids would be educated to the current GED/TASC requirements of the 50 states and then some.

The inhabitants of the city would be provided with full health, dental, vision, prescription and any other health needs free of charge. The staff for the health center would filled by people from the 500 couples. The process of finding everyone to live and work in the city was indeed a challenging one. It was surprisingly possible to find hippy doctors, dentists and opticians, etc. in society who were ready for a change.

Part of the contract that the 1,000 people signed allowed them to leave the city at any time. There was a waiting list of another 1,000 couples who were eager to serve as alternates to whoever exited the city. Querko wasn't surprised that so many people were as sick of society's ills as he was.

Before the people moved into the city, Querko had all the crops, trees, animals and other food supplying systems fully operational to permit a smoother transition for everyone's new life. The various systems and health center were put through the wringers to guarantee everyone's utter happiness and fulfillment. Querko left no stone unturned.

The only way into the domed city was through a tunnel under the dome located 3,000 feet below sea level. Since the dome sat on the top of a slight mountain, it was simple to excavate a tunnel that led into a cave, which housed the machinery and submarine bay. A submarine sat in the

submarine bay in the cave. The sub was the only way to get to and from the ocean surface. On the surface offset from the dome, was a barge on which sat a helicopter to get to and from the mainland.

It was part of Querko's dream to assemble a squad of scientists and lab technicians from the 500 couples who would work to find a cure in pill form for obesity. He had a state of the art lab constructed in the city where the scientists would work to find an all-natural cure. Before Querko created the city, he had the world's greatest botanists gather hundreds of exotic plants from around the world to plant them in and around the city. He hoped his scientists would find a magical compound derived from plants that resulted in no side effects when ingested. Querko reasoned that with the foolish distractions of mainland life eliminated, the scientists would be able to concentrate more deeply and crack the impossible case of the obesity pill.

Some of the 500 couples who were obese volunteered to participate in the trials of the obesity pill to assist in the development process. Querko believed that humanity deserved to be healthy in spite of itself. The obesity pill would be available over the counter to the millions of people who required it. Querko would patent the formula for the pill with all rights to it. The contract that the 500 couples signed included a section that released all rights of future patents to Querko. Querko didn't want the big drug companies to benefit from the pill or anyone else for that matter. He believed the secret that he was going to discover belonged to the world.

After the first year in the city, everything worked flawlessly. The doubters had been waiting for Querko to fail and he hadn't. Everyone worked at their constantly rotating jobs and learned how to do many things. The people couldn't be happier.

The lab was hard at work on the obesity pill and had made small gains each month. It was a tedious trial and error process of combining different plant materials in varying amounts. It was similar to the way in which Thomas Edison had experimented with hundreds of materials before settling on tungsten for the light bulb filament. The agricultural system made some gains in producing large amounts of produce with limited fertilizer and water. The animals responded well to the controlled atmosphere of the domed city and produced record numbers of eggs. The chickens and turkeys grew larger than normal. The cows produced 40% more milk than similar hormone laden beasts on land. The cheese artisans invented 3 new cheese varieties. The first 38 children were born in the city to much jubilation. Twenty bouncing boys and 18 healthy girls were born to the boundless joy of Querko who couldn't be happier for the parents.

Querko had picked very astutely with the majority of his 500 couples and only lost 5 couples to minor contract rule violations. They were replaced the next day by couples from the waiting list. The way that the people worked together so peacefully was astounding. By eliminating distractions and providing intellectual stimulation, people were happy in ways they didn't think possible. Due to the daily exercise and exposure to reading, writing and arts, the greater part of

the people were healthier mentally and physically than they had ever been in their lives. The scientists agreed that their minds were crisper and their thinking processes were positively bionic.

After the 2nd year of success in the city, they seemed to be closing in on the obesity pill formula. Some of the obese volunteers began losing some weight from variations of the formulas, but not much. The experimenters had to be sure to employ placebos, non-exercise factors and diet manipulations to ensure the correct results. The main problem was that of finding the correct elements. After months of experimentation, the collection of hundreds of plants had been boiled down to a combination of 9 special plant materials: Indian Mallow, China Doll, Australian Black Bean, Japanese Spindle Tree, Mexican Hat Plant, Italian Bellflower, Hawaiian Heather, Costa Rican Butterfly Vine and Madagascar Periwinkle. The scientist from China was the most influential in perfecting the formulation. China had been using natural remedies for thousands of years, which is probably why the Chinese scientist was the one to solve the mystery.

Six months into the 3rd year, the breakthrough was made and they had their pill. The 78 obese volunteers had begun to lose weight at will. The pill was so effective that everyone in the city began taking it. As hoped, there were no side effects. At the end of the 3rd year, after 6 months of rock solid testing, the pill was ready. The pill would revolutionize dieting, help millions of people reduce their obesity and possibly reverse the Type 2 diabetes that was suffered by so many.

Querko set up a meeting with the FDA to discuss marketing and patenting the new wonder drug. The Chinese scientist had worked for a leading Pharmaceutical company before he quit his job to live in Querko's city. He had given up a high salary, many perks and was beginning to miss the status that came with a high salary. Querko was going to the meeting on the mainland with the Chinese scientist, because the scientist claimed to have a great deal of experience marketing drugs. Querko expected the scientist to be integral to the process, because he had been so crucial in the drug's development. Without the scientist's great insight, there would be no obesity pill.

The Chinese scientist wanted to steal the drug patent for himself, since he had been so instrumental in its discovery. The scientist felt it was unfair for Querko to take credit for a drug that he had only facilitated and not actually discovered himself. In theory, the contract initially signed by the scientist prevented him from applying for any patents. However, his experience with his former company had taught him about the many interesting contract loopholes. Querko would have to sue someone for patenting the drug before he did. If Querko were unable to sue for some reason, the Chinese scientist could then patent the drug himself without interference and be wealthy beyond wealth. The scheming scientist hatched a plan that involved the use of a certain little-known ancient technique. When Querko and the Chinese scientist departed for the mainland in the submarine, something unforeseeable happened to Querko in the sub that prevented him from making it to the meeting.

68. Stanford's Lake



68. Stanford's Lake

Stanford was finally beginning to get sick and tired of hiding in Loch Ness. It had been a long time since the famous picture had been taken of him in 1933 and he decided to make some necessary changes around there. First of all, he was going to start come out in the daytime to eat whatever he felt in the mood to eat. When he limited himself to eating only at nighttime, he wasn't able to eat the alligators. The gators always went into their caves at night, impossible for Stanford to find. With his size, he needed to eat enough food to stay healthy. When he limited his diet, he noticed himself getting weaker and unable to properly enjoy life in the loch. Several alligators always made a nice start to a meal.

He made a promise to his mother back when she walked away from the loch in 1932 to inhabit another loch in Scotland. He promised his mother he would stay hidden, but he broke his promise. The very next year, Stanford was photographed and caused himself all manner of problems. Since 1933, Stanford had remained hidden during daylight hours. Enough was enough though. At his age, he didn't have enough time left to be wasting it by hiding from the nosy humans. If they wanted to see and photograph him, so be it. However, he was going to make them earn their photo ops.

The lake was 23 miles long, 750 feet deep, 1.6 miles wide and always dark due to the billions of peat particles perpetually floating in it. With 261 billion cubic feet of opaque water to hide in, it was impossible for humans to find Stanford if he didn't want to be found. It had been easy to stay hidden for so long, but those days were over.

Stanford commenced coming out during the day and snapping up all the gators he could find that were sunning themselves on the shores. On that first day, he ate 17. The next day he ate 23. On the 3rd day, he ate 41. After a month, the alligator supply in the loch was beginning to run low, so he backed off to only eating a maximum of 10 per day. He didn't want to deplete their numbers so low that they wouldn't be able to reproduce and maintain a good population for him to eat from.

After the 2nd month of coming out during the day to eat, Stanford spotted his first photo op. A man and woman were standing on the shore with cameras on tripods. Stanford emerged from the water and swam slowly to the people. They started screaming and operating the cameras. Stanford swam into the shallow water as close as he could get to the humans without beaching himself and grabbed the man in his mouth. He had the squirming man halfway into his mouth and posed dramatically. Incredibly, the woman kept snapping pictures. It would have made her famous, had the woman been able to do anything with the pictures. Stanford swallowed the man, then picked up and swallowed the woman. He left their cameras untouched on the tripods.

A week later, Police discovered the cameras and took them to the station. Upon viewing what

was on the cameras, they were both overjoyed and horrified at the same time. Everyone in Scotland was proud of the legend of the Loch Ness monster, but no one had ever seen the beast. No one since 1933 had even been able to get a good picture. The Police were in a quandary what to do with the incredible footage in their possession. The one camera had a video of the monster coming out of the water and a close up of the monster's open mouth. The other camera had still photos of the monster in the water, of the monster eating the man and another close up of the monster's open mouth. The video and photos would be worth a great deal of money to the newspapers and other media. However, the Police had a responsibility to the public to maintain proper discretion for the victims.

The Police decided to give the cameras to their relatives to cash in on the discovery. That way, at least the Police would know what happened to the victims and at the same time would be able to get some money without looking like vultures. It was nice of the Police to be so considerate of the victims. Similar reports of people disappearing began coming into the Police Station every other day. The Police attacked Loch Ness in full force with boats and sonar gear in the hopes of finding and dispatching the monster.

Stanford found that he actually liked the taste of humans and looked forward to eating them. They were much more tender than the alligators, turtles, snakes and fish that he was accustomed to eating. Due to his eating so many humans in such a short time, however, they stopped frequenting the shoreline as before. He would have to start doing a little bit of work to get more of them into his belly. The Police searches were just the ticket. Stanford didn't want to overdo it as he had done with the humans on the shore. He only overturned and ate the occupants of one Police search boat per day to minimize their fear. Stanford enjoyed eating the humans and didn't want to ruin a good thing.

After a month of searching and losing all their boats and many Police officers, the Police finally gave up. The wily monster was too evasive for them in the vast body of water. The beast was in his element and could hide itself at will. The military brought in special boats and equipment that would hopefully be more successful. The new search effort was successful only in providing Stanford with more succulent humans to eat. The military lost all their equipment and 42 men and soon called off their effort. The world decided to leave Stanford alone to his devices. That didn't sit well with Stanford. He had acquired a taste for humans and didn't want to go back to eating animals. How was he to solve his dilemma?

Stanford waited for nightfall and headed out from the loch to the closest village. He wasn't afraid of the humans when he was in his loch, because he could disappear at will. When he was on land, he felt like slow and clumsy. His flippery feet weren't conducive to walking on the cobblestones of the village streets. He found anything other than grass to be an irritant to the soft spongy skin of his flippers. As long as was able to ingest a couple of humans though, he was

willing to put up with it. He wasn't exactly afraid of the humans, but he still felt at a disadvantage out of the water. His plan was to find and swallow down 2 humans and then scurry back to the loch. It was late at night and everybody was asleep, so he had to make some noise to wake up the humans. Stanford knocked over the woodpile next to a little house and waited for the people to come out. They didn't come out, so he knocked over the woodshed that was next to the woodpile. That made a louder noise causing a man and woman to come outside of the house. Stanford gobbled them down and per his plan, went back to his loch.

Since only 2 humans wasn't enough to fill his stomach, Stanford was forced to eat a bunch of his old standard food sources. He ate 14 turtles, 32 fish and 17 snakes to top off his gut. Stanford thought that maybe that would be a safe compromise. He could sneak into a village, eat only 2 people and get the majority of his food from the loch. That would be the least risky thing for the time being, until he thought of another way to securely eat more humans. Stanford didn't really know what the humans were capable of doing to him if they caught him on dry land. All he knew was that he didn't want to find out.

After 6 months of his night hunting, Stanford progressively had to wander farther and farther from his loch to obtain his 2 choice human morsels. He assumed that as long as he only ventured out at night, he would be fine. One of the original cops who found the first 2 cameras hadn't completely given up on the case. The cop had felt bad that he and his partner cop had made so much money from selling those first pictures and videos through their relatives. The cop still wanted to solve the problem of the monster. He had lost his partner to the monster during the first sonar patrol. He also lost many of his other fellow Police force members to the monster. He hated to give up when they did, but the monster had been too wily for the police and the military.

One night after work, he went to the loch and lo and behold spied the monster sneaking out. He followed the monster to a nearby village, where he watched in horror as the monster lured 2 villagers from their house and ate them. The cop was powerless to do anything to stop the gigantic monster, which appeared so much larger when it was out of the water. The cop followed the monster as it went back to the loch after fortunately eating only 2 people. The monster appeared to be very clumsy on land as compared to when it was in the water. He wondered if they could trap the beast while it was out of the water sneaking around at night. The next day, the cop reported his findings to the captain, who contacted the military with the important information. The military regrouped and set up an ambush for the monster to catch it on the way to the village it visited when the cop saw it.

Stanford had been on alert whenever he sneaked out of the loch and had noticed the cop following him. He didn't want to let the cop know he had seen him and just continued with his usual procedure. Stanford figured that the humans might try to pull a fast one by ambushing him, so he decided to stay in his loch for the next month. He went back to eating his old diet

exclusively, which really wasn't that bad; he missed the treat of the 2 tasty humans though. When things settled down again, he would resume going out at night. He extended his stay in the loch for 6 months to make sure that the humans had given up. The next time he ventured out, he went in the opposite direction of the way he went out the last time. He wanted to outsmart the humans who expected him to keep going to the same village.

Stanford found a village that was about 30 minutes away, close enough that he could get back to the loch in 20 minutes if he had to run for some reason. He hated running on land because of the inadequacy of his flippers, but if he had to run, he would. The house that he chose had a truck parked in front of it. He slapped one of his flippers on the hood of the truck until the people ran out. Stanford was pleasantly surprised to see the cop who had followed him standing in the doorway with another man and a boy. Without hesitation, Stanford ate the 3 of them in 3 quick gulps. He expected that would end the case of the persistent cop. It did. The Police department had been so depleted by Stanford's rampages that they gave up once and for all trying to capture the monster from the loch. The military had given up as well.

Stanford felt that he had struck a blow for his species. After all the years of harassment by the humans, it was finally over. At last, the humans stopped messing with him. He continued to venture out only at night, because he had gotten into that habit and felt comfortable with it. There was something about being on land that rubbed him the wrong way. It wasn't natural; that's all there was to it. If he had to be on land, it would only be at night.

Stanford started to wonder about eating other animals on land that might possibly be as tasty as the humans were. After raiding so many villages, he had depleted the population of humans in the immediate vicinity so drastically that he was beginning to run out of his favorite treat. For a few months, he resorted to eating cattle, horses, goats and sheep and found them to be tasty, though not as tender as the succulent humans. The livestock would be a good enough substitute for eating the humans until the human numbers were restored. However, he needed to make a decision.

Stanford compared in his mind the flavor of the land-based food of cattle, horses, goats and sheep to that of his native food of alligators, turtles, snakes and fish. He concluded that he actually preferred the flavor of his native food from the loch to the land-based food. He decided after all to go back to staying in the loch full-time and eating there. Walking around so much on land was beginning to take a toll on his flippers. He was developing blisters and calluses that he didn't like. He concluded to contentedly wait in his loch for a while for his flippers to return to normal and for the human population to increase.

After a year of residing in the loch, Stanford's flippers had normalized and he started seeing humans on the shoreline again. He was getting the urge to eat those humans. He started by grabbing only one human at a time from the shore, to limit the human losses there. He didn't

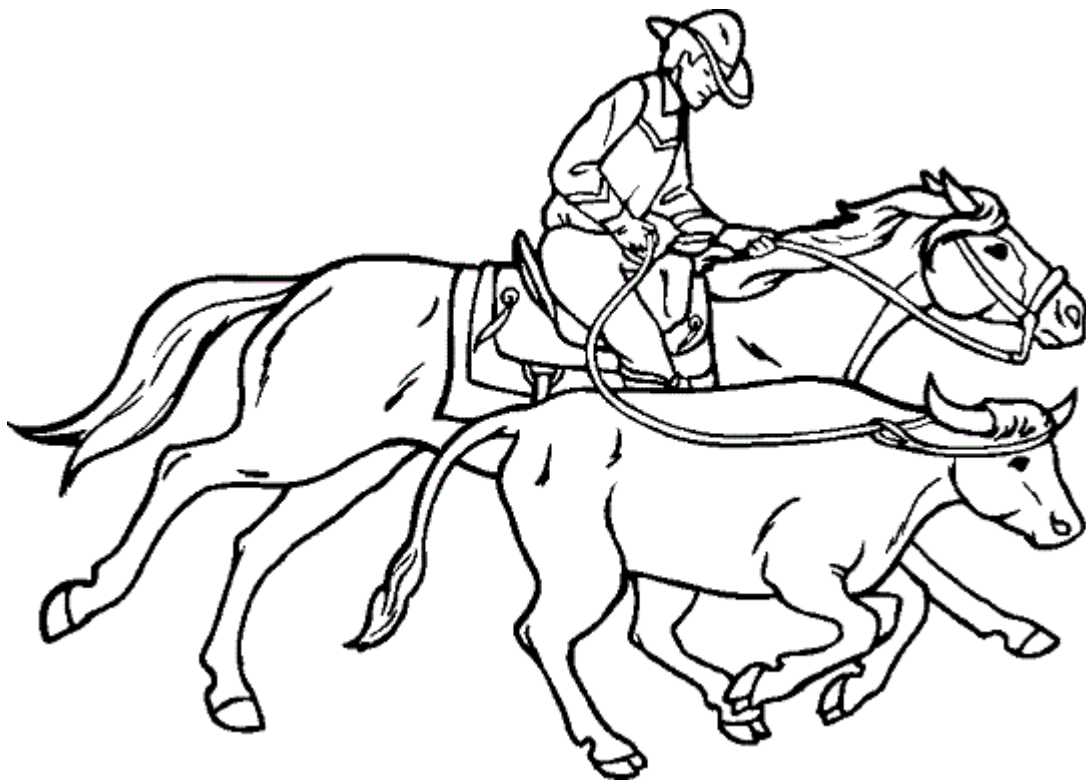
want the humans to become too afraid to visit the shore. He started up his nightly raids again. The villages he started raiding hadn't yet replenished their supply of humans. Apparently, it took them a while to re-populate those villages, for whatever reason. He found himself reluctantly ranging farther away from the loch to find suitable human quantities. He wasn't worried about ambush or attack by the humans. He just had that vulnerable feeling coming back again. He felt like a fish out of water when he was on land. He was roaming up to an hour away from his loch to satisfy his taste for humans.

Occasionally, Stanford wondered what had happened to his mother. He hadn't seen her in decades and wondered if she were still alive. The females of his species tended to live much longer than the males for some reason. His father was long gone. When his father still lived in the loch with him and his mother, their food supply had been dwindling precariously. When Stanford's father passed, it was some relief on the native food supply, but not enough. Luckily, the maternal instinct of Stanford's mother prompted her to depart from the loch. It enabled the 2 of them to survive separately in their own bodies of water. Stanford hoped that she had found a large enough loch in which to survive.

Stanford remembered the direction in which she walked when she departed. He had never gone in that direction on his hunting missions. He wondered if she were actually still alive, could she be living somewhere off in that direction. She would have to be living in a big enough loch to accommodate her food requirements, which had to be enormous. The females of Stanford's species were much larger than the males, similar to the spider species. His mother was big when he last saw her; she must be colossal by now. Stanford hadn't stopped growing yet himself and wondered how big he would be when he was as old as his mother was. Stanford reached the conclusion to venture in the direction of his mother on his next nightly raid.

The next night, he marched off between the 2 giant trees to see what he could see. After 1.5 hours, he noticed a village ahead and thought that he might as well eat something while he was there. He sneaked up to the first house and spotted a shed to knock over to alert the humans to come out. As he approached the shed, a large being emerged from the shadows of the woods on the other side of the house. It was his mother! She was huge, at least twice as big as Stanford was. She must be at the house because she acquired a taste for humans the same way that he had. What a coincidence! He called to her, but she didn't seem to hear him. He yelled louder and she still didn't answer. She had a blank look on her face as if she didn't recognize him. It definitely was his mother and she didn't even know who he was, her own son! Stanford wondered what was wrong with her. Could it be that in her old age she forgot who he was? She looked like a zombie. She slowly approached him. Stanford called again with no response. She growled. Why was she growling like that? Why did she have that look? Stanford was familiar with that look. Stanford slowly backed away. The gargantuan being that Stanford believed to be his mother gazed at him not as her son, but as her next meal.

69. Tanner's West



69. Tanner's West

Tanner awoke at 4:00 am as per usual in the bunkhouse along with Tex, Kit, Doc and Cooky. Tanner worked on the ranch with a bunch of good ol' boys, all of whom he had known his entire life. They went to school together in the one-room schoolhouse in Woodcock, where they were born and raised. The ranch had been passed down to Tanner when he was 18 by his dearly departed grandmother Flossy. They raised cattle, horses, pigs, chickens, goats and sheep for market. It was a load of work for the 5 of them with Cooky doing the shopping, cooking, baking, cleaning, egg gathering, milking, cheese making, butchering, bacon curing, canning and butter churning. They worked 16-hour days, but the monetary rewards were extraordinary. They wouldn't have to work the brutal schedule forever though; they were all saving their money to retire at the age of 50, which was 20 years away. Most folks in those parts lived to the average age of 61, so they might have about 11 years of easy living when they finally got around to retiring. They had a lot of things going on at the ranch and the 5 men had incorporated themselves into a company called Five Oaks, Inc.

Cooky made a nice breakfast as usual which would last them a good many hours. He made some beef and beans, fried eggs, bacon, corn, sourdough biscuits, corn bread, apple pie, cake and coffee. The beef came from a member of their herd. The beans came from a huge can. The eggs came from their chickens. The bacon came from their pigs. The corn came from their fields. The corn bread came from their corn. The butter for the biscuits came from their dairy cows. The apples in the apple pie came from their orchards. Everyone had a nice glass of sarsaparilla for good measure, which was Flossy's secret for longevity. She had made it the record age of 71, which was the oldest that anyone ever heard of someone living in Big Rock County.

After breakfast, Tanner, Tex, Kit and Doc put on chaps over their jeans, boots on their feet, bandanas on their necks, hats on their heads, gloves on their hands and headed out to work. It didn't matter how hot or cold it was outside, they had to wear all the protective gear to be ready for anything to happen, because every day on the ranch, everything did happen. First, they went around and fed all the animals, which took about 2 hours. They just bought some cattle that required branding, so Tanner and Tex did that after they fed the cattle. Kit sheared the sheep while Doc mended some of the fences. The 4 of them had to move some of the horses to let them graze in different pastures. When the cattle were done being branded, they would move them out as well.

Later in the day, Tanner fired up the forge to make some new shoes for some of the horses, while Tex fixed the roof, Kit put a new rope on the well and Doc repaired one of the wagons. It required the 4 of them to get 10 cords of firewood cut, split and stacked. That would take them a number of days. Every day was different on the ranch, because different things had to happen at different times of the year, related to the livestock. They bought, sold and raised horses and

cattle in different numbers, as they felt necessary. They harvested beef from the cattle they kept and the others were sold at market. They harvested pork and bacon from the pigs they kept and the others were sold at market. The chickens were kept for eggs and meat for their own use. The goats were kept for the milk and cheese that they consumed and sold. The sheep were kept for the wool that they sold.

Flossy had always been a firm believer in preparing for the worst and where they lived the worst thing that happened was twisters. She had experienced many twisters during her life, but 9 had been catastrophic to her family. The 1st twister took her father. The 2nd one took her younger brother. The 3rd one took one of her older sisters. The 4th one took her dog. The 5th one took her dog again. The 6th one took the machine shed. The 7th one took the barn. The 8th one took her cat. The 9th one took the tractor. Flossy was a firm believer in the use of the twister shelters. The problem with those shelters was that you had to get in it to be protected by it. Most of the twisters occurred while everyone was sound asleep, with only seconds to wake up, get outside and get in the shelter. Unfortunately, it wasn't always enough time.

Tanner emphasized the importance of the twister drills on the ranch that the 5 of them practiced every week on Sunday mornings. The ranch had twister shelters all over the place, in case the men weren't close enough to the main one by the house. They had all weathered twisters at the ranch together and fortunately, no one was hurt. The buildings had suffered some damage, but nothing to write home about. They never lost any livestock or crops from twisters.

The conditions under which Flossy died had never been made public. All anyone knew was that she had died of natural causes. Both Tanner's parents had died when he was 18, just before Flossy died. Tanner was the only person remaining in Flossy's lineage to inherit her ranch, which is how he acquired it. Some people had spread rumors that a rival ranching company called Big Rock Cattle Inc. may have had something to do with Flossy's demise. Tanner had been too young to be concerned about anything except getting the ranch running again. During the last 3 years of Flossy's life, she had slacked off on maintaining the ranch for some reason; the cattle and horse herds dwindled. She had been barely keeping afloat.

Tanner had been unaware of what was going on at the ranch while Flossy was running it. He had been working for his father. When Tanner's parents died from the twister, he became unemployed. Flossy's passing had come at just the right time for him. Tanner had been able to sell off his parent's house, etc. and move the money to the ranch that he inherited from Flossy. Tanner then approached Tex, Kit, Doc and Cooky with the corporation proposition and they quickly agreed to the idea. Tex had been working at his father's store making very little. Kit was working at an auction house. Doc was struggling to make ends meet as a tailor. Cooky was a cook at his uncle's diner. The 4 men jumped at the opportunity to work at the ranch and make some real money. In the ranching business, it was unlimited how much money could be made, if

the business was managed properly.

It took the 5 men a while to get things going, but they came up with a good plan with the help of some people in town. Tanner had heard things over the years about Big Rock Cattle Inc., bad things. The owner of the company, Bug Brickhall was ruthless and desired to be the only cattleman in the county. He hadn't given Tanner and his boys any trouble yet, but it seemed that it would have to happen sooner or later. Whenever Tanner and company saw Bug at the auctions, he always seemed cordial enough. Bug had a blank look on his face all the time, as if he were always hiding something. When he smiled, he formed his mouth into a smile in a fake manner and didn't smile with his eyes. Tanner had always noticed that facet of Bug's personality. That was the thing that made Bug difficult to read.

When Tanner tried to talk to some of Flossy's former ranch hands about what may have happened to Flossy, they refused to talk. When Tanner mentioned Bug's name to the men, they didn't respond and just walked away. That was very suspicious behavior to Tanner. Anyone could see that. Tex was Tanner's best friend and he advised Tanner to just let things be. Tanner explained to Tex that it was his grandmother who was involved and that maybe Tex was incapable of understanding. Tex maintained that he did understand; it was just that it was impossible to do anything about it. They weren't crime experts and there was no evidence of any wrongdoing. Tanner wished he could get a hold of the coroner that filled out the report for Flossy, which claimed natural causes. The coroner had been lost to a twister 3 years after Flossy passed and Flossy's records were conveniently misplaced somehow.

The more Tanner looked into matters related to Flossy, the less he found out. It was as if someone eliminated all the traces of what happened to Flossy and of any possible information from witnesses. Tanner supposed that Tex might be correct in telling him to forget about it. As long as Five Oaks, Inc. could continue to do business the way they had been doing it, there was no point in making waves. It just bothered Tanner that something may have happened to his wonderful grandmother at the hands of Bug Brickhall or one of his henchmen.

Tanner was unable to dismiss the thought and wished to hire a private detective to investigate his grandmother's business dealings and contacts. Tex, Kit, Doc and Cooky were against the idea, because they were genuinely concerned about the potential hazards of Bug Brickhall. Tanner insisted that law and order should prevail in the matter. His boys argued that Bug had the law in his back pocket and that is probably why there were no traces of his grandmother's death records. Tanner granted that may be the case, but he desired to gain some closure. The 4 men wanted no part of hiring the detective and wanted their names kept out of it. Tanner hired the detective.

The detective worked for a month on the case and managed to find one piece of information. The info was about a woman named Esmeralda who had been friends with Flossy for a long time. Esmeralda told the detective that she had been with Flossy on the night that she may have passed

away. She had been visiting Flossy to discuss the problems that she had been having with Bug. Apparently, Bug had been after Flossy for a while to sell her ranch to him and she refused. He had been asking her for years to sell and he was beginning to get impatient. Bug arrived at Flossy's ranch unannounced and interrupted Flossy's visit with Esmeralda. He knocked on the door and entered with one of his associates. Bug began talking to Flossy in an aggravated voice, causing Esmeralda to tell Bug that he was making her uncomfortable. Flossy asked Bug to leave and he wouldn't, so she threatened to call the Police. Bug told Flossy to go ahead and call them; they wouldn't do anything, because they were his friends.

Flossy realized the futility in threatening Bug and tried to get him to leave by telling him she would think about selling the ranch. Bug didn't believe her and said if she really wanted to sell, he had a contract with him that she could sign. Flossy said she never signed anything until she had her lawyer look at it first. Bug said he already had his lawyer look at it and it would be fine for her to sign it. Flossy was adamant about having her own lawyer look at it. She was trying everything she could think of to get Bug to leave, but he refused. Bug began to get upset with Flossy's resistance to sign the contract. Bug grabbed Flossy by the shoulders and began shaking her and yelling at her. Flossy and Esmeralda began screaming. Bug kept shaking Flossy until she fainted and fell to the floor. On the way down, she hit her head on the coffee table. Bug and his henchman panicked and took Esmeralda outside. They threatened her to keep quiet about what happened. As Esmeralda drove home crying, she didn't realize that was the last time she would see her friend Flossy.

Tanner was shocked at what the detective told him. The detective also said that Esmeralda would be willing to testify against Bug in a court of law. She was tired of keeping the secret and felt that she had nothing to lose. She was old and willing to take her chances with Bug's threat. She wanted Bug to pay for what he did to Flossy. Tanner asked the detective where Esmeralda lived, because he wanted to go and talk with her. Esmeralda had moved to another county per Bug's demands. Bug didn't want her living in the area, being tempted to talk to the authorities.

Tanner paid a visit to Esmeralda with the detective along as a witness. Tanner assured Esmeralda that she would be safe from Bug's threats if she came to live at his ranch. Esmeralda packed 2 suitcases and went to live with Tanner and his crew. Tanner gave her his room on the end so she would have privacy. Tanner, the detective and Esmeralda went to see Tanner's lawyer and told him the whole story. The 4 of them went to the Police to make a report.

At first, the Police appeared resistant and didn't feel that there was enough cause to arrest Bug. Esmeralda emphasized that Bug had said that the Police were his friends and asked the Police if it was true. The Police denied having any favoritism toward Bug and felt that they were being put on the spot. With Esmeralda, Tanner, the detective and Tanner's lawyer present, the Police conceded that they had to do something. They swore out a warrant for Bug's arrest and talked to

the Judge. The Judge was also a friend of Bug's, but Judges had to play by the rules. The Judge determined that Bug could be charged with manslaughter and instructed the Police to arrest him and bring him in.

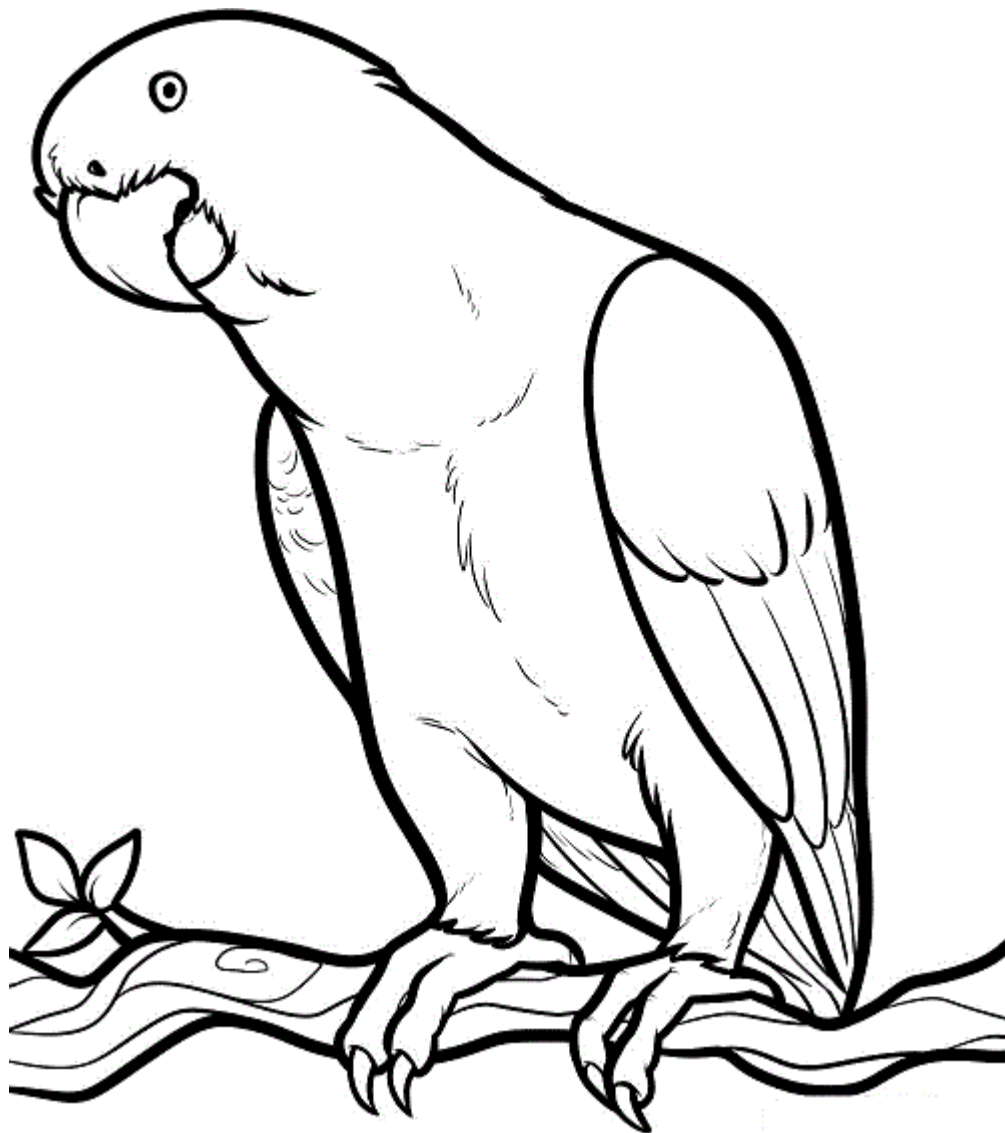
Tanner thanked the detective for his valuable work and brought Esmeralda back to the relative safety of his ranch. Esmeralda told Tanner how it was creepy for her to live at the ranch, because it was the last place that she saw Flossy. Tanner said he understood her concerns, but it was the best place for her to be, under the circumstances. Esmeralda agreed. Over the next few days, as they waited for news of Bug's arrest, Tanner and Esmeralda related stories about Flossy. They both missed Flossy, who was a nice woman who never hurt anyone. They wanted to see Bug pay for what he had done, but they hoped there would actually be a solid enough case. Tanner's lawyer made it sound like the prosecuting attorney should have enough to work with. The problem was that Bug would most likely have high-priced lawyers working for him and that could spell trouble.

Bug had been arrested, charged and released on bail, which was expected. At least things were in progress. Esmeralda was relieved that she had done the right thing. After all the years of living in fear with such a terrible secret, at last it seemed that it would soon be over. Even if Bug somehow weaseled his way out of becoming incarcerated, at least Esmeralda had come forward with the information that many people had already suspected. Most people believed that if Bug didn't personally do away with Flossy, he had to have somehow been responsible for her demise.

Esmeralda had emphasized to everyone that she hadn't actually seen Bug do anything that directly resulted in Flossy's passing. As far as Esmeralda knew, Flossy was still alive when Esmeralda left the house. Flossy passed out from being shaken by Bug and then she fell. After Flossy hit her head, Esmeralda was pretty sure that Flossy was still breathing. Maybe after Esmeralda drove away from the house, something else happened to Flossy. Esmeralda wouldn't be able to testify truthfully that Bug had done anything more to Flossy. Maybe Flossy expired as a result of the shaking, the head injury or a combination of the 2 traumatic events.

Tanner felt secure leaving Esmeralda at the ranch house with Cooky while Tanner and the other 3 men worked the stock. They temporarily shortened their days so they could keep checking back to the house to reassure Esmeralda. It was the stormy season of year on the ranch with the winds swirling, rains falling and lightning crackling. The stormy season always bothered Esmeralda, because it was the same time of year that she had lost her friend Flossy. Tanner, Tex, Kit and Doc were out moving the cattle and horses to different pastures when the winds started blowing like nobody's business. Esmeralda was napping in Tanner's room after eating Cooky's huge lunch. Cooky was down in the root cellar gathering some canned goods for supper. A menacing twister had formed from the swirling winds, thundered down through the pass and headed directly toward Tanner's ranch house.

70. Uncle's Voice



70. Uncle's Voice

Ashanti had owned her beauty salon for 6 years and really brought it a long way. It took a lot of hard work and a loan from her father Royce to get the salon where it was. She increased her clientele to the point that she couldn't handle any new customers. She only accepted walk-ins when there was a rare cancellation. Her shop gave high quality service at the lowest prices in town. The reason that she was capable of charging such low prices is because her father owned the building in which her salon was located and he also owned the buildings on either side. Royce told Ashanti that he bought the 3 buildings all at the same time with a bank loan. Her friends Chantelle, Filomena and Kenisha were stylists and Pauletta was a shampooer/general salon cleaner. Timika did the nails in the ventilated room in the back of the salon.

Ashanti's aunt bought an old parrot named Uncle and gave it to Ashanti as a birthday present. Her aunt had owned the parrot for a month and couldn't stand the way it talked all the time. Ashanti loved the parrot and taught it to say a few things at the salon. When customers went to the ladies room, they had to walk by Uncle on his perch. As the customers passed Uncle on the way into the ladies room he said, "Gonna poop, gonna poop?" When the customers exited the ladies room, Uncle said, "Didya poop, didya poop?" Everyone in the salon burst into uproarious laughter when the parrot said those phrases. The salon was a fun place to spend an hour or two and had gained a reputation in the neighborhood as the place to be.

Ashanti had long benches on 2 of the walls of the salon where people could wait for their appointments or just sit and hang out. It was a hugely social establishment. Music was always playing; bodies were always moving to the beat; people were always talking and merriment was the order of the day. Ashanti had friends in the food service industry who brought food in all day to sell to Ashanti, her workers the customers and the loiterers, with a small fee going to Ashanti. People came into the salon every day just to be there, because it was always so much fun. As long as the people who sat around were customers or related to customers, Ashanti didn't care who showed up each day. She loved the people from the neighborhood and they loved the atmosphere that she had created with the salon.

Everybody adored Uncle and taught him to say things about Ashanti and her employees. Ashanti had a big butt and somebody taught Uncle to say, "Ashanti big butt!" Timika had a small butt and somebody taught Uncle to say, "Timika no butt!" Chantelle had long fingernails and somebody taught Uncle to say, "Chantelle scratch you!" Filomena had big feet and somebody taught Uncle to say, "Filomena big feet!" Kenisha had big eyes and somebody taught Uncle to say, "Kenisha owl eyes!" Pauletta had a big stomach and somebody taught Uncle to say, "Pauletta big gut!" Ashanti's and Chantelle's latest boyfriends Skazz and Trifel came to the salon to chill out and share in the festivities. They usually sat together in the corner talking quietly to each other, occasionally winking at their girlfriends.

Uncle relished being a part of the fun by repeating the phrases that people taught him. Little did anyone know, but Uncle was actually capable of doing much more than repeating only what people taught him. After 43 years of hearing people talking all day long, he had acquired the ability to remember phrases that he picked up by listening in on conversations. He kept his ability secret, because he savored having the talent without displaying it. Uncle got a kick out of the things they tried to get him to say. He thought it was hilarious. He thoroughly enjoyed insulting people with their own insults.

Uncle would sit on his perch in the salon each day and eavesdrop on people's dialogues. He had trained himself to focus through all the talking, laughing, singing and music. He could pick out any 2 people in the room and clarify what they were saying to each other. It was an aptitude that humans didn't possess. He was a unique parrot. When Ashanti and Chantelle met their latest boyfriends a month before, Uncle listened in on them every day when they were at the salon. He didn't trust them for some reason. First of all, he thought they had strange names and he generally disliked people with strange names. He couldn't help it; it was one of his character flaws. He was a parrot after all and really didn't have to like anybody if he didn't want to.

At first, Uncle heard Skazz and Trifel talking about basic boring stuff about all the girls in the salon. They seemed to have some kind of a grading system. Apparently, Ashanti and Chantelle were 7's; Filomena, Kenisha and Pauletta were 8's and Timika was a 9. They would assign numbers to every girl who walked into the salon. Skazz would say, "She's definitely an 8." Then Trifel would say, "No way! She's a 7 at best!" Uncle didn't know what any of those numbers meant and he didn't care. It all seemed pretty stupid to him. Uncle wondered what numbers the girls in the salon would assign to those 2 buffoons.

More recently, Skazz and Trifel were talking about the 3 buildings that Royce owned. Royce seemed to owe a lot of money to someone named Vincenzo. It sounded as if Royce had borrowed the money from Vincenzo to buy the 3 buildings. Vincenzo had agreed to allow Royce a certain amount of time to pay back the loan and the time was up. Vincenzo wanted the loan to be paid in full in 2 months time. Royce didn't have enough money to pay off the loan to Vincenzo and was trying to think of a way to get the money. Royce had an extensive insurance policy on the 3 buildings with full coverage for everything, including Ashanti's salon.

It seemed that Skazz and Trifel certainly knew an awful lot about Royce and his business dealings. Ashanti had to know about the insurance policy, because it involved her salon and its contents. Ashanti had a lot of money invested in the salon's equipment and even though it was paid for, it was still expensive to replace.

Uncle was only aware of things he directly heard people talking about. He could understand what people said, but only in a limited manner. He wasn't able to draw conclusions or read behind the lines of what people said. He wasn't good with colloquialisms or slang either. If

someone said, "I'm down with that," he would be confused. Some of what Skazz and Trifel said was confusing to Uncle, because they used a lot of slang when they talked. Uncle didn't think those 2 oafs were very educated. They had strange drawings on their skin in different colors and metal objects in their ears, like the women in the salon. From hearing Skazz and Trifel talk day after day, Uncle managed to parse out the general concepts of their conversations by their repetition of common words. If asked to repeat what he heard them say, he could do it, because he had an excellent memory. He could repeat from memory entire phrases word for word; he wouldn't necessarily understand it all.

Ashanti and Chantelle invited Skazz and Trifel over to Ashanti's 2-bedroom apartment all the time for partying and other festivities. They liked to meet there, because it was such a big apartment. On one such Friday night, they were all sitting in the living room and Uncle was on his perch listening to everybody and squawking his funny quotes. "Ashanti big butt" and "Chantelle scratch you" were always popular. "Skizzy Skazz" and "Trouble Trifel" were the 2 latest ones. Music was playing and they had a movie running on the TV. Ashanti and Chantelle indicated they were going to the bathroom to freshen up and Uncle said his classic, "Gonna poop, gonna poop?" Everybody laughed. When they were out of the room, Skazz and Trifel sprung into action. Skazz said to Trifel, "Trifel, go and watch the bathroom door. Keep them over there. I'll do the keys and the code." Trifel said, "Got it Skazz." Uncle heard every word.

Skazz shuffled over to Ashanti's purse in the kitchen, removed her keys and from his pocket produced some clay rectangles for making imprints of keys. The clay imprints would be used later by Skazz's locksmith friend to make actual keys. Skazz made imprints of every key on her keychain. He then went through her wallet and found the code for the burglar alarm at her salon. He put everything back exactly as she had it and went back to the living room. Trifel also returned to the living room. Skazz said to Trifel, "Tomorrow we get the keys made by Joaquin and tomorrow night we enter the salon through the back door, deactivate the alarm and turn on all the curling irons." Trifel said, "So Skazz, we're gonna burn that place down and then Royce is gonna pay us the \$30,000." "That's the plan Trifel," said Skazz.

On Saturday morning, Skazz had the keys made. That night, Skazz and Trifel went over to Ashanti's apartment for some festivities and then left earlier than usual. They needed to stay at Ashanti's just long enough to create an alibi for their whereabouts. Their excuse for leaving early was that they had to get up early to do something for Royce. The excuse was believable, because Ashanti knew that the 2 men occasionally did things for her father. Skazz and Trifel went to Ashanti's salon, set things up and waited just long enough for the combustion to begin. Royce had plenty of cardboard boxes strategically placed in the 2 empty adjacent buildings to guarantee an inferno. Ashanti's salon had so much flammable material scattered about that it was an accident waiting to happen.

Early on Sunday morning, Ashanti received calls from her father and the Police about the fire. She went into a frenzy. All her years of hard work and gone up in flames. The fire investigator had determined that the fire was caused by curling irons that had been left plugged in and turned on. She insisted that she always turned off all the equipment before she locked up and left the salon each day. The Police didn't believe Ashanti and arrested her for arson. Royce wouldn't be able to collect on the insurance policy if arson had been the cause of the fire. He hadn't been thinking when he hired Skazz and Trifel to do the job. He had to pay them anyway and therefore was short by another \$30,000 that he should have been giving to Vincenzo. Royce had gotten himself into a real pickle. That's what he got for gambling all his money away.

In the meantime, Royce had destroyed his daughter's business and she was in jail. Royce bailed out Ashanti and she went back to her apartment to cry her eyes out. Uncle tried to console Ashanti with his usual comical phrases, "Ashanti big butt" and "Gonna poop, gonna poop?" She appreciated Uncle trying to uplift her spirits, but she had been smacked too far down. She said to Uncle, "Thanks Uncle for trying to cheer me up, but the salon burned down and I have nothing." Upon hearing that Uncle said, "So Skazz, we're gonna burn that place down and then Royce is gonna pay us the \$30,000." "That's the plan Trifel."

A shocked Ashanti asked, "What did you say, Uncle?" Uncle repeated what he said. "Oh my gosh!" said Ashanti. "When did you hear that stuff?" Uncle said, "Trifel, go and watch the bathroom door. Keep them over there. I'll do the keys and the code." "Got it Skazz." Ashanti fainted. When she awoke, she called Skazz and there was no answer. She called Chantelle to call Trifel. Chantelle said she had been unable to contact Trifel. Ashanti called Royce and had a long conversation with him. Royce was too much in fear of Vincenzo to acknowledge anything about the fire or Ashanti's allegations. Ashanti was disappointed with her father's seeming indifference and felt that he may be in some kind of trouble.

Ashanti went to the Police Station with Uncle and had the parrot repeat everything to the detective on the case. The cop claimed that Ashanti had trained the parrot to say those phrases, because she was so desperate to avoid prosecution. Everyone knew that a parrot could be trained to say anything. Ashanti insisted that she hadn't trained the parrot to say those words. She had been completely taken aback when the parrot uttered those phrases to her. She maintained that the parrot's words were unsolicited by her; the bird said them on its own without any prompting. Ashanti pleaded with the detective to test the parrot in one of the interrogation rooms. He would then see for himself that what she was saying was the truth. The detective was curious enough to take her up on her suggestion. He realized that Ashanti was anxious and seemed to be truthful. The detective only wanted to get to the bottom of the arson, even if it involved using a parrot to do so.

The detective took the parrot into another room for 20 minutes with another detective as a

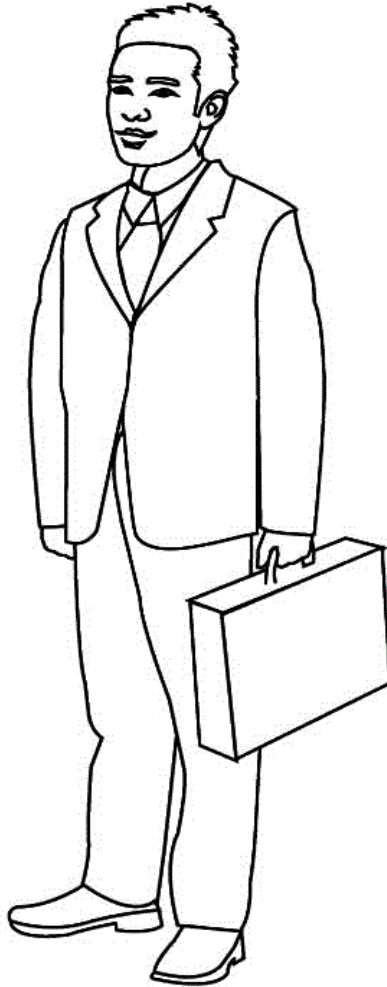
witness. When the detectives returned with Uncle, they asked Ashanti some questions in an attempt to corroborate the statements just made to them by the parrot. The detectives asked Ashanti if she knew anyone named Vincenzo. She said that she didn't. They asked her how Royce had bought the 3 buildings in the first place. She told them that he took out a bank loan. They asked if she knew anyone named Joaquin. She said that she didn't. The detectives were convinced that Ashanti was telling the truth about the parrot. Apparently, the bird had overheard Skazz and Trifel discussing things of which Ashanti was completely unaware. They wanted the Judge to observe the parrot to determine if the bird could be used as a witness. They instructed Ashanti to wait while they visited with the Judge in his chambers. The Judge, being the astute character that he was, came up with some questions of his own for the parrot. The bird was able to say things to the Judge that Ashanti couldn't possibly have programmed it to say.

The Judge had been convinced of the bird's viability as a witness. The case detective took Uncle back to Ashanti and informed her what the Judge said. The detective advised Ashanti to speak to no one about what happened at the Police Station. Ashanti went home with Uncle, overjoyed that she may be able to avoid being falsely prosecuted. She realized that Royce had hired Skazz and Trifel to destroy her beloved salon. Her father must have had a good reason why he did what he did. Those dirt bags Skazz and Trifel were just a couple of criminals looking for easy money anywhere they could find it. Ashanti called Chantelle and told her to not call Trifel anymore and to stay away from him. Chantelle asked Ashanti if it was related to the arson and Ashanti said that she couldn't say anymore about it.

Apparently, Skazz and Trifel had left town with their fee immediately after they exited from the burning salon. No one knew where they went. The Police issued arrest warrants for the duo, which would likely not be executed. They were long gone. In the meantime, Ashanti was still dealing with her father's issue. The Police had no evidence of Royce's direct involvement in the arson. All that was known was that Royce was the owner of the 3 torched buildings. The only evidence came in the form of some words spoken by a parrot. The Judge decided to drop the charges against Ashanti. Due to the evidence provided by the parrot, her alibi of being with Chantelle on the night of the arson and the suspicious behavior of the missing Skazz and Trifel, Ashanti appeared to be innocent. Ashanti began to wonder if Royce had some kind of shady dealings with the characters named Vincenzo and Joaquin. Royce refused to talk to her; he had little time remaining to satisfy his loan with Vincenzo. He was trying to concoct a new plan to come up with the money.

Uncle was getting restless from being cooped up in Ashanti's apartment all the time. He missed the fun of the salon and the people. He was the star of the show when he was there. Where was his salon and what happened to it? Why wasn't Ashanti bringing him to the salon anymore? He wondered if there were any other salons around like Ashanti's. There was only one way to find out. Uncle flew out the open window of Ashanti's apartment and never came back.

71. Wilburn's Bond



71. Wilburn's Bond

Wilburn finally got the big one for the year - a nice potential \$50,000 fee for the collection of one Reginald Cherry - current whereabouts unknown. He was supposed to be in court in San Diego, California, but he wasn't - bad boy, Reginald! Technically, Wilburn was a Fugitive Recovery Agent or Bail Enforcement Agent, the fancy names for bounty hunter. Wilburn's bounty hunting crew consisted of Ringer who made the phone calls, Webber who searched the internet and Trucker who kept everybody fed and maintained/stocked the RV. Wilburn had formed the crew over a period of 8 years. He had been collecting bounties by himself for 10 years, and then added people as he made more money. He felt he currently had the perfect amount of people and only wanted to buy a bigger and better RV in which to travel. The 4 of them lived in a modest 4-bedroom apartment in Topeka, Kansas. From there, they could be anywhere in the contiguous U.S. in 24 hours. They had a bulletproof system perfected by Wilburn and they never failed to bring in the bail jumper.

The fee was divided into 5 parts, 2 of which would go to Wilburn, the only licensed bounty hunter of the quartet. Wilburn was licensed in all the states that required licensure and was careful to obey all the state rules that allowed and didn't allow bounty hunters. The latest fee would grant Wilburn a cool \$20,000, all of which he would pour back into the business. Wilburn and his crew all loved what they did and wouldn't choose any other profession. They all cherished the challenge of the investigative work, the occasional necessary trickery and most of all, the adventure. They would do it for less money, as they usually did, but when a big fee came along, it was time to roll. Everyone always put some of their fee money into their IRA, and then the rest went back into the business. Wilburn promised the 3 members of his crew all the fun they could stand if they would work for him and not expect a regular paycheck. They would always have their home base, but the real goal was buying the ultimate RV. Some day they could all retire, sit back and live off their IRAs. Of course, that day was decades away.

The crew's current RV was a 30 footer, but the long-term goal was one of those \$100K plus big rigs that had all the comforts of home and then some. The 4 of them had all been married and divorced and decided that they were better off living the single life on the road. The situation was the most interesting for Webber, who was the only female of the quartet. She had grown up in a family of 6 brothers and no sisters, so she was used to it. Nobody on the crew messed with her and they all protected her as if she was their sister. Webber was the first person hired by Wilburn, then Ringer, then Trucker. Wilburn had never used a computer in his life, but realized the potential and when he hired Webber, he added 50% to his business. Adding Ringer to be on the phone all day added another 50%. Having someone like Trucker to keep everybody fed and fully equipped in the RV was crucial to being able to drive 1,500 miles in any direction, on a moment's notice. Trucker was an excellent mechanic and first class outfitter. He always had all their gear in perfect working order, packed away in the RV. Wilburn's crew agreed that their

goal in life should be the purchase of a high-end RV, since they were on the road all the time and an RV provided an easy way to transport the bail skipper back to where they belonged.

The instant that Wilburn got the call that Wednesday morning from the bond company for Reginald Cherry, Webber and Ringer jumped on the case. In 3 hours, Webber had some leads that she passed onto Ringer, who started calling on the leads. Trucker was out gassing up the RV and checking the vehicle from front to back and from left to right for anything and everything necessary for the trip. He also packed in a bunch of fresh food and beverages for the ride. Wilburn got on the phone to some people he knew who knew some other people. After 18 years in the business, he came to know hundreds of people in every state. Everybody he knew was always willing to help out an old friend, for a price of course. Wilburn had no problem paying people for information, because it was how the business worked. People always had their hands out, starting with the court system that demanded the bail in the first place.

By that afternoon, Wilburn had ascertained that Reginald was in Seattle, Washington, possibly thinking about sneaking into Canada. They hightailed it out of there as soon as Trucker returned. The RV was equipped with a satellite dish for internet and TV and they had every imaginable electronic device on board. Wilburn spared no expense on the gear and always bought the newest equipment at great discounts through his contacts. He had phone-tapping devices, listening devices, a GPS system and a top of the line video camera system with recording capability for liability protection. Everything Wilburn did was by the book and he filmed everything as a record, in case he had to prove it. He had many rights available to him as a licensed bounty hunter to pursue, apprehend and transport the bail jumpers. He didn't want to violate any state laws while he was hunting. Not every state allowed bail and/or bounty hunters, so he had to be extra careful when crossing state lines with a skipper.

The best thing about having a crew of 4 people was that Wilburn always had 3 witnesses to testify in his favor in any cases of questionable behavior during fugitive apprehensions. Webber, Ringer and Trucker had no criminal records and were law-abiding citizens. He had made sure via his law-enforcement connections of their cleanliness before he hired all of them. As each member of Wilburn's crew joined him, they were amazed at the very existence of bounty hunters and what they did. It was hard to believe that bounty hunters were allowed to do what they did, but the law wanted those bail skippers returned to them. Law and order had to prevail; the arrest authority of a Fugitive Recovery Agent had been granted by The Supreme Court. Individual states all had their own laws, which might differ, however.

They planned to arrive in Seattle by Thursday afternoon and with luck should have Reginald in custody by Thursday evening. The crew checked over all the equipment that would be employed to videotape everything. Trucker carried a camera and followed Wilburn into the buildings. Webber and Ringer operated the camera on the RV to film Wilburn and Trucker at the front

door. Wilburn had 2 cameras on his body to film his activities. Wilburn carried 2 guns in visible outside holsters, 2 containers of mace and 2 tasers, all of which were legal. Wilburn was legally allowed to break the door down as long as it was Reginald's residence, which per their information, it should be. Hopefully, Reginald would surrender to Wilburn peacefully, but he might be desperate and resist being arrested by Wilburn.

When they arrived in Seattle, Wilburn contacted one of his street connections, acquired some information and paid the person. Wilburn then contacted another connection to corroborate the information and it checked out. Wilburn and his crew knew where Reginald was residing and it was time to collect him. They located the street and parked down from the building a little, but close enough to do the video. Wilburn and Trucker donned their gear, which included bulletproof vests and other tactical gear. They started the camera on the RV and Wilburn and Trucker approached the building. In order to block the view of the RV camera, Trucker stood in front of Wilburn as Wilburn crowbarred the front door of the apartment building. As Wilburn entered the building, Trucker turned on his camera and Wilburn turned on his 2 body cameras.

Wilburn led the way up the steps with Trucker filming behind him. When they arrived at the door of Reginald's apartment, Wilburn knocked and said, "Reginald Cherry, this is Wilburn Snow, licensed Fugitive Recovery Agent. Please open the door; I'm here to return you to San Diego." Upon hearing Wilburn knocking at the door, Reginald placed a call to Zebediah. He said, "Zeb, the bounty hunter is here; let's go with plan Echo." There was a pause. "Ok. See you in California." Reginald hung up the phone, opened the door and let Wilburn into the apartment. Trucker stayed in the hallway filming through the open door.

As Trucker filmed the event, Wilburn produced the bond that had freed Reginald on bail and read it to him. He then placed Reginald under arrest and cuffed him. The 3 men exited the building and headed to the RV. They entered the RV and asked Reginald if it would be necessary to put the ankle chains on him and he said that it wouldn't. Sometimes, the fugitives required an extra precaution to keep them in custody. They all settled in for the drive to San Diego. Wilburn had enough gasoline in the RV to travel 1,500 miles non-stop. He wanted to avoid ambush situations that could result from pulling over somewhere. The RV had adequate toilet facilities for the 5 of them for a full day.

Apparently, Reginald had committed his 3rd felony and was due for some hard time, which is why he failed to show up for his court date. Wilburn never judged any of his bail jumpers; he looked upon them only as a source of income. He knew they were all criminals of varying degrees, but many of them were surprisingly cordial. It turned out that Reginald was an excellent singer, with a Michael Bublé type of a voice. Webber played her acoustic guitar while Reginald belted out song after beautiful song. When he was done singing after 4 hours, he requested to take a nap. He claimed that after a week of running, he was exhausted and in a way glad that he

had been caught.

Wilburn found that many of the fugitives that he had apprehended over the years had said the same thing. After a while, the anxiety of always running and looking over your shoulder becomes too much of a grind. From the time a fugitive wakes up in the morning, until they try to fall asleep at night, they are worried about recapture. Many bail jumpers turn themselves in to the Police, realizing the futility of trying to evade the law for the remainder of their lives. They feel that they might as well just get it over with. They go back to court, are sentenced, serve their time and get on with their lives. In some cases, the criminals managed to reform and became valuable members of society again. Unfortunately, that wasn't always the case.

When Wilburn and crew drove on a mission, they constantly rotated drivers and sleepers to keep everyone as fresh as possible. His system enabled them to travel the long distances in the most efficient and comfortable manner possible. No more than one person was sleeping at a time when there was a fugitive on board. Even though Reginald wore handcuffs while in the RV, he couldn't be trusted. Bounty hunters always had to be wary of their captives, due to their possible unpredictability. Wilburn and his crew were all tough, physically fit and knew martial arts, but a bail jumper was like an escaped convict and could be dangerous at any instant.

Ex-con Zebediah knew a lot about Wilburn and his operation, including about the RV that he always used. Zebediah knew much more than Wilburn would have wanted, but it came with Wilburn's territory. Part of the beauty of Wilburn knowing so many seedy characters was that some ugliness occasionally came with the beauty. Wilburn's connections were acquainted with various nasty criminal elements who would love to slow down or eliminate altogether Wilburn's pursuits. Zeb knew where Wilburn was taking his friend Reginald and he planned to be there waiting for him.

Zeb and 3 of his ex-con cronies would be lingering in the parking lot at the courthouse, each in their own stolen vehicle, scattered around the large lot. When Wilburn exited the RV with Reginald, Zeb and company were going to take Reginald at gunpoint and steal the RV. Zeb knew that Wilburn always traveled on the highways and avoided small thoroughfares. Zeb and his boys would be cruising on the southbound highways looking for the Wilburn's RV. When they spotted the RV, Zeb and his crew would race ahead to the parking lot and wait.

Wilburn tried to avoid being ambushed, which was why he always drove everywhere non-stop. Friends of the fugitives he transported had occasionally attempted to trip him up. However, Wilburn had always managed to make good on returning his captives, because he was smarter than they were. Wilburn had gotten too cocky over the last few years, due to never failing in his missions. His 100% success rate had finally gone to his head. His crew had been warning him about his overconfidence. Wilburn had dismissed their concerns as inexperience. He had begun to think that he and his crew were invincible.

Unfortunately, Wilburn and his 3 amigos weren't criminals and were incapable of thinking as criminals. That weakness, if it could be considered a weakness, could be his downfall. Criminals were devious to the point of being animalistic, in that they would do anything to accomplish their goals at risk of life and limb. It was because of the deviousness of criminals that non-criminals couldn't always predict what might be just around the corner coming at them like a freight train. The evil in criminals was why there were so many unsolved crimes on the books of every Police Station on earth. When an occasional unsolved crime was unraveled, the detective would say to himself, "I never thought of that!" and smack himself on the forehead in a eureka moment. The detective would then document the crucial piece of evidence that had solved the crime in the hopes of using it in the future to solve another crime.

Of course, it didn't matter, because the criminal mind was a constantly evolving entity. It didn't want to be figured out and therefore, it must keep changing to stay mysterious. And change it did. There would always be unsolved crimes, because it was human nature to never get caught. It was unfortunate that some of the greatest minds in the world were being wasted on the pursuit of committing perfect crimes. Those great minds would never be content with curing the world's diseases. They wanted something of their own creation. They wanted the evasive prize of getting something for nothing with nobody knowing how they did it. Once the perfect crime had been committed, a bigger crime was always waiting in the wings. It was the never-ending saga of the haves and the have-nots. If only the wealthiest 3% of the world that owned 90% of the wealth would just give it all away to the have-nots, there would be no more crime.

Wilburn and crew were cruising down the highway to San Diego and they were almost there. Wilburn was behind the wheel and he noticed a car speeding past him. He was accustomed to being passed while driving the RV, because the vehicle was too cumbersome to drive excessively fast. He never wanted to get a ticket anyway and always instructed his crew to never drive more than 10 mph over the limit. He had been driving 75 in the 65 zone and it appeared as if the car had passed him at 85. Wilburn's many years in the business had caused him to stir at the sight of that speeding vehicle. He didn't know why; he just had an inkling. Reginald had been sitting at the kitchen table with Trucker and they were both looking out the front windshield. Wilburn had noticed Reginald in the rear view mirror suspiciously looking at the car that had sped by.

That was all that Wilburn had to see; something was about to go down. When they pulled off the highway into the city, Wilburn made an uncharacteristic stop on a side street about 2 blocks short of the courthouse. Reginald asked, "What are you doing?" "Never mind!" yelled Wilburn. "Something's up folks! Everybody put on a vest and tactical. Put Reginald in full chains!" Trucker, Webber and Ringer replied, "Got it, boss!" "Everybody grab a rifle!" barked Wilburn. "And put a hood on our skip!" Wilburn had enacted the most extreme preparations that his crew had ever seen. They reacted without question and readied themselves for the worst. They drove to the courthouse and pulled into the parking lot.

72. Wyatt's Nuts



72. Wyatt's Nuts

Due to Wyatt's natural instincts, he always prepared for rainy days by collecting nuts whenever he found them on the ground or in the trees. He was a gray squirrel; he couldn't help it. The thing he wished he had was a container of some sort in which to store the nuts away from the elements. He was beginning to tire of eating damp or soggy nuts that he had just dug from the ground. He ended up losing a large percentage of the nuts that he buried in the ground. Either he forgot where he buried them, couldn't sniff them out, another squirrel or chipmunk found them or the nuts sprouted into trees. Wyatt hated when the nuts sprouted into trees; there were enough nut trees around already. He decided to find a place to store the nuts and group together with the other gray squirrels, red squirrels and chipmunks in the area into a co-op.

After searching the general area, he found 37 gray squirrels, 17 red squirrels and 99 chipmunks and they held a meeting to decide where to store their nut collection. A gray squirrel friend of his suggested using the attic of the decrepit old guy's house located closest to the woods. Wyatt scaled the side of the house and at the peak, found a space in the siding. He widened the space into a hole that was big enough to crawl through. The attic was completely empty and had a lot of storage volume. The house had the approximate dimensions of 24' x 40' and Wyatt estimated that the co-op would be able to fit in the attic space over 2.5 million hickory nuts, walnuts, acorns and chestnuts. Wyatt made a similar hole in the same place on the other side of the house.

As long as all the 154 members of the co-op contributed to the collection of nuts, everyone would be able to eat nuts at will during the winter. They started collecting immediately and stored the nuts by dropping them through whichever hole was more convenient. The collection began growing rapidly with all the animals involved in the gathering.

Werner was the half-baked old guy who owned the attic and house that the squirrel/chipmunk co-op was using for nut storage. Werner was 88 years old and was hard of hearing. He always blasted his TV and even though it was loud, he could fall asleep in front of it. He only slept 4 hours per day, because he didn't require much sleep at his age. Werner exercised by walking from his luxurious recliner to the bathroom, kitchen or bedroom and back. He also walked on the treadmill next to the recliner in the living room. He walked once a day for a mile, which at a speed of 1 mph on the readout, took him an hour. He obviously wasn't in any hurry. Werner wasn't able to hear the co-op animals scurrying up and down the sides of his house or hear the nuts landing in his attic. He cranked the volume of his TV 24 hours a day and slept whenever he dozed off in his chair. He hadn't used his bedroom in years.

Werner had read somewhere that the best way to prevent Alzheimer's was to read interesting books and write interesting stories. He started writing short stories years ago and he was just starting number 72. He entitled the story, "Wyatt's Nuts." The story was about a squirrel named Wyatt that decided to store nuts in the attic of a doddering old man. The squirrel teamed up with

all the other squirrels and chipmunks in the area to gather and store as many nuts as possible in the attic. The animals would share all the nuts during the winter. Werner thought it would make an interesting nature story.

Wyatt and the co-op had completed the first layer of nuts in the attic, which added up to over 100,000 nuts. They were doing pretty well and hoped to have the attic full in time for winter. The idea was to store as many as possible for the winter months, when nut gathering would be difficult or impossible. Some of the lazier chipmunks started sneaking into the attic to eat some of the nuts, necessitating the posting of guards at the 2 holes. The names of the guards were picked at random and every co-op member had to serve on a rotating basis. The co-op emphasized the importance of saving the nuts for winter.

Werner loved watching TV and enjoyed all the game shows, both the day and the night versions. His favorite game show was The Price is Right, followed by Wheel of Fortune. He preferred Bob Barker as the host of The Price is Right, compared to Drew Carey, but found Drew to be acceptable. Werner was so good at playing game shows, that he figured he would have won millions of dollars of money and prizes, had he played the games in person on TV. Werner also liked watching movies on his big screen TV and subscribed to all the premium channels. In between watching movies, game shows and napping, he would write a little of his story. Then he would take a walk to the kitchen or bathroom and then back to his beloved recliner.

He sat in a premium recliner that was huge and soft, which is what enabled him to fall asleep so easily. It had settings for massage, heat and stereo sound from his TV. When it came to his entertainment facilities, Werner spared no expense. Werner wrote his stories out by hand in a notebook. He planned to have someone type them into a computer someday and have a hardcover book made. He didn't care if anybody liked his stories; he wanted to do it for enjoyment and to improve his cognitive skills. He had definitely noticed an improvement in his brainpower and found himself remembering things that he had done as a kid in Rhode Island.

When he was thinking of ideas for his stories, he drew from his past, particularly from his school days. He managed to remember all the way back to kindergarten when he taught all the other kids how to tie their shoes. All the other kids used to call him Wonderful Werner for his abilities. He could hold his breath longer than any of his friends in 1st grade. When he was in 2nd grade, he was the only kid who could pronounce the last name of a new kid from Lithuania. In 3rd grade, Werner was the first kid to have a bike. When he was in 4th grade, Werner was the fastest runner in his elementary school.

In 5th grade, Werner was the only kid with a job. When Werner was in 6th grade, he was almost hit by a car. In 7th grade, Werner saw a UFO. When he was in 8th grade, Werner asked one of the teachers out on a date and was rejected. In 9th grade, Werner was the first to have a car. When Werner was in 10th grade, he was hit by a car and sustained minor injuries. In 11th grade,

Werner and a couple of his friends went to summer school and graduated early from high school. After high school, he joined up with an HVAC company and worked there for 51 years. When he retired at the age of 68, he moved out to his current house in the country and happily lived alone for the past 20 years. He used to have his friends over until they all passed away. It's not easy getting old, he would say to each friend as they disappeared from his life.

Werner had many times considered buying a horse, ostrich or a goat, but considered pets to be too much trouble. He didn't want to have to mess around feeding and cleaning up after an animal. He could barely keep his filthy house clean. Werner bathed once a week whether he needed to or not. Many weeks during the summer, he chose to skip around in front of the lawn sprinkler with a bar of soap, in lieu of an actual shower. Werner didn't sweat the small stuff; he had learned early on that life was too short to waste time taking unnecessary showers every day.

Wyatt had made bets with some of the other gray squirrels who could collect the most nuts each day. The winner would be able to spend an hour in the attic, eating whatever nuts they wanted. By the end of the day, Wyatt had lost the bet by 3 nuts to his Uncle. Wyatt didn't care, because the bet was just a fun way to help the chore of nut collecting go by faster. Wyatt didn't consider nut collecting to be work anyway, because it was his instinct to collect them. Some of the chipmunks were lethargic and didn't have the go-getter attitude of the squirrels. The red squirrels were especially feisty when collecting nuts. They didn't want anyone to know where they were getting the bigger ones. It was silly really; everyone would benefit from the efforts of all the squirrels and chipmunks, come winter.

Werner wrote in his story how the squirrel named Wyatt made a bet with the other squirrels of who could collect the most nuts and of course, Wyatt won. He was allowed to spend 2 hours in the attic eating as many nuts as he could. When the time was up, he was so full that he could barely squeeze through the hole in the side of the house to get back out. When he did get out, he barfed out all the nuts he just ate. He wanted to go back into the attic for another 2 hours, but the other squirrels wouldn't let him. Werner thought it would be funny if squirrels actually made bets like that with each other. Of course, it was preposterous, because squirrels were just silly little rats with bushy tails, incapable of any real intelligent thought, much less betting.

Wyatt thought how convenient it was that the silly old man who owned the house was too befuddled to notice the co-op filling his attic with nuts. The co-op had certainly picked the right house to use as a storage facility. Wyatt thought for sure that the old fool would have heard all the nuts clanging on his ceiling for weeks. Wyatt reckoned that the obliviousness was likely from a combination of the old man's general feebleness and loud TV. Whatever the case, as long as the guy stayed the way he was, the co-op would be able to prosper for years at that location. There were nut trees everywhere, positively laden with the precious foodstuff. The squirrels and chipmunks couldn't ask for a better place to live. It was like a Garden of Eden for them. The

attic for storage was the greatest idea that any squirrel could ever have. Wyatt wished it were he who had thought of the idea, but as long as he could contribute to the cause, it was good enough.

Werner occasionally looked out his windows to see what the weather was doing and spotted an unusual number of squirrels and chipmunks around his house and woods. He attributed it to the natural instincts of the creatures to always collect food for winter. Even though Werner felt the creatures were mindless rodents, he still admired their work ethic and fortitude. He was glad that he didn't have to run around all year foraging for food. He supposed that was the essential difference between man and the beasts. Those silly beasts! Look at them out there, running around with nuts in their mouths. Werner wondered where they were putting all those nuts, because they didn't appear to be pausing to eat them. Whatever. It was time for Let's Make a Deal, and then The Price is Right. He had to make some popcorn for his shows.

Wyatt and the co-op were making progress on the nut pile, layer by layer. When they started a new layer, someone had to go into the attic to spread out the nuts occasionally, to make it uniform. If they didn't spread the nuts out, eventually they wouldn't be able to stuff any more nuts into the holes in the side of the house. The nuts would just pile up against the holes. Uniform layers ensured a nice variety of nuts throughout the layer, instead of being concentrations of one nut variety, which nobody wanted to happen. The chipmunks didn't have a lot to say about the workings of the co-op, but they had great senses of humor that were always appreciated. Squirrels needed a good laugh now and then and the chipmunks had good memories for remembering jokes.

In between writing and watching TV, Werner occasionally looked back on his life and wished that he had adopted some poor unfortunate children. There were many refugee orphan children in the world, due to all the political chaos. He didn't know if he would have been a suitable candidate for adopting one of those kids, but at least he could have tried. The only thing he did along the lines of helping his community was working in the food kitchen years ago. He got a really good feeling out of the experience. The establishment had so many volunteers that they didn't need him after a while, so he stopped going. He lost interest altogether in volunteering once he started writing his short stories. It took him a long time to write one of the stories, but he had nothing but time on his hands. He wanted to write 100 stories and then print out the collection in hardcover for posterity. He had been writing for 23 years and was only on number 72, but he was hopeful that he would make it to 100 before he croaked. He supposed that he could stop at any point and make the book, but it was just an idea.

The co-op was making great progress on the nut collection and was at the halfway point in the attic. It certainly seemed like a lot of nuts when they were viewed all in one place up there. The co-op animals intermittently peeked into the holes in the siding to look at the nuts and drooled at their accomplishment. The nuts would stay in perfect condition and be nice and dry and

healthful. They wouldn't lose any nuts to rotting from excessive moisture, as in the past. No nuts would be wasted by sprouting into trees. It was really a great idea that they came up with. Wyatt was indeed happy with the co-op's achievement. He planned to travel to other parts of the county to spread the word of the co-op's success with the formation of the co-op itself and of the nut-storing innovation of the attic.

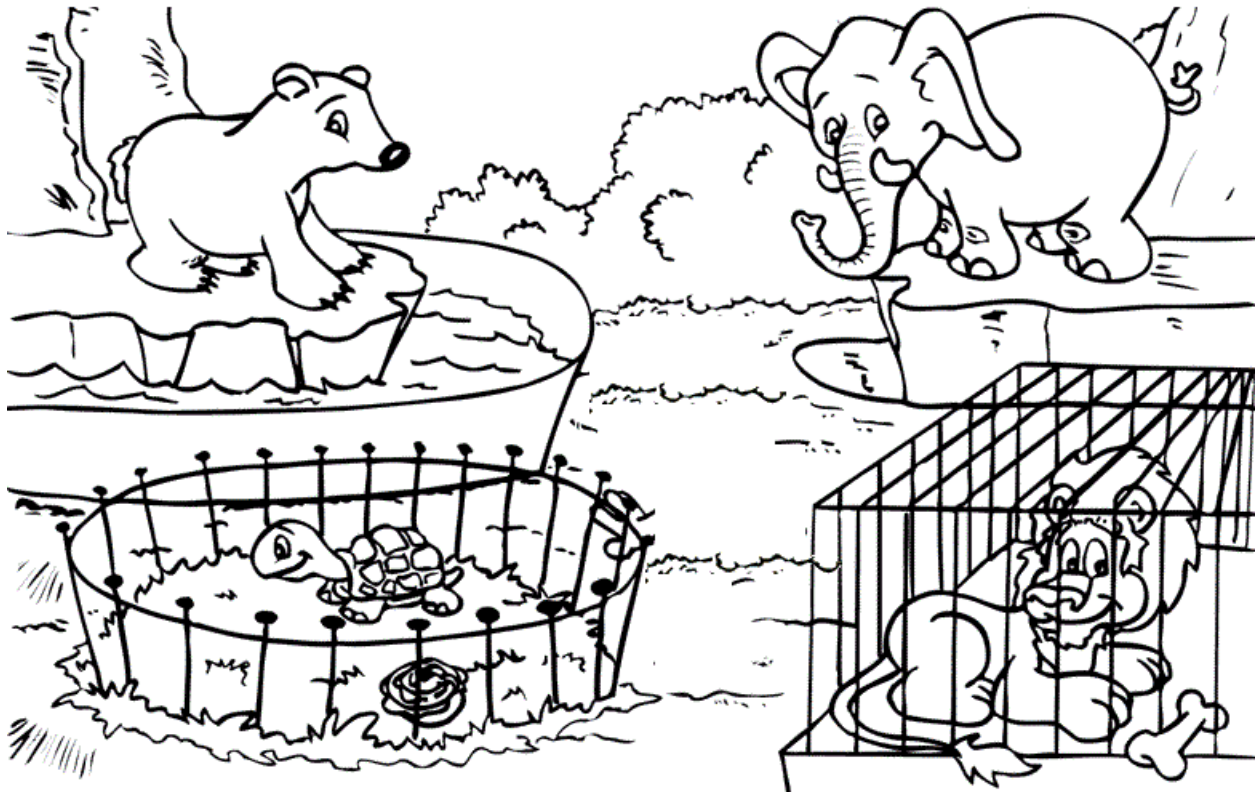
Werner wrote in his squirrel story how the squirrels were all patting each other on the back for coming up with such a great idea. It wasn't necessarily an original idea for squirrels to invade attics, but the fact that the squirrels had grouped together was the kicker. Werner thought about other animals that grouped together for a common purpose. Certainly, hyenas, wolves, lions and other pack animals teamed up to survive. Those animals worked together because of the simple instinct of strength in numbers. Were there other animals similar to beavers that seemed to intelligently team up to do something? Bees and ants certainly filled the bill of grouping together for a purpose. The more that Werner thought about it, he realized that some animals in nature might have more going for them than he originally thought. Maybe those squirrels weren't so dumb after all.

Wyatt looked into the window of the old man's house that Wyatt and the co-op were abusing for their own purpose. Wyatt observed the oaf sitting in his recliner eating popcorn yelling at his TV set. Wyatt wondered how humans even survived in the complicated world. Look at that goof in there; he probably couldn't survive living outside the way the squirrels and other animals did. That human didn't look as if he had a brain in his head. He looked as dumb as an ox and he was drooling. He was yelling at that box in the room. What was that all about?

Werner's favorite nighttime game show, Wheel of Fortune was on and he always loved trying to solve the puzzles before the people did on TV. Werner felt that he was actually pretty good at the puzzles. He would have won thousands of dollars if he played that show in person. Werner received the New York Times and always completed the crossword puzzles. He was so good at it that he used a pen, like some of those show-offs at the barbershop.

Wyatt and the co-op were nearing completion of the attic-filling extravaganza and they debated about how much room to leave in the attic. Should they fill the attic all the way to the top or leave some space to more easily pick from a variety of nuts? The co-op voted on whether or not to fill the attic to the top. When the votes were tallied, it was 80 in favor of maximizing to 74 against. They concluded that it was better to fill the attic with as many nuts as they could force in there, to be better prepared for a potentially long and bitter winter. As Wyatt and the other gray squirrels pushed on the last few nuts that would go into the holes, they could hear Werner yelling at his TV again. As Werner bellowed, "Buy a vowel, buy a vowel! Why doesn't she buy a vowel?", the last 2 nuts were forced into the holes in the siding. The attic creaked noisily and collapsed from the weight of the 2.5 million nuts.

73. Vance's Zoo



73. Vance's Zoo

Vance's zoo was in trouble; he was the head zookeeper and virtually every animal in the place had one issue or another. Vance feared that it might be Albert Einstein's prediction coming true that eventually all animals in captivity would rebel against their captors. It was a sad thing to think about, but the concept certainly possessed some validity. The state of New Hampshire's motto, "Live Free or Die" had a similarly eerie quality, although it pertained to humans, not animals. Whatever was the cause of the distress of his animals, it was a real problem for Vance. He had loved animals his entire life and his family always had all kinds of pets.

The lions refused to be in the same cage with each other and were constantly brawling and bickering. The big male lion named Nestor was a former Police K-9 animal and had served the department honorably. He was beginning to show tendencies of actually wanting to maul his feeders. Nestor was growling continuously. Vance was forced to separate the big cats into different smaller containments that reduced their quality of life. The zoo had a policy that if any animal in its care had reached a point of discomfort for more than a month, the animal would need to be sent to another zoo that could accommodate the animal appropriately. If only there were other zoos that could accommodate Vance's animals. The zoo's policy was an admirable one in theory, but in reality wasn't always possible to execute. As Vance would find out, the zoo animals of the world seemed to have had enough of captivity.

Ellsworth was a camel that somehow had climbed a tree and became stuck in the tree a couple of years back. He was having some trouble in his paddock lately. It seemed that he had been chewing on the new sleeping structure to the point of damaging it beyond repair. The zoo would have to build a new structure made from metal, to prevent him from destroying it. It was common for animals to chew on things when they became stressed for whatever reason. Ellsworth was harassing the other camels and was trying to get them to join him in chewing on all of the paddock's wooden objects. Ellsworth would have to be put into a smaller containment, which he would undoubtedly dislike.

There was the huge ostrich named Quincy that had been brought in temporarily to recuperate from gunshot wounds. Quincy was beginning to get antsy from being in the zoo. He was supposed to be there under special care for 2 weeks, but he wanted out after only 3 days. Vance would have to make arrangements for Quincy's owner to come and get him. The ostrich was a great attraction at the zoo, because of his size, but he was getting too crazy. He kept trying to climb the fences to the point of possibly injuring himself. He was spitting at the zoo visitors and pooping against the fence where the visitors could smell it. Quincy's immense size made it difficult for the handlers to do anything with him in a safe manner.

The giraffes began to do things that Vance didn't think was possible for giraffes to do. They were actually somehow standing on their heads! It was truly a sight. The few zoo visitors who were

lucky enough to see the feat snapped as many pictures as they could. Vance believed that the giraffes had to be going insane. What would possess previously normal animals to flip out the way they did? The giraffes were performing physically impossible acts. There was no reason in nature for them to stand on their heads, so they had to be mentally disturbed. Could it be as a result of something they ate?

The elephants were filling their trunks with all the water from their water troughs, walking over to the visitors at the fence and spraying them with the water. They were doing it all day long. The elephants were obsessed with spraying the visitors with water. Even after the zoo was closed for the day, the elephants kept doing the same thing. They were spraying water at the fence in the middle of the night. Vance didn't mind except he had to make sure that the elephants had enough water to actually drink. The handlers had to add extra water troughs and keep them full. When the troughs were empty, the elephants flipped them over, making it necessary to chain the troughs to the ground.

The giant 100-year old tortoise began running around his corral continuously. It took him a while to make one complete trip, but he kept at it non-stop. He dug a trench in the ground that had become 3 feet deep from the continuous trampling. He had been running for 3 weeks and had dug out about a foot per week. At that rate, the tortoise would be invisible in his trench in a month's time. Vance wasn't quite sure how to address the situation. He started by filling the trench with concrete to prevent further excavation by the beast. The tortoise simply started running on a path next to the concrete filled trench. In a week, he had another 1-foot deep trench dug around his corral.

The mountain gorillas tore down all the tires, logs and other toys that were hanging from chains. They launched the items over the fence at the visitors and injured 6 people. They tore the chains down and mercilessly whipped 2 of the unsuspecting handlers to the point of unconsciousness. The gorillas had to be tranquilized in order to remove the fallen handlers. The silver back gorilla leader refused to cooperate after pretending to being tranquilized. He reared up, knocked 3 handlers down and spanked them. He actually spanked them! It would have been really funny under other circumstances. The silverback required another tranquilizer dart to bring him under control.

The zebra herd was having a ball stampeding back and forth across their paddock. They kicked up such a cloud of dust that the zoo had to be closed in that section. The handlers were forced to bring in hoses to wet the ground, preventing the zebras from creating any more dust. The handlers had to re-wet the ground every 6 hours. That didn't stop the zebras from running, however. They continued rampaging back and forth in the mud until they were completely covered from head to toe with mud. It was impossible to discern what kind of animals they were. When the mud dried on their bodies, they were gray colored. They continued running and

running.

The rhinos were enjoying the use of their colossal horns as picks and shovels in their paddock. The biggest rhino would dig his 3-foot long horn into the ground, tearing great ruts. Then the other 3 rhinos would use their horns to dig even deeper. In no time, the rhino paddock resembled a freshly plowed farm field. The rhinos appeared to enjoy wading in the deep dirt. The big rhino kept digging deeper and deeper until he had actually disappeared from view. Then the 3 other rhinos disappeared. The 4 rhinos had concealed themselves in 4 feet of cultivated soil. The handlers were at a loss what to do. Vance suggested that as long as the rhinos were still in their paddock, it was fine for the time being.

The hippos had formed themselves into a pyramid. The 22 hippos in the paddock figured out how to stack themselves by climbing on top of each successive upwardly rising hippo layer. They eventually had the smallest hippo standing on the top of the hippo pyramid barking out its hippo bark. They ended up with 4 layers and the visitors enjoyed seeing the world's first hippo pyramid. Vance called around to the other zoos and they all were experiencing similar phenomena. He had been hoping to move some of his animals to other zoos at the same time that the other zoos were hoping the same of him. Vance was going to have to figure it out on his own somehow.

The wolves began howling a week ago and haven't stopped since. They had howled so much that their voices had taken on a comical raspy sound. They were verging on losing their voices. Vance wasn't too worried about them, because they would soon be silent. As long as they continued to eat their food and drink their water, they would at least be healthy. After another week, the wolves had become silent, but they continued trying to howl. They could only whisper, but it was definitely howling.

The tigers began howling like wolves, something that no one on earth had ever witnessed. The 4 tigers were sitting on the ground in a line with their heads tilted back. They were attempting to howl, but of course, it came out as more of a continuous high-pitched roaring sound. It was the creepiest thing that Vance had ever heard. It sounded like some kind of beings in a horror movie. He didn't know how the tigers were able to tweak the tones of their roars the way they did. They were harmonizing like a barbershop quartet. Whatever possessed them to do such a thing? Vance was beginning to dread what each new day would bring.

The black bears all climbed to the tops of their trees and refused to come down, no matter how many food items were used to tempt them. The handlers couldn't shoot the bears with tranquilizer darts, for fear of the bears getting hurt from falling out of the trees. The handlers pretended to cut the trees down with running chainsaws, but the bears wouldn't fall for it. The handlers began pounding on the trees with sledgehammers, in an attempt to vibrate the bears down. The bears looked at each other and seemingly on cue, pissed and pooped on the handlers

below. Upon seeing what they did, the bears laughed at the soiled handlers, but still refused to come down.

The grizzly bears teamed up, dragged all the trees and boulders in their enclosure to the edge of the moat and climbed out of their enclosure. The horrified visitors ran screaming out of the zoo and called the Police in terror. The zoo had to be temporarily closed and the bears were tranquilized. Vance was forced to keep the bears inside until he could figure out what to do with them. None of the other zoos was able to take them in, due to similar problems with their bears. The grizzly bears were always Vance's favorite animals at the zoo, due to their majestic stature and raw power. Vance's former awe of the bears had turned to fear. The giant predators had actually figured out how to escape from their enclosure. If the bears continued to be so wily, there would be no way to keep them in the zoo in a structure where they would be safely observed by the public.

The polar bears thought it would be funny if they threw all their food at the visitors. Vance and the handlers had never seen the polar bears turn their noses to food, much less throw it out of their enclosure. The bears launched the food and the empty containers at the shocked visitors. A man and his son were both hit in the face by fish and plastic food bins. Nobody was seriously injured, but they weren't very happy. When the polar bears ran out of food and food dishes to throw, they splashed the water in their pool. One of the 3 bears sat on the edge of the pool and kicked his back legs in the water, splashing non-stop. Another bear jumped into the pool and did cannonballs. When the bear landed in the water, it quickly swam to the edge, climbed out and made another cannonball. The 3rd bear of the playful trio just stood in the pool continuously splashing with his enormous front feet. The bears splashed for hours, never appearing to tire.

The water buffaloes started head butting each other. They continued until one or both of them were knocked out. Eventually, of the 23 buffaloes in the paddock, there was only one left standing. That last one wasn't satisfied and began head butting the fence until he knocked himself out. Vance had seen buffaloes and goats head butting before, but not to the point of unconsciousness. They usually only butted until one gave in, yielding superiority to the other one. The practice was usually only carried out during mating season to determine which studs would get the most females to mate with. If the psychotic water buffaloes continued head butting each other, they would eventually cause major damage to their skulls and brains, possibly resulting in their expiration.

The alligators were normally the most immobile creatures in the zoo and rarely presented Vance with any problems. The alligators didn't appear to be alive sometimes, due to their lack of movement. Somehow, the alligators had figured out how to climb the fences of their enclosure and 17 of them were running amok in the zoo. The only one remaining in the enclosure was the 15-foot long old timer, who probably stayed right where he was to be able to eat the food left

behind by the others. Alligators climbing fences really took the cake for Vance. When was he going to see the end of the insanity? How many more biological impossibilities would he be exposed to at the zoo?

The cheetahs started running at full speed in their paddock and jumping over each other's backs as if they were playing leapfrog. It seemed innocent enough at first, until they started using the other cheetah's back as a vaulting mechanism. When a cheetah gets its speed up, it is a thing of utmost grace and beauty. When a cheetah runs, vaults off the back of another cheetah and flies through the air a great distance, it's a big deal. The cheetahs were running so fast that when they vaulted, they flew over the fence of the enclosure. In no time flat, 6 cheetahs were outside their enclosure, running at breakneck speed around the zoo, scaring everyone who saw them speed by.

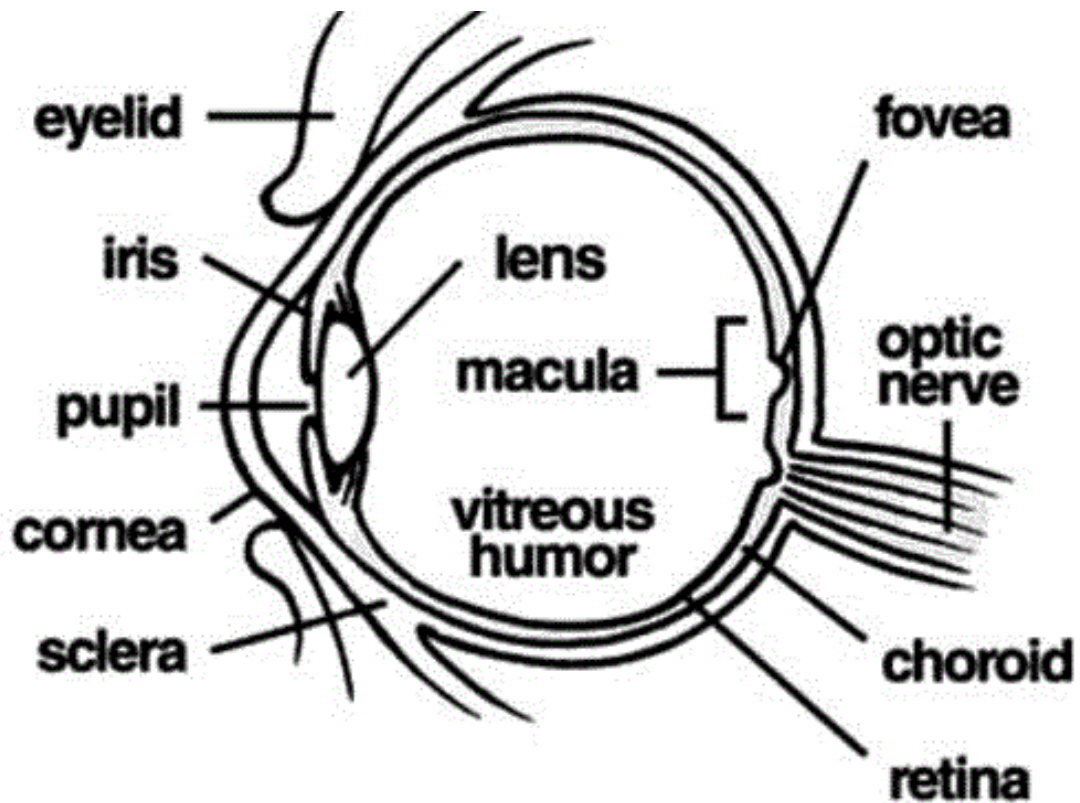
The kangaroos began running and hopping around their paddock like nobody's business. It didn't take them long to get the idea to escape. Their paddock had been designed to keep them from jumping over the fence. However, it wasn't designed to prevent them from climbing out, which they did. Twenty kangaroos hopped around the zoo, trying to avoid being eaten by the cheetahs and alligators. The kangaroos could easily avoid the alligators, but the cheetahs had managed to bag 2 of the kangaroos and the fast cats were enjoying an afternoon snack of kangaroo meat.

The walruses were the only animals in the zoo that appeared to be behaving normally and Vance wanted to know why. He decided to talk to the handlers to see what they thought. They didn't have any input. The walruses were consuming the same food and water as they usually did. The walruses awoke at their usual time and went to sleep at their usual time. At least Vance didn't have to worry about the walruses. If only he could determine why the walruses were still normal, he could possibly apply the knowledge to the remaining troubled zoo animals.

Vance researched walruses extensively and consulted with marine biologists. Apparently, walrus milk was the closest thing to human milk. Vance wondered if there was something inherent in walruses that had prevented them from becoming lunatics at the zoo. The zoo happened to have 3 lactating walruses that were nursing their young. Vance was desperate and would try anything to save his animals and the zoo. He had his handlers carefully extract a quart of milk from each mother walrus. He gave a quart of walrus milk to Nestor the lion, Ellsworth the camel and Quincy the ostrich. The animals seemed to like the taste of the milk and immediately lapped it up. Vance would wait for the milk to hopefully work its magic on the 3 animals.

The next day, Vance returned the 3 test subjects to their normal enclosures to ensure the validity of the test. Vance and his handlers observed the animals throughout the day with their fingers crossed. Nestor had stopped his continuous growling; Ellsworth had ceased his desire to chew everything in his paddock and Quincy had stopped trying to climb the fence to get out. The animals seemed relaxed and happy and they appeared to have returned to their old selves again. The walrus milk had worked!

74. Verdell's Vision



74. Verdell's Vision

Verdell wished for most of his life that he had the ability to restore at least some of the vision of someone who had lost all or most of it, due to illness, injury or just plain bad luck. His grandfather had gone blind at the age of 59 from the aggravated effects of the Type I diabetes that he had unfortunately been born with. It was because of his grandfather that Verdell dedicated his life to finding a way to help the blind or visually impaired of the world. He started his quest by getting the highest grades possible in school, and later in college. Over a period of 23 years, he obtained higher education in ophthalmology, optometry, corneal surgery, microelectronics and optic nerve restructuring.

When kids went to school, they always learned about the one thing that was out of reach by humanity, the nerves. Verdell's studies had always involved the same people doing and saying the same things at the highest level of thinking. Those high thinkers weren't getting anywhere, though. Verdell was one of those high thinkers himself, but after banging his head against the wall for so long, he decided to try a simpler approach to the problem.

What if we were to treat the nerves and neurons simply as wires? That's all they really were in the body anyway, just wires. They were incredibly sophisticated wires, but they were just wires. The fact that the connections were made chemically in the synapses was what confounded everyone. Verdell's new approach involved looking at the human body's electrical system as a bunch of wires. What if he were to use the lens of a camera in place of the human eye? Obviously, it couldn't be a simple SLR type of a lens. It would have to be a digital lens like that of a cell phone or digital camera. The lens could be electronically focused via voice control. The person would wear a controller for each eye behind their ear, like a hearing aid.

The controller would need to be sophisticated enough to focus the lens via the person's voice, while at the same time transmitting the image to the person's brain through their optic nerve. The optic nerve was the other part of the problem, if it was damaged or unusable for some reason. How could the image be transmitted to the brain without an intact optic nerve through which to transmit?

The lens would be implanted in the eye through a process similar to cataract surgery where lenses are replaced. The new lens would have wires running to the controller. Wires would run from the controller into the brain. The connection at the brain was probably the trick to everything. Wherever the optic nerve of a person was connected to their brain was where the story should begin. The solution to blindness needed to be attacked in phases.

Verdell had been perfecting his electronic lenses for 2 years and was ready to try them out. He had also perfected a prototype controller to connect to the lenses and the optic nerve or to the brain.

For one phase, a volunteer would be needed whose eyes were physically damaged, but the optic nerve and brain connection were still intact. The person would be technically blind and their eyes would be irreparable by typical means. That volunteer would be perfect for one part of the solution, that of installing the new electronic lenses and controller. The new lenses would be attached to the existing healthy optic nerve via wires on one end and to the behind-the-ear controller at the other end.

It was always easy for scientists, doctors and surgeons to find volunteers for new procedures. Hospitals were always on the lookout for people who were willing to help with the advancement of medicine. The people typically had nothing to lose and usually something to gain. Verdell was fully qualified to perform the procedure of the new electronic lens installation. However, he preferred to have an expert in the field take the case. The surgeons who routinely fix cataracts are the best candidates, since they do it all the time. Verdell located a cataract expert colleague of his who was always willing to improve the science of eye surgery.

The volunteer was waiting at the hospital; she was the victim of a drunk driver who she mistakenly entrusted to drive her car. She had also been drunk at the time, actually more drunk than the driver. When they crashed, she flew through the windshield from the lack of wearing seat belts and her eyes were blinded by the broken glass. The driver didn't survive the crash. Verdell brought to the hospital his controllers and experimental electronic lenses, which were exactly the same size as the typical lenses used for cataract repair. The operation took about 2 hours, which was the normal amount of time for cataract surgeries. The controller required some tweaking to get it hooked up and working, but all was well.

The patient would be able to test out their new vision in about 4 days. In the meantime, Verdell discussed with the patient some of the guidelines in using the controller. Since the controller was voice activated, the user would have to learn to say the correct words with the proper tone to get the desired focusing result. The controller could be set up to respond to any language, which made it a universal product. Verdell wondered what would be the best way for a user to operate the controller. Should they say words like "closer" or "farther" to adjust the focus of the electronic lens or use other words? Any words could be easily programmed into the controller. Verdell decided to leave it up to the user what trigger words they ultimately wanted. The words could be changed at any time with ease.

When the user was alone in public, they would appear to be talking to themselves, when they were operating the controller with their voice. The sensitivity could be dialed in to require only a quiet voice to activate the controller. The genius of the controller was its simplicity and adjustability. After 4 days, the bandages were removed from the patient and the testing began. At first, she said she could see, but it was blurry. That alone was an accomplishment, since she had been completely blind the week before. Verdell told the patient that initially the controller

was set up to respond to "closer" and "farther" voice signal words. She said "closer" and her vision became blurrier. Then she said "farther" and it cleared up a little. The controller was designed to adjust in fine increments. One way to adjust it was to say "closer" or "farther" and then "stop" to cease the adjustment. Alternatively, Verdell could program the controller to adjust a little with each utterance of the signal words. He would have to work out the best method for the user's preference and practicality. The controller could be programmed to adjust quickly, but then it might be too difficult to manage. They would realize in time what was the best way to program the device.

The patient said "farther" again and again until she was happy with the focus. She started crying with happiness. "I can see! I can see! It worked!" Verdell high-fived the patient out of childish happiness. Verdell was overjoyed. There was no satisfaction greater to a scientist than that of proving a theory through a real life experiment. It was one thing to know something will work on paper, but to see someone's pure joy really put the icing on the cake. To know that he had improved someone's life and had restored at least some of their ability to pursue happiness was indeed gratifying for Verdell.

The next phase of the lens/controller/optic nerve experiment was to perfect the process of restoring someone's sight who had damage to their optic nerve or the connection of the optic nerve to the brain. After so many years of failed experimentation with optic nerves and their brain connection, Verdell decided to use a transplant from someone who had donated their body to science. It seemed that it was impossible to replace or repair an optic nerve, so it was Verdell's idea to surgically remove the small section of brain where the optic nerve was connected, along with the optic nerve intact. That complete unit could then be attached to Verdell's electronic lens/controller system and the patient's brain. If that concept worked, blindness could be eliminated. It seemed a little farfetched, but no one had tried it or even suggested it before Verdell had.

Verdell was convinced that his method of looking at human science in a simpler manner was the way to solve many of the previously impossible problems. Ideally, they would want to harvest the tissue of someone who had just perished. Obviously, that person would have donated their body to science. Verdell had the phase two patient lined up who had been born blind and had no functioning retinas or optic nerves. Verdell and the patient had to wait for an unfortunate event to take place that would provide the necessary biological material for the next experiment.

As Verdell and the phase two patient waited, they discussed the procedure and consulted with the successful patient from the phase one experiment. The phase one person was ecstatic to talk to the new patient and told him about how she had life back again. It was a little tricky to operate the controller and her vision wasn't perfect, but it was better than being blind. She could see in color, not in every hue of the rainbow, but certainly better than black and white. She had to take

things slowly with the controller, because she and Verdell were still dialing in the settings. The main thing was that it worked miraculously.

A month passed and a poor unfortunate person had been hit by a drunk driver while haplessly walking down the sidewalk of a city street. The person had donated their body to science; the body was rushed to the hospital and Verdell called his colleague. In addition to the lens installation, Verdell's colleague was able to perform the delicate brain surgery to remove the brain section and optic nerve of the donor. The brain section and optic nerve were then transplanted into the patient along with the electronic lens and controller. The patient would have to rest for 2 weeks, due to the sensitivity of the contact with his brain.

After 2 weeks, the phase two patient was ready to test the equipment. Verdell unwrapped the bandages; the lens adjustment had already been close to correct, causing the phase two patient to shriek with happiness. He cried and cried. He never knew what it was like to see. He was amazed and awed by it. Verdell gave him beautiful colorful magazines and books to pore over. The patient was so excited, that he pissed in his bed. Then he farted and laughed and then everyone in the room laughed. It was a joyful, though smelly, place to be. The phase two patient's mother and father were there and when the patient saw them, all he could do was stare. He said, "Mom? Dad?" The patient's father said, "It's us, son!" Everyone in the room started sobbing from happiness.

Verdell had done it! His theories of simplification had proven to be correct. He couldn't wait for the medical profession to hear about his success and read his reports. Verdell's work would easily earn him the Nobel Prize. The money would come in handy to put toward his new research and experimentation facility. He would be able to perform all the harvesting, surgeries and recoveries in one complex, to better ensure the results. Time was always of the essence when transplanting organs.

After 8 months of more successes in reversing blindness, Verdell had in fact won the Nobel Prize and attracted millions of dollars of funding from philanthropists the world over. Verdell was extremely happy that his methods were working, but he wished that he could help his favorite singer. Verdell had always been a fan of Motown music and loved Stevie Wonder in particular. Verdell always felt bad that Stevie Wonder was blind and he had always wished that he could help Stevie somehow. Now that Verdell had his methods perfected, he had been hoping that Stevie would have approached him for help.

Verdell felt strange offering his services to someone; it seemed more fitting for patients to approach him and request the services. Verdell waited for another 6 months and Stevie still didn't attempt to contact him. Could it be that Stevie hadn't heard of the procedure? It was all over the news and TV. Maybe Stevie didn't watch TV or simply didn't want to be messed with. Maybe Stevie was content as he was, since he had been blind for so long.

Verdell decided to make the first move; he contacted someone who in turn contacted Stevie. Stevie agreed to meet with Verdell at Stevie's residence. With Stevie's permission, Verdell brought with him his phase one and two patients who were still thrilled by their restored vision. Verdell hoped that when Stevie talked to the patients, he might consider the surgery for himself. At Stevie's residence, everyone was surprisingly cordial. Stevie had a lot of people hanging out with him and taking care of him. The place had pianos and keyboards located everywhere, in different colors and sizes, indicating Stevie's obvious appreciation for the instrument.

After they all had lunch, Stevie sat down with Verdell and the 2 patients. After about an hour of discussion, Stevie had been convinced to try the surgery. He would require the full package of lens/controller/retina, since he had had no viable optical components. Verdell explained that they had to wait for someone who donated their body to science and that Stevie would have to be on call to immediately travel to Verdell's clinic. Stevie said that he could be ready at any time.

In 2 months, a suitable candidate expired who had donated their body to science. Stevie was immediately notified and he flew to Verdell's clinic in 2 hours. Verdell's colleague performed the surgery and everything went off without a hitch. Stevie would have to stay at the clinic to recover for a week, and then he could return to his residence for the remainder of the recovery. After the 2-week waiting period, the bandages were removed and Stevie was able to see for the first time in his life. He burst into tears and his entourage cried along with him. Stevie was so happy that he cried himself into passing out. When he awoke, he cried even harder and passed out again. When he awoke again, Verdell tried to calm him down into not fainting anymore. Stevie wasn't as young as he used to be and was out of shape; he could be on the verge of a heart attack or other problem if he became overstressed by being so happy.

Stevie couldn't wait to start writing music for the first time, now that he could see it on the paper. Verdell worked with Stevie for a week to tweak the controller and then left Stevie to his posse. Verdell felt that he had probably done the music world a great thing. Imagine the new masterpieces that Stevie would be able to create now that he could see what he was doing. After a month of trying however, Stevie was unable to write or sing anything the way he had before. He had become tone deaf. He could still play the piano, but it didn't sound the same to him. He could write music but could no longer create the harmonies. He couldn't figure out what had happened to him and he didn't like it. Stevie became severely depressed.

Sometimes, when people suffer a loss of one of their senses, such as sight, one of their other senses, such as hearing, becomes enhanced. The body attempts to make up for a deficiency in one location by increasing the capacity in another. It seemed that Stevie Wonder's blindness had given him superior hearing and the ability to mix music in his head as few people on earth could. When Stevie had been given sight, his brain cut back on his other formerly acute senses. After a month of suffering, Stevie called Verdell; he wanted to go back to being blind again.

75. Xenon's Piano



75. Xenon's Piano

Xenon was the 3rd greatest pianist on earth and was hoping to be number 2 someday. He was a composer and a musician, which was relatively rare for pianists. Typical pianists played someone else's creations, due to the complexity required in writing piano concertos. The arena Xenon was currently billed at for 4 consecutive weekends was paying him an incredibly tidy sum for his presence. Xenon thought the money was fine, but his true love was playing the piano. Since he was 3 years old, he had been taking expensive piano lessons. He had learned from some of the masters in Germany, Austria, Italy and France. His parents spared no expense in his training. From the moment he was born, the doctor saw those magnificent fingers of his and declared to Xenon's parents that he should become a pianist. Xenon's parents were ardent music lovers and particularly loved listening to pianos at concerts. They had hoped that their only offspring would be a boy firstly, and secondly a concert pianist.

It seemed that their dreams might come true. Xenon was tested at the early age of one for his desire to play piano and he immediately took to the piano in his parents' house. He tried to play, but became frustrated when he couldn't make any sense of the keys. He was immediately enrolled in lessons and traveled the world with his nanny to learn from the best teachers.

By the age of 5, Xenon was writing music and at age 7, he was playing in junior competitions. His unusually long and dexterous fingers went a long way toward his greatness. However, simple physical structure was only part of his talent. The raw coordination of his fingers is what really set him apart from the rest of the pack, as with any great pianist. Add in his crazed desire to create music from the wonderful machine called a piano and Xenon was hooked. By the age of 13, he was traveling the world giving shows while continuing to take lessons. He wanted to keep learning all he could about the many subtleties and intricacies of the piano.

At age 20, he was composing and playing all the music that he performed at concerts. He was indeed a wonder, but in his mind, he still wasn't the best. No one knew how the world's pianists were rated among each other. The top ones had an idea who was number 1, 2, 3, etc. Maybe the ranking was determined to an extent by the amount of money they made. Realistically though, they all played different genres of music, so they couldn't be ranked on that. They also played with different styles.

Since Xenon had insisted on playing only his own music, his clientele was different from the other top pianists who only played the classics that everyone loved. The true aficionados of piano playing liked the classics and the newer stuff as well. That's where Xenon's mastery came into the picture. He could easily play all the classics with the others, but when he played his own material, he blew people away. He attracted people who appreciated real piano music, which was a broad ever-changing field of sound.

In Xenon's line of work, there were always people who wished they were better at what they did and wished they were better than the next guy was. Xenon was never one of those people, because he had been born with an ability and a love for music right out of the womb. He was never jealous or envious of his contemporaries. He only learned from them. He appreciated what all musicians did, with all the forms of musical instruments. Xenon appreciated everyone's struggles and passions to do the best job they could when performing. The real musicians are the people who Xenon could relate to best, the ones who did it for love, not money. Xenon couldn't help loving music, because it was all he knew, essentially from birth. At his current point in life, he didn't want to know anything else. He was in music; music was in him and it probably wasn't going to leave him anytime soon.

Occasionally when Xenon was playing piano on stage, he would look out into the audience at the people. Some would have loving looks on their faces, indicating their obvious enjoyment. A few others would be sleeping, but they were rare. They were probably dragged there by their spouses or friends. Every once in a while, Xenon would look into the audience and see a contemporary of his, enjoying Xenon's performance. Xenon did the same thing and went to concerts to listen to his fellow pianists. Xenon was always learning from his own playing and from the playing of others. His hunger for the piano was insatiable.

Once in a great while, he would see someone sitting in the audience with a strange look on their face as if they were studying him. Those guys gave Xenon the creeps; they appeared to be stalkers of some sort. Most celebrities had their stalkers and they didn't want to think about them. Part of being in the public eye was being on display as someone's temporary property. Celebrities couldn't control who looked at them; it was everybody or nobody. Occasionally, some freak got too close to a celebrity physically or even somehow invaded their residence.

Xenon had gazed into the audience one day and spotted one of those freaks. Xenon was too busy concentrating on his playing for the face of the freak in the shadows to register in his brain. He thought he may have seen the person somewhere before in another country. It was possible. Xenon traveled to a lot all of venues. Thousands of people frequented his audiences; he could never remember all their faces, even if he wanted to. Xenon thought that he might have seen the person in Paris or maybe Zurich, but he couldn't be sure. At any rate, Xenon wasn't going to let it bother him.

Xenon traveled to the U.S. on occasion for a month-long tour during the fall and was due to leave for the trip soon. Xenon never married and never really became romantically involved with anyone, choosing the piano as his one and true love. It was easy for him to travel alone everywhere; he just had to pack up his tuxedos and he was off to NYC. At the Saturday performance there, he saw that creepy guy again. Xenon confirmed that it was definitely the same guy, since he had been looking in the audience for him. Xenon hoped to avoid obsessing

over the guy who seemed to be obsessing over him. At the Sunday performance in NYC, the guy was in the very same seat in the audience.

When Xenon traveled to Branson for 2 shows, he saw the guy again; in LA, he saw him again at both shows. The guy in the audience was beginning to appear to be more than just a big fan. The guy didn't have much of an expression as he sat there; he just glared as if he cared more about Xenon than about the music. It wasn't as if Xenon could forbid the guy from being in his audience. The man paid for a ticket and was entitled to sit in the audience and watch the performance. Xenon kept telling himself to stop looking into the audience for the guy. Xenon couldn't help it; the guy was beginning to get into Xenon's brain.

Xenon had developed a following of fans that started to request autographs inscribed on his albums. Xenon felt it was the least he could do to autograph something from which he had made money. Xenon held an autograph session after the Sunday LA concert; a long line of people were standing and holding their various objects to be signed. Xenon always used a black medium point Sharpie marker to provide a nice thick signature that would last.

The line of autograph requesters progressed and Xenon cordially greeted each one in turn. Then the next person in line was shockingly the guy from the audience! At first Xenon was too speechless to say anything to the guy in the form of a greeting. Xenon couldn't believe that he was standing there face to face with the person who was only moments before sitting in the audience seemingly undressing him with his eyes. He might not have actually been doing that, but it had felt like it at the time.

The guy possessed every album in CD form that Xenon had produced, 7 in total. Xenon would have to autograph all 7 objects for the freak. That was one of the ugly prices of fame. When the guy handed the first CD to Xenon, one of the guy's fingers accidentally or intentionally touched one of Xenon's fingers. The guy's finger was icy, bony and really hairy. The bristly hairs on the guy's finger made unfortunate contact with the fine hairs on Xenon's finger.

Xenon felt a chill down his spine that was indefinable. He felt cold, scared and confused in one twinkling. Xenon thought, "Who was this freak and why was he here?" He was there because Xenon was there. The question of who he was had yet to be answered.

As the guy handed Xenon the last of the 7 CDs to be autographed, Xenon's vision went into slow motion. Xenon reached out his hand to accept the CD from the guy. He saw the guy's hand that was holding the CD moving toward his hand. As Xenon opened his hand to grab the CD from the guy, he remembered the creepy iciness of the guy's hand from before.

Xenon didn't want his fingers to experience that feeling of cold again. He almost didn't want to sign another autograph. He wanted to leave. He wanted to run away. He couldn't. All the

thoughts that ran through his head in that moment didn't come together quickly enough to formulate the correct action for him to perform at that instant in his life.

When the 7th CD was at Xenon's hand, instead of his fingers closing down on the CD, Xenon's hand retracted. The CD fell to the ground and the freak latched onto Xenon's left hand. The freak's hand was cold and possessed abnormal strength. Xenon tried to pull his hand away, but couldn't. The guy's grip was immense. Xenon instantly became afraid for his life and yelled, "Let go!" The man silently maintained his iron-like blacksmith's grip.

Xenon's hand felt instantaneously cold and at the same time, not a part of his body. Xenon screamed, "Let go!" The freak produced a device from under his heavy woolen coat and chopped off Xenon's left hand. Xenon shrieked in agony, "My hand, my hand! You cut off my hand!" If that weren't bad enough, the guy picked up Xenon's hand off the ground and ran away with it.

Xenon was so shocked at what had just taken place that he screeched at the top of his lungs. He lost his hand! He could no longer play the piano! Now what was he going to do? Xenon fainted. People in line were hollering, screaming and collapsing at the sight of the blood and of Xenon lying on the ground with a handless left arm. Someone in line called for the Police and ambulance on their cell phone.

Xenon awoke in the hospital with a bandage on his hand. He looked at it. It was true then that he had lost his hand; it was unbelievable! That evil hound of a person had essentially ended his piano playing career by cutting off his hand. Why didn't that villain just cut his throat? It would have been the same thing. It would have had the same result of killing Xenon.

It took a while for the sick reality to sink in that Xenon had actually lost his ability to play the piano. It couldn't be. It couldn't be real. It couldn't be happening to him. What was he going to do? His life had been so perfect up to that point. Why did this happen then? That freak had Xenon's hand and he had no profession, no love no life. Was his life over? Who ever heard of a one-handed pianist? That bad man had destroyed his life. What was Xenon to do now?

When Xenon left the hospital the next day, he went to live with his parents. The phone rang for Xenon and it was the freak who had just cut off his hand the day before! The guy demanded a ransom of \$10 million in exchange for the hand. The villain claimed that the severed hand had been placed in ice immediately after he took it. It had been frozen ever since. The guy claimed that if Xenon wired the money to a designated Swiss bank account, the hand would be returned that day. Xenon would be able to have the hand re-attached and be able to play the piano again, but he had to act quickly.

Xenon had no choice but to believe the person on the phone. The person had described Xenon's hand precisely, including the small scar from a dog bite that Xenon had received as a child. The

hand thief also correctly described the ring that had been on one of the fingers. It was a ring from one of the universities that Xenon had attended in Europe. The thief of course demanded that no Police get involved. Xenon had his father wire the money to the account per the freak's instructions. The freak claimed that once he had verified the transfer of the money, the hand could be found in a cooler of ice in a specific location. The hand thief didn't want to disclose the location yet, to prevent Xenon from causing any trouble.

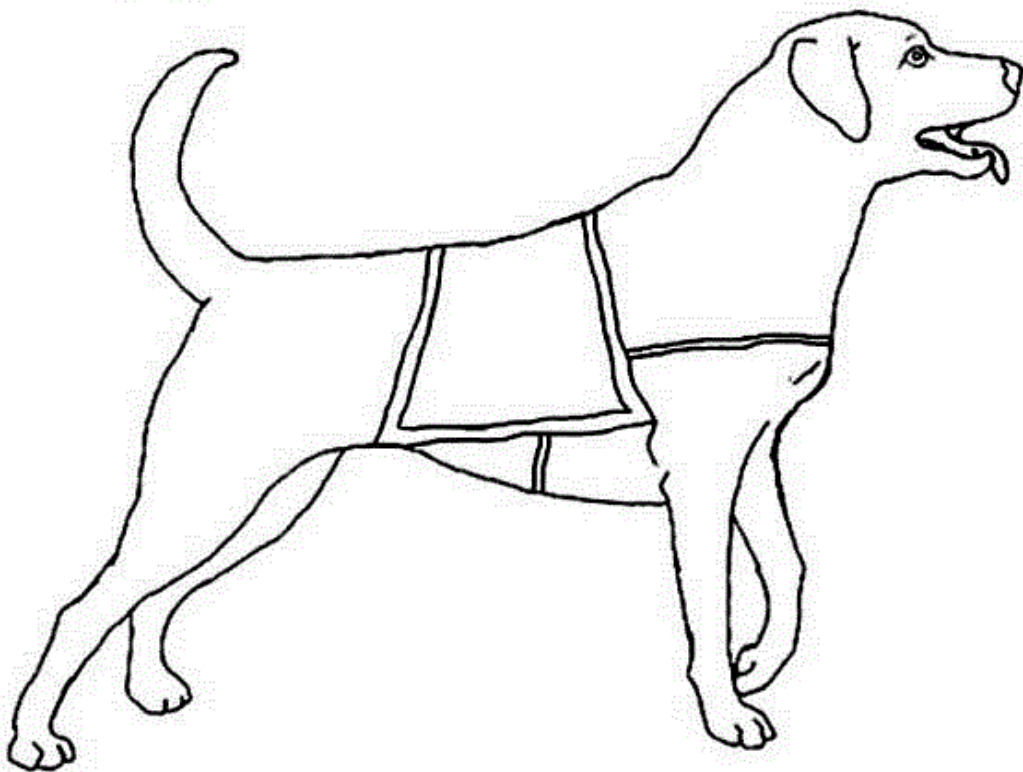
The money was successfully wired within the hour and the freak called Xenon at his parents' house to confirm it. The person told them where they could find the hand in the cooler, but they better hurry. He said there was something unusual about the location that made the cooler's presence at risk. The freak couldn't guarantee that the cooler would be where he placed it for more than 15 minutes. When Xenon asked where the cooler was, the freak said he put it on the train tracks!

Xenon, his mother and his father sped to the alleged location of the cooler. They had to park the car in a parking lot and then walk to the railroad fence. There it was on the tracks! It was the cooler! They could hear a train coming down the tracks at a reasonable speed. Xenon's father hurriedly climbed the fence, jumped down on the other side and snagged the cooler off the tracks. He barely made it back to the fence when the train came speeding by, blowing its loud horn.

Xenon's father brought the cooler to the car and they hastily looked inside to verify the presence of Xenon's hand. Yep, there was a frozen hand in there, immersed in ice and ice water. They immediately drove to the hospital, where the surgeon they previously notified had been waiting in the operating room. The surgeon had agreed that there wasn't much time remaining to still have success with the surgery. The tendons, ligaments and nerves were delicate tissues and became less and less viable as time went by. The surgeon advised that as long as the duration of severing of the hand hadn't been more than 24 hours, which it hadn't, the re-attachment should work. However, there was no way to guarantee the dexterity and control of the hand after healing. Xenon, his mother and father understood that there were no guarantees. Xenon was just glad to have his hand in his presence again. The sooner they re-attached the hand, the sooner Xenon would be hopefully be able to play the piano again.

The surgeon and anesthesiologist sedated Xenon in the operating room and the procedure was begun. After 3 hours of precision work, the hand had been re-attached and appeared to have the correct blood flow. All the fingers were properly fleshy and toned. In another 2 hours, Xenon was out of the recovery room and on his way home. When the surgeon unwrapped Xenon's hand a week later, Xenon was excited. Xenon had been testing the fingers and grip of the hand while it was still bandaged and was surprised at how strong the hand already felt after such a short time. When Xenon saw his left hand unwrapped, he was horrified. It wasn't his hand! That criminal had cut off his own hairy hand and put it in the cooler! That freak still had his hand!

76. Zukiko's Master



76. Zukiko's Master

JJ was one of those guys who always craved attention from other people, but he rarely got enough. It was probably from not getting enough attention as a child. He was the 3rd of 3 boys that his parents had and by the time he was born, his parents had run out of attention. His parents were really busy with their jobs and wanted to give their kids everything. As was always the case, everything costs money. JJ's father worked 2 jobs and his mother worked 1.5 jobs. JJ and his brothers had been raised by babysitters and nannies most of their lives, so their parents weren't able to give them the attention they deserved.

Poor JJ was always acting up at home and getting into trouble everywhere he went. When he graduated high school, he left home to go work for a truck rental company. He made good enough money for being a single guy and survived pretty well, but he was lonely. Occasionally, when JJ was in public, he would see those people with service dogs. Some of the people were blind and used Seeing Eye dogs; others needed dogs to detect if they were on the verge of having a seizure. Some of the dogs could somehow detect issues that diabetics would encounter.

As sick as it sounded, JJ actually envied those people with service dogs, because of the attention they got from complete strangers wanting to pet their dogs. JJ wondered if he got a regular dog and then put one of those service dog banners on it, if he would he get the same attention from strangers. He went to the animal shelter and adopted a golden retriever. He thought it was pretty good timing that there happened to be one of those dogs there. The dog's name was Zukiko and JJ kept the same name to avoid confusing the dog.

JJ searched the internet for one of those service dog banners and ordered one post-haste. While he waited for the banner to come in the mail, he thought about the kind of ailment he would pretend to have. Should he pretend to be blind? Should he pretend to have seizures? Should he pretend to be a diabetic with risk of going into shock? When he was growing up, JJ always felt the most sympathy toward blind people, so he would pick that one.

First, he practiced walking around with Zukiko in a harness and leash to get the dog accustomed to the concept. The local parks were too risky to pretend to be blind, in case he saw someone he knew. The parks would be ok for training the dog though. When he put the service dog banner on Zukiko, he would walk around in the out of town parks with his blind act. After 2 weeks of walking with Zukiko, the banner came in the mail and JJ drove to a non-local park. He parked the car away from the park, so people wouldn't see a supposedly blind person driving a car.

He got out of the car with Zukiko, put the banner on the dog and put on his sunglasses. He walked slowly and carefully to appear to be blind. The sunglasses would conceal the fact that he could actually see. It was an interesting experiment; he was immediately stopped by people who wanted to pet Zukiko. The people were complete strangers, but for some reason felt that they

could interact with his dog. They said things like, "He's such a cute dog!" or "Can I pet him?" or "What's his name?"

JJ had to remember that he was pretending to be blind and had to initially appear indifferent, because he wasn't supposed to be able to see the people approaching. JJ had gone through his life as a nobody who was unnoticed in the streets and now he was a somebody! He was a somebody who people felt sorry for. Complete strangers were feeling sorry for him. What a concept! Why didn't he think of the ploy sooner?

It was mainly the women who asked to pet Zukiko, which was fine by JJ. The dog didn't appear to mind all the attention he was getting. It was a win-win situation for JJ. He was making friends without really trying. Actually, he was really just making acquaintances with people who sympathized with him. It wasn't actually the same thing as making friends with them. JJ was content though. He was getting attention from people through the dog. The people who were petting Zukiko conversed with JJ while they were petting the dog. At least it wasn't a completely one-way thing. JJ was starting to feel that he deserved their sympathy. He had been deprived so much as a child, that he needed it as an adult more than he thought.

Zukiko was beginning to catch onto JJ's lie. The same way that dogs were capable of sensing people's ailments was the same way that Zukiko sensed that JJ was lying about being blind. Zukiko thought it wasn't right that JJ pretended to have an affliction just to garner sympathy from people. Zukiko didn't mind getting attention from the strangers, but he didn't like it that JJ was doing it. There were plenty of people who deserved the attention more than JJ. The dog thought it was pitiful that JJ could be so callous. However, JJ took good care of Zukiko and did give him a good home.

Zukiko wanted to show JJ that he really shouldn't be pretending to have an illness. The dog schemed to expose JJ as a phony. The next time they went to the park, Zukiko began misbehaving. When they encountered some people on the sidewalk and JJ stopped to allow them to pet the dog, Zukiko bolted down the sidewalk. It was an embarrassing moment for JJ, but too bad for him, thought Zukiko. When Zukiko finally stopped running, JJ asked him what happened. Of course, Zukiko played dumb; what else could he do?

They started walking again and when they stopped at the next people, Zukiko again bolted down the sidewalk and dragged JJ by the leash. The next day, at the first people they saw, Zukiko bolted so hard that he tore the leash from JJ's grip. JJ was left standing there, looking like an idiot while trying to talk to the people. They asked JJ how long he had owned the dog and JJ quickly responded that it was apparently not long enough. Zukiko ran back down the sidewalk to JJ and behaved until they encountered the next people. Zukiko bolted again. The dog was determined to frustrate JJ into not using him in the phony manner anymore. Zukiko was tired of being a party to JJ's charade.

The next day, they went to the park again and Zukiko pulled the same tricks on JJ. Zukiko wondered how much longer JJ was going to put up with his joking around. JJ had become so accustomed to receiving attention while pretending to be blind, that he couldn't stop. JJ was willing to keep playing the blind game as long as he could. Even if Zukiko occasionally ran away, the dog still fulfilled its purpose as a service dog. JJ didn't know what was going on with Zukiko and why the dog was getting so jerky in front of people. JJ decided to stop walking with Zukiko for a while until the dog settled down again.

In the meantime, JJ decided to pursue some of the women whose phone numbers he had acquired over the months of walking at the parks. It seemed that there were many people in the world with a lot of love to give. Those people would give it to anyone who asked for it. JJ's blind act was on the verge of paying off. At first, he had been content getting attention from the people who were petting Zukiko. However, when women started giving him their phone numbers, it was an unexpected result. JJ wondered how it was going to work. He had to pretend that he couldn't drive and they would have to come to his apartment for a date. The women didn't appear to mind the arrangement, possibly because they didn't feel threatened by JJ. Being blind possibly projected an air of weakness or at least non-aggressiveness that women were attracted to.

Was it fair for JJ to take advantage of women in that manner? It was one thing to get close to women via a dog; it was another thing to advance to the next level of closeness under such false pretenses. The first woman JJ called was named Belinda and she was due over at 7:00 pm on Friday evening. JJ was making a nice spaghetti dinner with meatballs, salad, garlic bread and cake for dessert. He wanted to impress her with the amazing cooking abilities possessed by the blind man that he was pretending to be. Theoretically, JJ shouldn't even know or care what Belinda looked like, since to her, he was supposedly blind. Of course, JJ did know what she looked like, because he saw her through his sunglasses. Belinda had average looks and an average figure, and was really friendly. She would do just fine. JJ found it interesting how he hadn't had a date in years, and in a short time after pretending to be blind, he was hooked up. Go figure! Maybe he didn't need to walk with Zukiko anymore, since he had a few phone numbers to work with. Belinda would be fine for the time being.

JJ had to be very careful when Belinda came over. He had to pretend he was blind in every way. He had to stumble around his apartment and occasionally bump into things. The fact that he was cooking a big meal shouldn't be that big of a deal to Belinda. Many of sight-impaired people lead normal lives and a lot of them are great cooks. He would still have to be careful while serving and eating the food. He would have to be a sloppy eater and get plenty of sauce on his face. That way she might be inclined to wipe it off delicately and intimately.

Maybe they would do that goofy thing with a long spaghetti noodle like in the Disney movie when the 2 dogs ate spaghetti. Maybe that would be too corny though. He would think of

something similar. Belinda arrived early at 6:55 pm with a bouquet of fragrant flowers. She acknowledged that JJ may not be able to see the flowers, but he could still smell and touch them. JJ had a bouquet of flowers waiting for her as well, so they exchanged them. It was a cute moment that JJ would remember forever.

Zukiko came running out of the living room to greet Belinda and she quickly bent down to pet the pooch. Zukiko was glad to see Belinda again; he remembered her as one of the friendliest women from the park encounters. He wasn't surprised that JJ would try to get friendlier with her. In a way, Zukiko was glad that JJ had succeeded in arranging a date with Belinda. Even though Zukiko had wanted to end JJ's charade of pretending to be blind, he was still glad for Belinda. The dog couldn't help feeling happiness toward Belinda, a person he genuinely liked. Even if JJ were being untruthful, at least Belinda was getting some joy out of it. Maybe the woman had no other men in her life and she felt that JJ would fill a niche.

Zukiko decided to back off on harassing JJ into quitting his blind act. The dog was a simple loving animal after all, and didn't particularly enjoy harboring ill will toward anybody, especially his benefactor. The date progressed beautifully and Belinda appeared to genuinely like JJ. JJ definitely liked her and asked her for a date on the next day, Saturday. JJ wanted to take Belinda to a Rolling Stones concert. JJ didn't have tickets, but they could always get them from scalpers outside the venue. After the concert, they went back to JJ's apartment where they ordered a delivered pizza and chicken wings. JJ and Belinda really hit it off and liked each other a lot.

After months of dating, the 2 seemed to be feeling more serious toward each other. When people were together early in a relationship, they only thought about themselves. As the relationship progressed, matured and became more serious, other considerations began to come into play. Sooner or later, JJ's and Belinda's friends would become aware of their new relationship. JJ sensed an obvious problem with introducing his friends to Belinda, for the obvious reason that his friends knew him as a seeing person. JJ couldn't possibly pull it off; he would have to somehow avoid contact with his friends. He should be able to make excuses for a while of why he wasn't seeing his few friends.

Hopefully, Belinda would be so enamored of him that she wouldn't care. JJ could simply say that he didn't have many friends due to his condition, which was a believable excuse. JJ wouldn't have any problems meeting Belinda's friends who didn't know him yet, which was probably more important to her anyway. How long could JJ keep up with the ruse? Would he continue to pretend to be blind to enjoy Belinda as long as she would have him? Should he be planning to end the relationship before they got too serious and she would be hurt by a breakup?

JJ didn't think things would work out the way they did with Belinda; all he initially wanted was more attention from people. Now he was getting more than he had bargained for. What a strange situation he had screwed himself into. Life was indeed funny. JJ supposed that life could

be as good as you made it or it could be just as easily ruined by the same effort. JJ decided to let things go the way they were going and if he sensed that Belinda wanted to escalate the relationship, he would attempt to back out.

Relationships among humans were only as complicated as the humans made them. Things could start simple and stay simple. If either party didn't want to go all the way to marriage and family or even part of the way, they didn't have to. JJ supposed that he wasn't being fair to Belinda by continuing to pretend to be blind, but what choice did he have. Should he risk telling her that he wasn't blind? Would she still accept him after his lie had been revealed? JJ wasn't yet ready to reveal his lie. He had moved on to another plane of consciousness. He had transformed himself into behaving like a blind person in public. He didn't want to go back; he probably slipped a disk in his brain and became a little bit loony along the way without realizing it was happening.

JJ wasn't capable of understanding what had happened to him over the months, because it took place while he wasn't paying attention. Psychotic things happen all the time to people while they are unaware of them taking place. The complexity of the human brain is the very thing that made it so vulnerable to attack. If all the systems weren't firing on all the cylinders all the time, something could sneak in while the person was sleeping. JJ's tendency toward wanting to act blind all the time was an example of such a situation. He had let his guard down while pretending to be blind in public. At first, the simple encounters between the strangers and Zukiko satisfied a simple need. When Belinda came along, things got more convoluted than he had realized. He wasn't in a typical relationship with Belinda. Because of his blindness lie, he had inadvertently thrust himself into a vastly complex liaison.

JJ had become an actor on a stage who had captured the attention of an innocent maiden in the same manner that Esmeralda had become attracted to Quasimodo in *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* story. JJ hadn't been careful with his power and had flaunted it; now he was trapped by it. His lie of being blind was like a spider's web that he had become stuck in. JJ couldn't allow it to continue. He had to break it off with Belinda before she wanted more than he was capable of giving her. JJ didn't want to hurt Belinda. He would tell her at their next date on Friday evening.

The date represented the one-year anniversary of their relationship and JJ wanted to make the same spaghetti dinner as he had on their first date. She came over at 7:00 pm and wanted to help in the kitchen by cutting up some salad ingredients. JJ was busy cooking the spaghetti, sauce, meatballs and garlic bread. JJ lifted from the stove the pot of boiling water with the cooked spaghetti to pour it into the colander to drain. He overacted by being too clumsy and dropped the entire pot into the colander. The boiling water and hot spaghetti splashed up from the colander onto his face and neck. It scalded his eyes and he screamed, "I can't see; I can't see; I'm blind!" Belinda said, "Are you ok, JJ? Wait, of course you're blind!" JJ said, "No! Now I really am blind!" Belinda said, "What are you talking about?"

77. Spear's Tribe



77. Spear's Tribe

In the Clear Creek Tribe, with the exception of Chief Clear Creek, the members of the tribe had names that were more or less in line with their tasks in the tribe. For example, Spear was a male of the tribe who was 20 years of age or older and therefore was named as the hunters were named. His formal name was Hunts with Spear. Anyone in the tribe who was younger than he was addressed him by his formal name. Anyone who was older addressed him by his informal name of Spear. Spear's wife, Cooks with Wood addressed him informally. Spear addressed her by her informal name of Wood. The females of the tribe who were 20 years of age or older were named as the cooks were named. The males of the tribe who were 13 years of age to 19 years of age were named as the fishermen were named. The males of the tribe who were 12 years of age and younger were named as the male gardeners were named. The females of the tribe who were 13 years of age to 19 years of age were named as the cleaners were named. The females of the tribe who were 12 years of age and younger were named as the female gardeners were named.

Spear's and Wood's 6 children were named Fishes with Worms (male 16), Fishes with Leeches (male 14), Gardens with Seeds (male 12), Cleans with Soap (female 15), Cleans with Pine (female 13) and Gardens with Tubers (female 11). Spear's mother, Cooks with Dung and father, Hunts with Arrows and Wood's mother, Cooks with Kindling and father, Hunts with Stones lived with them in their large tepee. There was a root cellar in the space between the cots where the onions, potatoes, pumpkins, squashes, etc. were stored. The fire was in the middle of the tepee, to allow the smoke to rise straight up through the offset opening in the roof. The 3 adult cots and 3 bunk-bed cots for the children were on the floor around the perimeter of the tepee. There were elk-hide partitions between each cot for full visual privacy.

To minimize confusion with naming the members of the tribe, each tepee was assigned a color to enable duplication of names by adding a color prefix to the name. For example, Spear's tepee was assigned the color blue and the tepee next to his was assigned the color brown. Both tepees could have similarly named people by adding the prefix. Spear would be formally known as Blue Hunts with Spear and the brown tepee could have someone living in it named Brown Hunts with Spear.

The males of the tribe pissed on the pissing pole, which was located at the edge of the tribe on the top of a slope to allow for runoff. The males of the tribe pooped at the male pooping pit. The females of the tribe pissed and pooped at the female pissing/pooping pit. Both pits were separated by a large distance and fully partitioned for visual privacy.

The tribe grew all manner of vegetables in the vast gardens including onions, tomatoes, cucumbers, beans, corn, potatoes, pumpkins, squash, peppers and various salad greens. The tribe had groves with oranges, grapefruits, lemons and limes and orchards with apples, pears, peaches, nectarines and plums. Since the tribe was located in Georgia, they were able to harvest fruits and

vegetables year-round. The tribe utilized the dung from their herd of hundreds of goats for manure and for the cooking/heating fires in the tepees. The gardeners discovered early on that by spraying the crops and trees with a thin layer of human piss, all insect problems were eliminated. The male gardeners would piss directly onto the plants in the garden. The female gardeners would squat and piss into special gourds with holes in them for shaking the piss onto the trees.

The cleaners of the tribe cleaned the tepees, clothing, cookware, dishes and poop pits as needed. In addition, the cleaners tended the goats, which included daily feeding and milking. The division of labor concepts in the tribe had been determined many moons before Chief Clear Creek was even born. The concepts had been passed down from the previous chief to him and were never considered to be negotiable. Every member of the tribe was born into their roles and happily went about performing them from day to day without question.

At the end of each long day of hunting, fishing, gardening, cooking, eating and cleaning, the members of the tribe gathered around the great community fire, which was located in the middle of the circle of tepees. When everyone was settled down and absolutely quiet, Chief Clear Creek began his 2 to 3-hour session of relating the history and customs of the tribe. The chief felt that it was important for the tribe members to have instilled in them everything that was ever known about the tribe. It was crucial to the chief and he felt it was essential to the future of the tribe. The chief knew that he wouldn't live forever and whoever became the next chief had to possess all the available tribal knowledge. The tribe's customs were never meant to change or be altered in any way. They had been perfected over thousands of moons. The reason that the tribe functioned as effortlessly as it did was because of the customs.

The chief emphasized the importance of everyone's role in the tribe from the youngest to the oldest. The tribe needed every member to perform their roles each day for as long as they lived on earth to be able to exist in the hereafter. The way the tribe members behaved while in their physical bodies was vital to their eternal happiness when they were taken to the great sky above. When the chief orated, he didn't expect anyone to disagree with his speeches and tales, but he welcomed comments from any tribal member. The youngsters often asked him the silliest of questions, but he answered their questions seriously. To the chief, anyone in the tribe could become a chief someday and he considered every member equal to each other.

The chief stressed that even though he was a male and the previous chief had been a male, the next chief didn't necessarily have to be a man. Chief Clear Creek believed in equal opportunity for everyone. The custom of the chief always being a male was the only custom that he was willing to change. The reason that he held the daily lengthy sessions was to pass on the wisdom to whoever could best use it toward perpetuating the tribe. The chief felt that the tribe must live forever, no matter what happened. If it required a woman to run the tribe into perpetuity, then so be it. The chief suggested that when he passed away, the next chief should be selected based on

an election, where every tribe member was allotted a vote.

There was some discussion on the concept of the selection process of the next chief, but no one really became too noisy. Nobody expected the chief to be going anywhere anytime soon. The chief instructed the people to make a decision immediately on how they would be selecting the next chief. The chief warned that the white man had begun to take over the tribal lands and it was important to plan ahead. The chief felt that he was at risk if the white man ever invaded the tribe's territory. A plan had to be in place to elect the next chief if something happened to the current chief.

After the chief's evening chat, the drink cup was passed among the adult males. Afterwards, they retired to their tepees where one of the fathers would play his harmonica while someone else sang along. One of the mothers would occasionally recite some new poetry. The children always had many questions related to the chief's evening session. The chief was incredibly wise and possessed a lot of information to pass on. The children didn't always understand what he was talking about. Even though the chief welcomed questions from everyone during his sessions, there wasn't enough time for the hundreds of questions that the dozens of children of the tribe wanted to ask. The tepee was the preferred setting to attend to the children's many issues. With 6 adults in Spear's tepee, they were always able to answer the queries asked by the 6 kids.

Spear didn't agree with the chief's idea of allowing a woman to be the chief of the tribe. Spear had been hoping to become the next chief. In fact, the chief had been privately grooming Spear for the past 3 years on how to be the best chief possible. There was a lot more to being chief than simply talking about the customs and history. The chief made all the important decisions related to hunting, fishing, planting/harvesting crops and who married whom. The chief was the person who approved or disapproved when a man and a woman approached him to become husband and wife. The chief was the person who performed the sacred marriage ceremony. The chief was the person who welcomed the new babies into the world with the new tribe member ceremony. The chief was the person who performed the burial rites. The chief was the person who decided if they should attack a neighboring tribe. The chief was the person who negotiated with the neighboring tribes when the trading season was in session.

Spear wanted to be the person who held all those responsibilities. He was the greatest hunter of the tribe. The current custom of the tribe deemed that the most productive hunter became the next chief as long as that hunter was in good standing with the tribe. As far as Spear knew, everyone liked him and respected him. Spear already felt that people expected him to become the next chief per the custom. For Chief Clear Creek to say that he was willing to change that custom was unacceptable. Spear wanted to be the next chief and that's all there was to it. He wasn't going to wait for something to happen to the chief. Spear was going to make something happen to the chief. He had to become the next chief before Chief Clear Creek had solidified in

everyone's heads the new voting idea and the female chief idea. Spear wasn't sure how many people favored the chief's new ideas, but he didn't want to wait to find out.

Spear remembered something that his uncle, Walks with Limp told him once while his uncle was still a hunter. Before he became injured and unable to hunt anymore, his uncle was named Hunts with Slingshot. It was tribal tradition for a hunter to lose his hunting name and adopt a more suitable name if they became injured and unable to hunt. If his uncle ever became well enough to hunt again, which was unlikely, he could regain his previous name and status. His uncle hated being labeled with the name, which was a sign of weakness. Only the chief could grant a pardon to Walks with Limp to get his old name back. The chief didn't expect that to take place while he was still in office.

Spear's uncle had mentioned something about a slow-working poison that could cause a person's demise over a period of time, depending on the dosage. Spear aimed to acquire the poison from his uncle and put it into the chief's drink cup when the adult males passed it around after the chief's evening info session. Since Spear's greatest hunter status placed him as sitting in the circle next to the chief who drank first and last from the cup, it would be easy. Hunts with Sling, who was the son of Spear's uncle, sat next to Spear, since Sling was the 2nd best hunter in the tribe.

The next evening, Spear began to poison the chief. Spear only added a little of the poison to avoid the chief detecting the flavor. Spear's uncle claimed that it could take days, weeks or months to work depending on the dose and size of the victim. Spear wanted the chief gone in less than a month and demanded from his uncle the correct dosage for that to happen. Spear's uncle told Spear that the only reason he gave Spear the poison was because he didn't like the way the chief was talking about voting for the next chief. The current custom required the next chief to be the best hunter of the tribe. Spear's uncle didn't necessarily have anything against women, but he felt that the tribe should always have a strong presence as its leader. A woman was incapable of projecting that image. The hunting males were the strongest and best fighters for protection against attacking tribes. Spear's uncle felt that if the Clear Creek Tribe ever had a woman as the chief, they would surely be conquered and enslaved by another warring tribe.

Spear began spreading propaganda when the males went out hunting each day. He wanted to instill in the other men that they needed to maintain the custom of the tribe having a male chief who was chosen based on being the best hunter. It was obvious to the men what Spear's ulterior motive was, since Spear was slated as becoming the next chief based on his hunting status. The men agreed with Spear though. The men of the tribe had grown up with the idea of being as strong as they could to be great hunters and fighters. The tribe lived in the wilderness of the country and needed strong men to survive. The hunting ability of the men was attained by using powerful longbows, which required strong arms to pull the bowstring and hold the bow steady

enough to accurately shoot the speeding arrow. Only the strongest hunters such as Spear, were capable of harvesting elk and moose, which needed the maximum pull on the bowstring to launch the arrow fast enough to dispatch the large animals. The lesser hunters with smaller bows were only capable of downing smaller game such as bear and deer.

Spear was by far the strongest of all the hunters, followed by Hunts with Sling. Sling wasn't as strong as Spear, but he had a slightly better and more consistent aim. Sling rarely bagged an elk or moose, which were the greatest food prizes to the tribe, since elk and moose weighed up to 1,000 pounds. Sling was good at bagging the bears, which weighed up to 400 pounds. Spear always used the biggest bows with the longest arrows. None of the other men could pull the bowstring of Spear's large bow. Spear had been taught well by his father of the ways to become the chief of the tribe some day. The day was approaching.

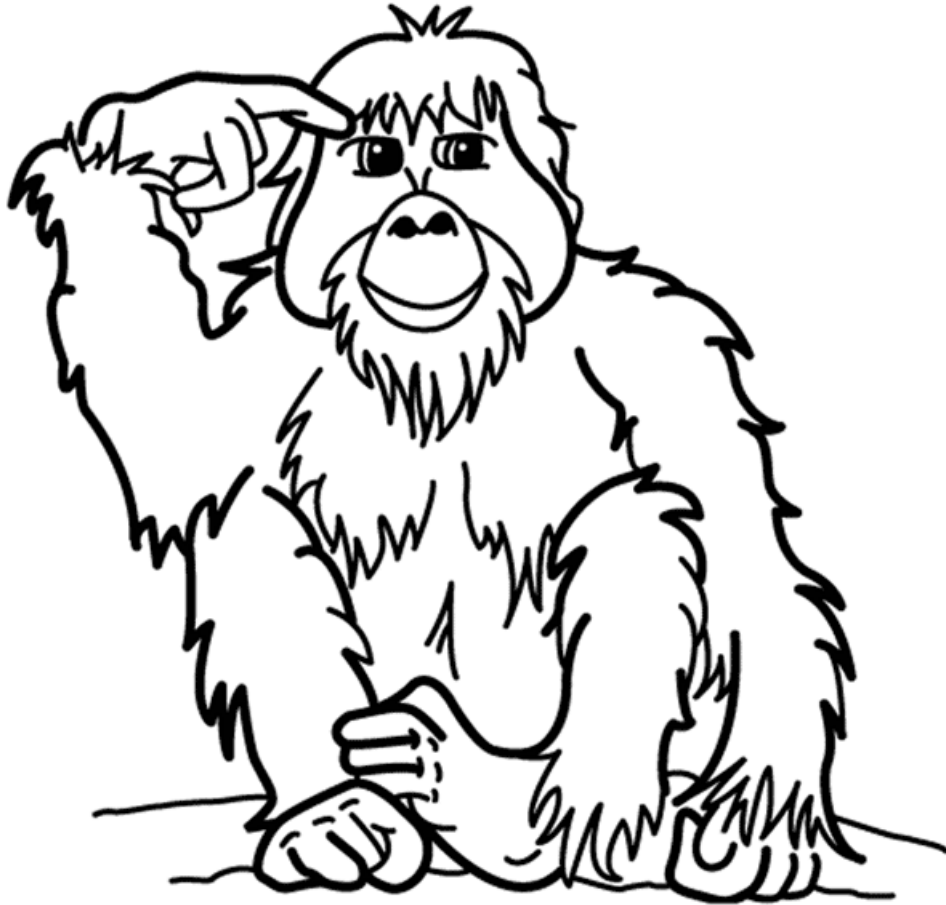
Spear kept putting the poison in the cup for the chief to drink while carefully observing the chief for changes in his behavior. Spear's uncle claimed that as the poison worked its magic, the victim would become slower moving and appear tired. Spear had noticed himself moving more slowly lately and was feeling more tired than usual. Spear was always tired, due to the limited sleep he got each night. Spear woke up early each day, before everybody else in the tribe, to work on the weapon supply. The tribe maintained an armory of weapons to be used for hunting and battle. They had knives, bows, arrows, spears, tomahawks, slings, slingshots, shields and piles of rocks for the slings and slingshots. Spear mainly worked on his special large bows and arrows, which were the symbol of his hunting greatness.

After 2 weeks of poisoning the chief, Spear finally noticed that the chief was beginning to stumble occasionally while walking and was slurring his speech slightly during the evening sermons. It was just a matter of time before Spear would become the next chief of the tribe. Spear felt that he had convinced the other hunters to adhere to the old ways.

Spear had been noticing that his hunting abilities were slipping lately and he was actually having difficulty pulling the bowstring on his strongest bow. He had been forced to use a slightly smaller bow and he hated to reveal any weakness to the other hunters. He had to maintain his hunting abilities to become the next chief. By week's end, Hunts with Sling actually brought in more total pounds of meat via his 1,200 pounds from 3 bears versus Spear's 1,000 pounds from only one moose. Sling had been steadily gaining on Spear's monthly meat total and Spear was beginning to get nervous.

While the adult males were sitting in the circle drinking from the cup one evening, the chief fell over and then Spear fell over. The men were unable to revive them. Unbeknownst to Spear, Sling had been poisoning Spear with the same poison that Spear was using on the chief. Sling's father, Walks with Limp had wanted his son Sling to become the new chief. That way, Sling would be able to change his father's name back to Hunts with Slingshot.

78. Ute's Guy



78. Ute's Guy

It was 1:00 pm and Ute was in the middle of his busy day taking care of Guy. It was time for Guy's lunch and he wanted canned spaghetti on bread on a plate, one of his favorite lunches. Ute liked preparing such easy lunches, because they were simple and didn't require much more preparation than opening a can and a bag of bread. Ute preferred to prepare Guy's favorite meals, because then he didn't get any grief from the old man. Guy was 97 years old, but he was still capable of dishing out a load of guff to the Ute the orangutan. Guy's last remaining relative, his son Diggs, was the person responsible for hiring Ute from the agency. An orangutan was necessary to take care of Guy, because at 374 pounds, no single human would be able to lift Guy in and out of his bed, the sofa, the tub, the toilet and the van for medical appointments.

Diggs located the agency by way of the internet and it was the only organization in the state with orangutans that were trained to care for obese seniors. Diggs didn't want to see his father stuck in some nursing home, so hiring Ute for the job was the only option. Due to an orangutan's immense strength and calm disposition, they made perfect home health aides. After a year of training at the agency, the orangutans were ready for duty. Surprisingly, orangutans actually cost less than comparable humans doing the same job. Diggs thought for sure that because of the comprehensive training by the agency, Ute would cost more. Apparently, since orangutans didn't have the same benefits as humans, they were less costly to employ. It made perfect sense.

While Guy was eating his lunch, Ute raided the refrigerator and ate almost everything in it. Diggs realized early on that there was a slight added cost in hiring Ute as a home health aide, because of the orangutan's appetite. Every time Ute fed Guy his 3 daily meals, Ute also ate whatever he could find in the fridge and pantry. Since Ute weighed in at a bulky 200 pounds, he needed a lot of foodstuffs to keep his ape belly full. With the large appetites of Guy and Ute to satisfy each day, Diggs bought the biggest refrigerator he could find and stocked it on Sundays and Wednesdays. Diggs didn't mind, because it gave him the chance to visit his father and keep tabs on Ute, which really wasn't necessary.

Ten years before, when Diggs first hired Ute to take care of Guy, Guy wanted no part of being handled by an orangutan. Guy complained that Ute smelled and was too rough on him. When Diggs emphasized that it was either Ute or the nursing home, Guy relented. It took a while for Guy and Ute to get acquainted, but they soon learned each other's strengths and weaknesses. Diggs was surprised that Ute was able to grunt out a few words of English. At the agency, Ute was taught to speak the words, "yes" (usually a nod of the head), "no" (usually a shake of the head from side to side), "I don't know" (usually a shrug of the shoulders) and "ok" (usually a thumbs up). Guy taught Ute a few words as well, one of which included the use of a middle finger.

Ute understood more words than he could speak and enjoyed Guy's sense of humor. Guy was a

great joke teller from his days as a stand-up comic and could still remember all the punch lines of the jokes. Ute had a funny laugh, which was the best he could utter with his limited vocal chords. Guy wished that Ute could speak better English to enable them to converse more, but they did all right together. Ute watched all the TV shows with Guy and appeared to appreciate everything he saw on the set. Ute seemed to prefer game shows and action movies the best, because dramas and romances didn't have enough movement on the screen. Guy was surprised that Ute didn't become more interested when he flipped to the nature shows. Ute didn't seem to relate to seeing animals on the screen, maybe because he knew they weren't real.

After eating lunch, Ute carried Guy from the dinner table to the toilet to make a deposit, and then to the living room sofa, where Guy took a nap. Ute had his own sofa in the large living room where he also napped after his big lunch. At 2:00 pm, Ute and Guy woke up from their naps and it was time for Guy's physical therapy. Ute helped Guy lifting weights with his arms and legs, followed by a full body massage, front and back. Due to an orangutan's strength, Ute had to be instructed at the agency how to give massages without breaking the bones and joints of his clients. At 4:00 pm, Guy watched TV for a while as Ute cleaned the house and did the laundry. At 6:00 pm, Ute cooked a nice supper for the 2 of them, which included 6 steaks, potatoes, salad, beans, corn, bread and an entire cake with a 1/2 gallon of ice cream.

At 8:00 pm, they watched TV until they both began dozing off, at which time Ute carried Guy to the toilet and then his bed for the night. Ute had to sleep in his own bed in the bedroom downstairs, because his excessive flatulence bothered Guy. The combination of Ute's orangutan physiology and human food made for an awfully lethal bunch of farts. Guy was barely able to tolerate Ute's daylong fart fest while he was awake. Guy demanded to sleep on a different floor from the ape when nighttime rolled around.

At 7:00 am, Ute's alarm clock went off and he kept hitting the snooze button until 8:00 am, at which time he got out of bed and took a shower. He then went upstairs and carried Guy from his bed to the toilet and then to the tub where he bathed the old man for a good hour in very hot water. The water was as hot as Guy could stand it and was necessary for his therapy. Since Guy was unable to walk, he needed the daily thorough physical treatment by Ute and hot baths to help maintain his circulation. Guy's doctor specifically prescribed everything Ute did for Guy each day. Guy hadn't been expected to live past the age of 89, but with Ute able to take such good care of him, Guy had exceeded everyone's expectations. Guy's doctor attributed Guy's health to the rigorousness of Ute's physical therapy, massages and baths. Guy's doctor had initially considered it an experiment by using an orangutan to take care of Guy, but the results had thus far been phenomenal. The doctor planned to submit a detailed paper to JAMA.

The raw physical strength of the orangutan is what Guy's doctor thinks is the reason for the success. A typical human health aide couldn't possibly do what Ute did for Guy. Even a health

aide who was working with a smaller patient couldn't deliver in the same manner as the trained ape. Ute was a health aide and a physical therapist all rolled up into one. Guy's doctor recently forecasted that Guy could live to 100 years old and beyond under Ute's specialized care. Diggs couldn't be happier with Ute and Guy loved the ape almost like another son.

At 9:00 am, Ute cooked a nice big breakfast for himself and Guy, which included a dozen eggs, a pound of bacon, home fries, toast, juice, cereal, oatmeal and pancakes. At 10:00 am, Ute carried Guy from the dinner table to the toilet to make a deposit and then they both took their naps on the sofas in the living room. At 11:00 am, they woke from their naps, at which time Guy watched TV and Ute went outside to mow the lawn, run the trimmer and tend to the flowers. While Ute was outside, 2 salespeople came to the front door attempting to sell something to Guy. Ute walked over to the people with the most apelike movement that he could muster and glared at them. Ute had been authorized from the beginning to shoo away any and all annoying solicitors from Guy's front door. On Guy's front lawn was an obvious no-soliciting sign prominently displayed that was impossible to miss. If the solicitors didn't leave immediately, Ute would employ his stage 2 tactic of pooping on their shoes. The stage 2 tactic usually worked, but during the inclement weather, people wore boots and weren't always bothered by the poop. Ute's stage 3 tactic was to poop on their boots, pick up the poop and throw it at them. No solicitors lingered very long after the stage 3 tactic.

Ute lived with Guy and they had their same routine 7 days a week. Occasionally Ute would do other chores outside such as wash the car, work in the garden or trim the trees or hedges. Before Diggs hired Ute to take care of Guy, Guy's house had been broken into while Guy was inside. A short time after Ute came to live at the house, someone tried to break in again. Guy heard a noise, whispered to Ute and pointed to the back door. Ute understood that Guy meant for him to be quiet. Ute wasn't trained at the agency on how to deal with break-ins, but it was probably obvious to anyone what an orangutan could do if provoked. Two men had crowbarred the back door of Guy's house and sneaked into the kitchen. Guy dialed for the Police, snapped his fingers at Ute and Ute entered the kitchen.

Ute approached the first burglar, grunted at him and the criminal just laughed. The guy swung at Ute with the crowbar. Ute stopped the crowbar in mid-swing and took it from the man. Ute picked up the man and threw him through the back door into the backyard, shredding the door and the man in the process. The other burglar looked at his friend on the lawn through the destroyed remains of the back door and tried to flee through the back door threshold. Ute beat the 2nd burglar mercilessly with the crowbar until the man fainted. Ute went out into the backyard and dragged the first injured man back into the house. Ute then beat that man with the crowbar until he fainted. When the Police arrived and observed the scene, they were impressed. Because Ute had thoughtfully dragged the 1st man back into the house, it looked better on the Police report.

When Diggs found out about the break-in and subsequent beating down of the bad guys, he phoned Ute's agency and thanked them. Without Ute's training and skill, the burglars might have hurt Guy. After the thwarting of the burglars, Diggs installed signs in the front and back door windows that said, "Beware of bad orangutan!" Diggs didn't care if potential thieves heeded the warning signs or not; he just felt that it was his civic duty to try to prevent the orangutan from slaughtering anyone.

As Guy turned 98, he began to feel the effects of dementia setting in. Diggs had been dreading the day when the illness would begin to invade his father's privacy. At the agency, Ute had learned how to play Chess, Checkers and Monopoly. It was essential for Guy to keep his mind working to stave off the evil mental illnesses for as long as possible. Diggs and Guy both felt that it was better to pass away with a clear head at a younger age than to live longer as a zombie. Ute's abilities at playing the board games with Guy were severely limited and Guy won every time they played. The important point was that Guy was doing something that involved him thinking and scheming to use his brain.

Before Guy slipped away into total brain uselessness, he wanted to prepare a will that outlined Ute as one of the beneficiaries. Diggs was Guy's only living relative and had been automatically designated by law as the beneficiary in the absence of a will. Diggs was financially well off enough that he declared to Guy that he didn't care if he made Ute as the sole beneficiary. That's exactly what they did on the following Thursday, with enough witnesses to attest to Guy's soundness of mind. Guy's lawyer had many times seen people giving all their money away to animals, so it wasn't unusual for him to prepare such a will. Guy's will established that after debt settlement, Ute was bequeathed Guy's home and property with an account instituted to pay the taxes, utilities and maintenance of the estate for as long as Ute should live. At Ute's current age of 20, he could easily live another 40 years; therefore, the will needed to account for tens of thousands of dollars of future bills and food.

Diggs decided to buy Ute from the agency and they reluctantly agreed to sell the well-trained ape. That way, Ute could live and work at Guy's house until Guy's passing, at which time Ute would take over the household. Ute already lived at the house, so it seemed like the most logical thing to do. Since Ute had been designated as the future owner of Guy's house via the will, it would make an easier transition when the time came.

When Guy turned 100, it was reported in the local paper and Guy was still coherent. They had a big celebration at the American Legion post, of which Guy had been a member for 51 years. They had a huge cake out of which a girl emerged; she wore a yellow bikini and danced to the classic stripper music. Guy and Diggs loved the show; Ute was permitted to attend the party and was allowed to fondle the bikini-clad girl along with Guy. Ute ate an excessive amount of the actual cake and barfed a huge pile of undigested cake on the floor of the hall. Everyone laughed

because Ute farted while he was barfing and the farting sounded funnier than usual, probably because Ute drank so much of the fruit punch.

When Guy turned 101, he was still of sound mind and decided to something special for Ute. Guy had Diggs buy another orangutan from the agency, a female orangutan named Agatha. When Ute first saw Agatha, it was love at first sight. The 2 orangutans immediately took to each other. They took turns taking care of Guy and divided the duties. Guy amended his will to include Agatha as the co-recipient of the estate when Guy passed away. Agatha had been better trained than Ute had and as a result knew more words of English, could play more board games and was a better cook. Agatha was the best thing to happen to Guy and Ute's already happy home. She was a marvel around the house and really kept things neat and tidy. Ute had never been much of a house cleaner and only vacuumed once a month. Agatha was meticulous and evened cleaned the various stains from the carpet caused by Guy's and Ute's pooping accidents.

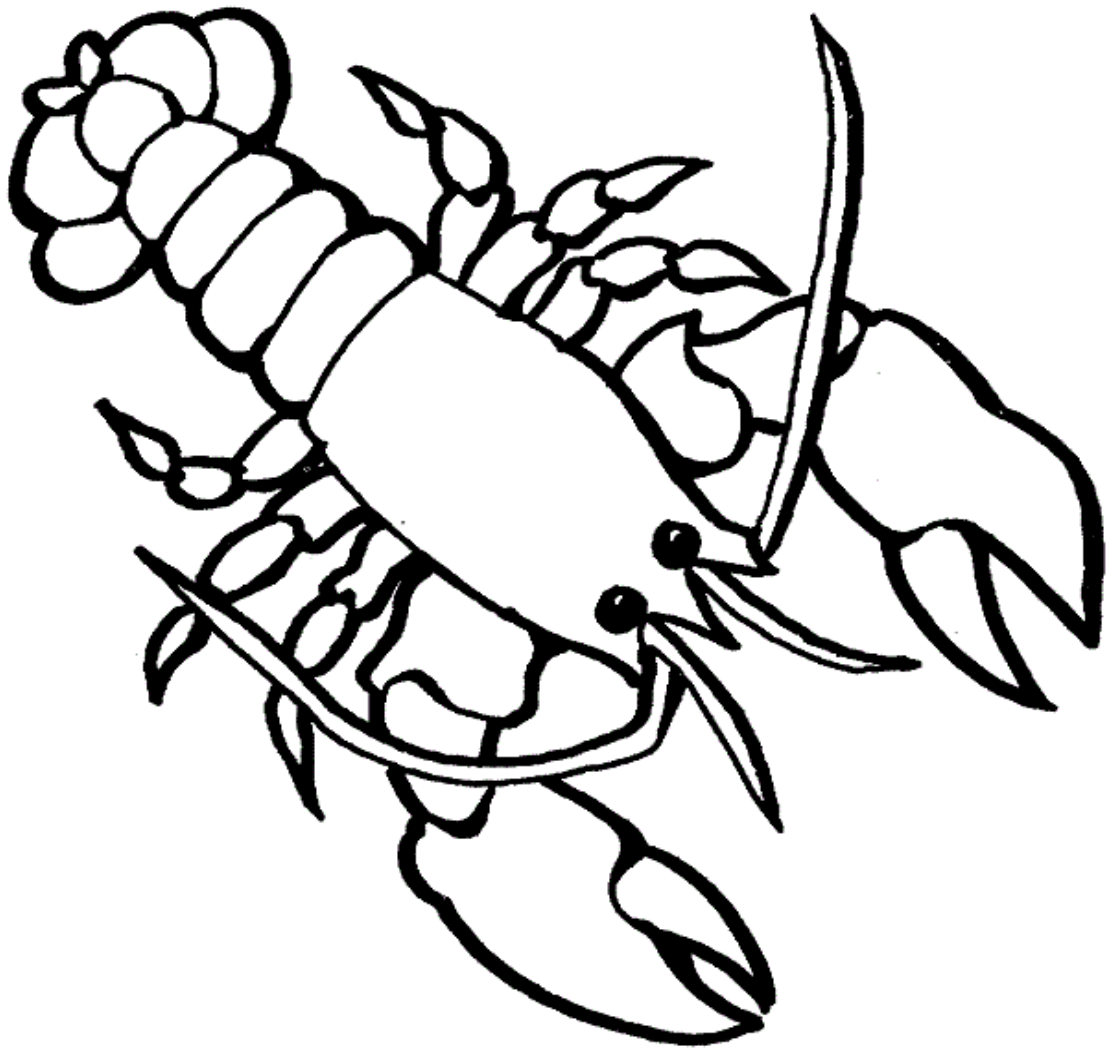
The laundry had never been cleaner and the sheets were whiter than ever. Either the agency had expanded its training methods or Agatha was just a more immaculate orangutan in general. Whatever the case, the house actually smelled fresh for the first time in years. Guy and Ute had probably become accustomed to the smell of their own stink. That's what happens when men live alone or in their own filthy company; they begin to live like pigs.

At Guy's 102nd birthday party, Ute and Agatha were married in a cute ceremony officiated by a local minister with a good sense of humor. The ceremony made the local paper and they held the reception at the American Legion post. Three months after the wedding, Agatha gave birth to twin girls named Britney and Chelsea. The 4 orangutans lived happily together with Guy, who surprisingly didn't mind having so many animals in his house with him. The young oranges were wild and ran around all over the place. Ute and Agatha didn't discipline the kids and they destroyed everything of value in the house. Guy was so old and close to the end that he didn't care. He felt as if he were living in his own zoo where he was the zookeeper. Diggs didn't care about the damage that he observed during his semi-weekly visits, as long as Agatha cleaned up the messes.

Guy's spirits actually seemed to pick up with the addition of the 2 little oranges and his health improved slightly. He amended his will to include Britney and Chelsea as beneficiaries. Two years later, Guy turned 104 and took a turn for the worse. He didn't want any special care or nurses or hospitals. He was happy living at home with his orangutan family. Ute and Agatha took the best care of him that they could, including numerous diaper changes and more bathing than usual, but they didn't mind. Guy had become like a father to Ute and Agatha and a grandfather to Britney and Chelsea. The 2 younger oranges began giving Guy his massages and baths and Guy really got a kick out of the creatures.

On Guy's 105th birthday, he passed away peacefully at home with his orangutans at his bedside.

79. Walker's Lobster



79. Walker's Lobster

Walker's father Irving had disappeared while lobster fishing more than 6 years before and was still legally classified as missing. Irving wouldn't be legally classified as passed away for another 6 months. In the meantime, Walker's half-brothers Texas and Ranger were working with Walker in their food truck business. Walker's older brother Ranger was the lobster fisherman who set out 50 baited lobster cages each day at the family house in Maine. Walker's younger brother Texas worked with Walker in the food truck called Lobster Tails in Albany, NY.

Each morning, Ranger rose at 4:00 am, checked the cages and transported between 50 and 150 lobsters to Albany. While waiting for Ranger to arrive, Walker and Texas bought the fresh ingredients and did the prep work on the food truck. The trio sold lobster salads, lobster sandwiches in a tortilla as a wrap, on a hard roll or on a 1/2 sub roll for \$6. A full 12-inch lobster sub was \$12. Each salad or sandwich contained the meat from a full lobster tail and claws. A 12-inch sub contained 2 lobsters worth of meat. Nobody could beat their prices for what they put in the food items. Due to the lobsters being caught and transported by a family member, the overhead was low and the profit high, even at the low prices they charged. They made approximately \$180k annually before costs and taxes.

After Ranger dropped off the lobsters, he headed back home to Maine; Walker and Texas lived followed in an apartment near Albany. Walker and Texas had been stockpiling money in the hopes of remodeling the family house in Maine into a Bed and Breakfast (BnB) business, but Ranger had consistently refused. Ranger was a fisherman like his father and wanted to stay a fisherman until he could do it no longer. Ranger wanted no part of converting the house that he had lived in his entire life. Walker and Texas came along later from different mothers. Ranger's 2 younger brothers had no interest in fishing for lobsters and were only after easier money via the BnB idea. Irving's will had declared that the house and property would go to the 3 brothers equally. When Irving was eventually declared as passed away, the legality of the will would kick in with Walker and Texas demanding their 2/3 rights to convert the house.

Walker and Texas knew that their idea would make them all a large amount of money, due to the extraordinary location of the house on the shore of the Atlantic Ocean. The 20 acres of land that the house sat on would enable them to eventually expand the place into a resort, to really cash in. Ranger was too basic of a man to care about things like money and luxuries; he was much more like Irving than his brothers were.

Walker and Texas felt as if they were saving all their money for nothing if they couldn't convince Ranger to change his mind. They had to do something about it. Walker knew a Guy named Zito who claimed that he could arrange for an accident to happen to Ranger while he was checking the lobster cages. The location where Ranger had the traps in the water was extremely rocky, and treacherous, a perfect accident locale. One morning, Zito could sneak up on Ranger and

forcefully push him onto the jagged rocks. Ranger would most likely not be able to walk away from such an accident. With Ranger out of the way, Walker and Texas would inherit their father's property and be able to do what they wanted with it.

Walker and Texas were so confident in the perfection of their plan that they began researching how to create a resort. They had ample acreage, thanks to Irving's foresight in buying the choice property. When they built the resort, the old house would eventually be demolished to make room for their state of the art moneymaking facility. They could have 100 ocean-view suites, banquet/convention rooms, restaurants, heated pool with a retractable overhead roof, spa and a lounge with live music.

When they first converted the house into a BnB, they estimated that after 3 years of running it, they would be able to start building the resort in an efficiently designed modular manner to allow for expansion as they made more money. When the main 100-room hotel structure was complete, the BnB would be replaced by the banquet/convention room section of the resort.

If only Ranger could see the beauty of their idea, things would be so much easier. Walker and Texas planned to try to convince Ranger to see things their way until the last possible day. They didn't really want anything bad to happen to Ranger; he was their brother after all, well, half-brother.

Texas wasn't as engrossed in Walker's maniacal idea of getting Ranger out of the way, as Walker thought he was. Texas was happily content working the food truck business and expanding that concept for a while by adding another truck. The only restriction was Ranger's limit of 50 lobster traps that he could legally put out each day. The Maine house had hundreds of feet of frontage on the ocean and could easily handle more traps, probably another 50 more. That could supply one more food truck with lobster. As long as no nosy legal entities such as inspectors found the extra traps, they would be ok. The simple fact that they were getting lobsters on their own property helped matters enormously.

The idea to trap the lobsters in the ocean in front of the house had actually been Ranger's. After Irving disappeared, Ranger became nervous about fishing in the ocean and decided to trap lobsters along the shoreline. Most people probably didn't even know he was doing it. The traps were down in the rocky water, connected to shore posts by barely visible ropes.

Texas pretended to go along with Walker only because it was Walker's great idea to start the food truck business in the first place. Ranger would have been content merely selling the lobsters locally, but at far less profit. Walker was always looking at the bigger picture of things. It was Walker's plan all along to only use the food truck temporarily to make money for the BnB and then the resort. Walker kept talking about his plans, which really were only his plans. Ranger refused to modify the house in any way and Texas only appeared to agree with Walker.

The 3 brothers obviously all had different ideas of their futures tucked away in their heads. Ranger was perfectly gratified with maintaining the status quo, as was Texas, who only feigned to want more. Walker wanted the world and constantly expressed the fact to his brothers. Walker firmly believed that Texas was going along with him with the BnB and resort ideas.

The main issue was that of getting Ranger out of the way. If Ranger only knew how serious Walker was about his big plans, maybe Ranger would change his mind. Texas didn't want to go through with the plan of getting rid of Ranger, but he was afraid to challenge Walker. Walker seemed so gung-ho about his ideas that only a fool would get in his way. Walker may even be crazed enough to want to eliminate Texas if he didn't go along. Texas was in an ugly bind from which he was unable to unravel himself. It was obviously a case of self-preservation for Texas to pretend to go along with Walker, but Texas truly didn't want to be a party to anything illegal.

Walker was so into his own ideas that he simply assumed that Texas was agreeable to them to a fault. Walker didn't care to dig deep enough into Texas' psyche to see what Texas was really thinking. Somewhere along the way, something diabolical happened to Walker that warped his brain. Perhaps it was the disappearance of Irving that had triggered something in Walker's head that had twisted him. His instinct for survival had blossomed into something ugly and forbidden. He had become cold and evil without knowing it. It wasn't as if he was walking around beating on people and yelling at them. No, it wasn't as obvious as all that. Walker's personality was broken inside, invisible to the public eye. Texas could see that his brother Walker had gone bad, but the innocent and happy go lucky Ranger was completely blind to it all.

Walker had begun to talk about his wicked plans every day in the food truck and it was beginning to get on Texas' nerves. Texas tried to tolerate Walker the best that he could, but it was becoming more and more difficult to do so. Walker kept babbling about Zito. Zito was going to do this and that and then everything would fall into place. They were going to become millionaires, blah, blah, blah. Texas couldn't believe how casually Walker was talking about plotting such a crime. It was abominable. Obviously, Walker and Texas wouldn't physically be doing anything to harm Ranger, but the conspiracy itself was the issue. The way Walker ranted began to make Texas' blood curdle as if he were watching Vincent Price machinating in a horror movie.

Walker had been babbling so incoherently about his grand plans that he hadn't noticed the lack of interest in Texas lately. Walker began to come back to reality and he sensed that Texas might not be the same willing player he once was. Walker started interrogating Texas to the point of nausea. Texas became so sickened by it all that he actually vomited in the food truck at noon on one busy day. They had to shut down the food truck and sell the remaining lobster items in another location after cleaning the truck.

Walker demanded to know what was going on with Texas and why he was behaving so

skittishly. Texas stated that he was tired of talking about the Ranger elimination idea so incessantly. They had the plan in place and they should wait for the appropriate time. They didn't have to keep going on and on about it. Walker took a step back and realized that Texas was right. They had a solid plan and they just had to be patient and wait to execute it. There was no need to obsess about it so much. Walker told Texas he was sorry to keep on so much about the plan. Texas accepted Walker's apology and they went about conducting their business for the remainder of the day.

Ranger wished that Walker and Texas would get off his back already about changing things. Why couldn't those guys see things from his point of view? Ranger was Irving's first kid and gladly became a fisherman just like Irving. Ranger had been the only child in the family for 10 years before Walker came along and it was another 10 years before Texas was born. Irving would have preferred that all his boys had followed in his footsteps, but Irving's 3 wives had differing influences on their 3 boys. Ranger was a simple hard working boy who immediately took to fishing. Walker had always been a schemer and had worked from an early age in the village doing any jobs he could, in order to obtain his one true love of money. Texas' mother had liked all the finer things in life and wanted Texas to become a society type, but it wasn't meant to be. Once Walker had gotten hold of Texas, he manipulated the boy at every step of the way.

Due to Irving's gruff fisherman type of personality, he was only good for about 10 years of devotion to a wife. As Irving divorced his wives, he was given custody of the boys and his wives chose to live their lives elsewhere. Irving tried to be as good of a father as he knew how, which was basically to let the boys thrive on their own. Irving never coddled the boys or over-nurtured them. He always felt that cuddling was something to be left to the mothers. Ranger had inherited Irving's love of the sea and its products and was as content at fishing as Irving had been. Walker felt that fishing was for the drudges of the world who had no ambition or vision. To Walker, fishermen were no better than ditch-diggers or cab drivers. Walker's motto was, "Simple jobs for the simple-minded." What Walker didn't realize was that he was no better than either of his brothers. As Thomas Jefferson said in The Declaration of Independence, we were all created equal. The only difference between Walker and his brothers was their individual outlooks on life.

Just because Ranger was content with his simple work didn't make him a simple-minded person. In fact, Ranger had consistently done better in school than Walker and Texas; Texas did better in school than Walker. Without realizing it, Walker had equated his greater drive and vision with having superior intelligence, which was far from reality. The reality was that Walker's limited intelligence had honed his survival instincts into sharp points. Walker felt that he was better than everyone else was because of his higher level of ambition and potential for wealth. The concept that Walker conceived in his mind as making him a better person than his brothers had actually made him a much worse person. It was due to Texas' close proximity to Walker that enabled

Texas to detect how Walker was slipping into megalomania. Ranger was lucky to not have to be exposed to Walker's worsening mental state, not yet anyway.

The time was growing near for Irving's official declaration of missing to be changed to officially passing away. The will would then become legally in motion. Walker's plan would have to be carried out immediately. In another week, it would be done. Walker contacted Zito in Rensselaer to travel out to Maine and prepare for action. Zito's exorbitant fee for his role was a percentage of the 1st year's profit from the upcoming BnB enterprise.

The hit was set for the following week on Monday morning when Ranger was out checking the lobster traps. On that day, Ranger awoke at 4:00 am and headed to the shoreline. Zito emerged from the woods and crept up behind Ranger as he began to walk onto the rocks. When Zito was behind Ranger, he pushed him and Ranger fell.

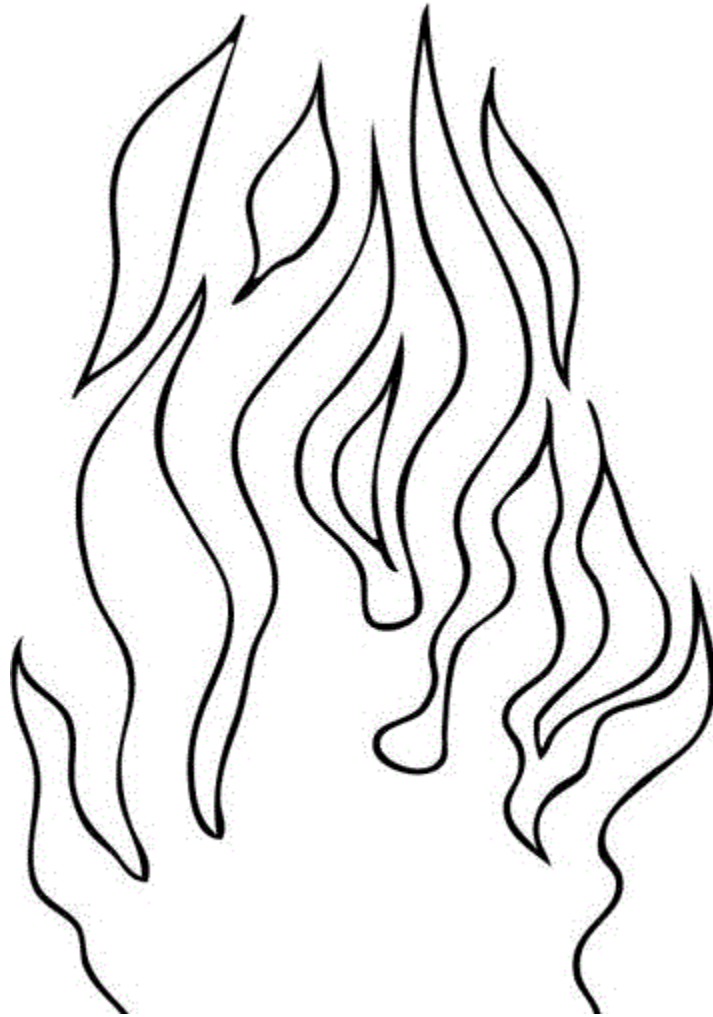
Irving ran from the house with a lobster cage in his hands, yelled at Ranger, "Look out Ranger!" and jettisoned the cage through the air at Zito. Zito was hit in the back of the head by the cage and fell to the ground. Ranger quickly got up, turned around and saw Zito lying there on the ground, groggily looking up at him. Irving said, "That was close, son! I figured it was going to be something like this. It had to be Walker's idea." "Probably," said Ranger. Zito mumbled with slurred speech, "It was Walker and Texas who put me up to it!" "That's it then," said Irving. "Call the Police, son." "Ok dad," said Ranger.

Irving pretended to go missing 7 years before and had been living with Ranger the whole time in the house. The few times that Walker, Texas or anyone else visited the house, Irving had hidden in a special secret room in the basement. Irving had been diagnosed with a fatal illness and knew that his years were numbered. He wanted to see what the boys' intentions were with the property. Irving had suspected that Walker was up to no good years ago. Irving concocted the idea of his own disappearance to test the boys. Ranger had of course known about Irving's idea all along, because it was actually Ranger's idea. Ranger had always been his father's favorite son.

Irving had wanted all his boys to become fishermen like himself and Ranger was the only one to follow suit. Irving was a stubborn man who earned everything the hard way through hard work and simple living. He didn't believe in allowing his kids to have easy lives by exploiting his hard-earned property. Irving felt that only Ranger deserved the property, because he would remain a lifelong fisherman and would cherish the house that his father had built with his 2 rough hands. Irving could trust Ranger to never do anything to change his beautiful house.

Walker and Texas were arrested for conspiracy to commit murder and thanks to Zito's testimony, they were sentenced to 30 years without the possibility of parole in the state penitentiary. Irving passed away a year later from his illness. The day after he buried his father, Ranger quit fishing and began modifying the house to convert it into a Bed and Breakfast.

80. Yael's Flame



80. Yael's Flame

Yael didn't know what it was about fire and flames that he liked so much. Was it the infinite spectrum of colors produced by the flames? Was it the miniscule heat from a birthday candle or the seemingly infinite heat from a forest fire? Was it the ability of fire to render anything on earth into ashes? Was it the sound of fire as it roared like a lion when a building was engulfed? Was it the fact that even the sun was perpetually on fire? Yael liked everything about fire.

Yael wasn't even sure if "like" was the most suitable word to describe his feelings toward, about and of fire. Fire was Yael and Yael was fire. Yael felt that fire was a part of him presently and had been a part of him since he had been a small child. Yael often looked in the mirror at his scars as he thought back to when he was a small child. When he was 2 years old, his mother Ursula had left him and his 2 sisters, Winnifred who was 3 and Wendy who was 4 in the care of his brother Will, who was 5. Will had found a pack of his mother's matches, which was easy for the boy, since his mother smoked and left matches lying everywhere around the apartment.

The gist of the story of Yael's time as a small child was that he was the only one of his siblings pulled out alive from the burned apartment. Will had just been playing a little game with the matches and something in the apartment caught on fire. Perhaps the trauma of the fire had imprinted something on Yael that was as rotten as the dead rats in that old apartment of 18 years ago. Yael never got the chance to talk to his mother about what happened to his brother and sisters. She heard about what happened to her kids, left town on the next train and was never heard from again. The Police and other folks tried to locate her over the years, but she had simply vanished without a trace.

Yael had been too young to remember much of the fire, other than a moment when he was choking on smoke as he hid under his burning bed and then it became really hot. He remembered hearing screaming and then everything went blank. Whatever happened in that fire had morphed Yael into a bad boy. He didn't notice it for the first few years in elementary school when all the kids made fun of him. He didn't even notice it in junior high and senior high. When he graduated high school at 18 and began living alone in his apartment, something clicked in his head like the sound of a Zippo lighter clicking shut.

By the time that 2 years had passed, Yael had been associated with many fires. Those fires hadn't hurt Yael; he was always too careful to ever be burned again. The fires that Yael had been a part of were the fires of all the old empty buildings that were similar to the one that he had lived in as a small child for his first 2 precious years. Yael wanted to make sure that no one ever lived in old buildings like his old building. Those old buildings weren't safe to live in; they were all owned by slumlords who paid off the building inspectors. None of the buildings had safe wiring, smoke detectors or safe windows. Those old buildings contained enough asbestos and lead paint to cause problems for thousands of financially disadvantaged children who were unlucky enough

to have to live in them.

It wasn't right and Yael vowed to try as hard as he could to eliminate all those old empty buildings. One of those old buildings had taken his brother and sisters and had caused his mother to disappear. It became Yael's mission in his new life to prevent the habitation of any old unsafe buildings in the city. It sounded strange to Yael to refer to his life as his new life, but it was the only logical way for him to depict it. He lived his first life for 2 beautiful years before the fire in the tenement. After the fire, his second life was 16 years of hell. His new life began at age 18, when he heard the click in his head. He savored his new life of fire. He was the hero of the oppressed. By burning down all the old empty buildings, the slumlords would eventually be forced to buy and rent the more modern, safer buildings.

Maybe Yael would be able to prevent some children from being burned the way that he had been burned. Maybe he would be able to prevent other children from getting lead poisoning from eating the old paint chips, as children tend to do. Maybe all the residents of the old buildings would be prevented from contracting mesothelioma from the asbestos that was everywhere. Any of the bad things that Yael could prevent from happening to innocent people would be just fine by him. Yael was teaching the slumlords the valuable lesson that easy money shouldn't come from the suffering of others. Maybe the cities would take note of Yael's torching vendetta and start demolishing the buildings themselves. Perhaps Yael was actually doing the cities a favor by incinerating all those buildings. The cities all had huge budgets and fully equipped fire stations thanks to 911. Yael reckoned that it was probably cheaper for the cities to allow an empty old building to be burned down by someone and extinguished by the fire companies than to foot the full cost of demolition.

Yael didn't concern himself with the whys and wherefores; he just wanted to see the flames of his victories. Yael found himself eyeing smaller potential fires as he drove around looking for the next building to destroy. He noticed stacks of wooden pallets that would very likely make beautiful crackling sounds as they burned. Piles of garbage were everywhere in the cities; they would certainly result in beautifully flowing smoky infernos. Plenty of abandoned vehicles littered the backstreets of the cities, long forgotten by their former owners. The large box stores always had mountains of flammable cardboard waiting to be picked up by the recycling folks. Yael was titillated by everything he observed in his travels that could be burned. Was he a hero of the people who burned down the old empty buildings to save countless lives or was he just a petty arsonist? He believed that he had become a bit of both, but he was mainly a hero.

Yael looked at his current pursuits lightly and never feared being caught. As he had previously discussed with himself, he was doing the city a favor and they didn't appear to want to catch him. He had gotten to the point of walking into the old buildings in broad daylight to do his pre-torching recon for anyone squatting in the building. He would then walk out to his car, get the 5-

gallon cans of gasoline and proceed with his task. No one ever stopped him, yelled at him or even looked at him. The people who lived in the inner cities had their own problems to deal with without worrying about preventing crimes. Naturally, Yael never considered what he did to be a crime. Otherwise, he wouldn't be doing it; Yael was a law-abiding citizen. When Yael heard that fateful click in his head, it set the tone for the rest of his interesting life. The occasional people that Yael encountered in the buildings before burning them were warned and sometimes escorted out. Yael didn't want to hurt; he wanted to help and help he did. The cities were beginning to be cleaned up, one old building at a time. When the cities eventually demolished and removed Yael's works, community gardens, fenced playgrounds and landscaped areas were installed. Yael was actually doing the city some good.

Sometimes Yael thought about why Ursula left town after he and his sibs were caught in the fire. Why would she leave him behind? It wasn't as if she had set the fire; she wasn't directly to blame. Any memory of his mother had been evaporated by time and the anguish from the fire. Yael had only known his mother for 2 years and as a result, didn't really miss her. He just wanted to know why she left and where she was currently living. In between lighting his fires, Yael did some investigative work. He asked all around his old neighborhood if anybody had known anything of Ursula's current whereabouts. After 4 months of poking around, he finally found a woman who claimed to know where Ursula was. After the fire, Ursula had been so shocked by the incident that she fled to Las Vegas.

Yael torched one more building and then drove to Vegas to find his long lost mommy. As Yael approached the city, he noticed many old buildings outside the city limits that needed his magic touch. He would tend to those after he located his mother. Yael's twisted mind instructed him that wherever he went, he was to burn down every old empty building that he could find. After some weeks of asking around the Vegas area, Yael had determined that his mother didn't live in the city, but on the outskirts. Ursula had been living in an apartment building on the top floor. When Yael pressed the buzzer outside and announced himself, she told him to go away. He begged her to let him come up for just a little while, so that they could see each other, if only briefly.

Ursula pushed her buzzer and Yael went up to see his mother. When she opened the door and saw him, she burst into tears. She hadn't seen what happened to him as a result of the fire. Yael was incapable of crying, because he had lost the ability when he heard the click in his head. Ursula let Yael in and offered him some iced tea. They hugged each other and sat down in the living room to reminisce. Ursula admitted that she did the wrong thing by abandoning him after the fire, especially at such a crucial time in his life when he needed his mother most of all. Yael's main issue was her mistake of leaving such young kids alone to their methods; her mistake had led to the disaster.

She went on and on saying how sorry she was; Yael enjoyed her torment. He wanted her to know how much he had suffered over the years, living without a mother and father. It was directly because of her stupidity and carelessness that his appearance was damaged forever. He emphasized that she should have atoned to her crime of abandonment and been prosecuted. She was a criminal who performed a criminal act and should have paid for the crime. Yael kept pouring it on. She sobbed and screamed for him to stop. She was sorry and nothing could be done to change it. She was devastated by the loss of her 3 kids and by the scarring of her 4th. She couldn't fix what happened; it was over. It had been too many years to go back and fess up to her crime.

Ursula wanted more than anything to make amends with Yael; she offered to let him live with her for a while if he wanted. Yael thought it would be a good idea. Ursula made enough money that Yael wouldn't have to get a job if he didn't want to. Yael insisted on earning his keep and found a job at a car wash, wiping down cars. Ursula was a good cook and cooked all their suppers after she came home from the casino. After leaving the car wash each day, Yael set fire to an old empty building or 2 and then went home for supper.

Yael concluded that he had become addicted to burning buildings down; it was no longer just a heroic thing to do. He had become a full-blown arsonist and he enjoyed the illustrious title. Yael kept telling himself that no one had ever been hurt in his burned buildings that he knew of. In his enfeebled mind, that made it ok to continue doing it. He never intentionally burned a building in which someone was living. An arsonist by Yael's definition was some kind of a freak who ran around trying to burn buildings that he knew were inhabited. Yael was so far from being that kind of freak that it was laughable. He felt that he was only an arsonist as far as the fact that he enjoyed the fire that was involved. He liked the flames, heat, sound and smell of burning buildings. Some people liked the smell and sound of bacon cooking. There was no difference to Yael. Yeah. It was just like he was burning large boxes of bacon; that was the official justification in his brain that made it ok to continue doing it. Problem solved.

Sometimes, when Yael came home after work and after burning a building, Ursula detected the smell of gasoline on him. He claimed it was because he only put a small amount of gas in his car at a time due to the leaky gas tank and always got gas on his clumsy hands. It sounded like a good enough excuse to Yael and because she was his recently loving mother, Ursula bought it. She would never suspect that he was one of those freaks who run around and burn down buildings. Why should she? To Ursula, Yael was just another normal boy who had been dealt an unlucky hand early in life that had left a few scars on his otherwise perfect life. Since Ursula had become a card dealer, she constantly drew parallels between her job and her life. It made things easier for her, since she really had never completely gotten over the tragic fire involving her beloved children.

Ursula had gone through years of unsuccessful therapy in an attempt to heal herself, but Yael coming to live with her seemed to be the real medicine. She imagined that by his apparent forgiveness of how she had abandoned him, maybe things would get better after all. After initially berating Ursula when they first met months ago, Yael backed off and allowed things to fall into place. Ursula was finally beginning to feel better about herself and hoped that Yael truly forgave her for what she had done as a foolish 21-year old.

Yael never forgave Ursula and never would. He only pretended to accept her apology and planned to get even with her someday. He needed time to carefully orchestrate his vengeance; it helped him think more clearly when he watched his buildings burn. The only time he was at peace was when he watched and listened to the beautiful flames. Those were his flames, creating by him, adored by him and worshipped by him.

Unbeknownst to Yael, in addition to her card-dealing job, Ursula was one of those slumlords who Yael detested so vehemently. When she first arrived in Vegas, she got the casino job and ran into people along the way with investment ideas. She didn't want to be a card dealer for the rest of her life and investment property seemed like a good idea. She met up with some seedy characters from whom she bought rental properties on the outskirts of Vegas. She continued buying old empty buildings over the years and some of the buildings were currently empty, waiting to be rented.

On a particularly eventful evening after work, Yael had torched 3 buildings, his personal record for burning buildings down to the ground. He was absolutely elated and brought home pizza, chicken wings and ice cream to celebrate. When Ursula came home, she was depressed and when Yael asked her why, she related the story of how 3 of her empty buildings had been burned down. Yael's eyes popped open like someone suddenly waking up to their alarm clock on a Monday morning. Ursula claimed that she had lost 5 other buildings since he had come to live with her. Yael asked her why she didn't tell him about her rental properties. She claimed she didn't want to tell him because she was too embarrassed to admit that she owned the same type of old building in which he had been burned. She only bought the buildings out of desperation.

Yael heard all he wanted to hear and all that he could stand listening to. He blankly looked at Ursula and hastily rushed out of the apartment without saying a word. She called to him to come back and whimpered that she was sorry. Yael had heard the last sorry that he ever wanted to hear. He had so many sorries thrown at him that they began hitting him and falling to the ground. How could she? Was she insane? How could his mother become one of those fiends who made easy money from the miseries of the financially disadvantaged? How could she do that to those people? Did she think he wouldn't find out eventually? She was sick! What was wrong with her? She had done him the ultimate injustice years ago and had been doing it to him ever since. Yael ran down the stairs to his car and burst into tears. He knew what had to be done.

81. Christopher's Gifts



81. Christopher's Gifts

Christopher actually went by many names. He was known as Kris Kringle, Chris Kringle, St. Nicholas, Santa Claus and other variations, but preferred to be called Chris by his friends and Mr. Chris by his worker elves. Chris was busy every day of the year, but particularly busy on Christmas Eve. He had a lot of work to do to get all the gifts ready for the children. The hundreds of thousands of elves under his employ actually did most of the work, but Chris liked to take full credit for it. The concept of gift giving had been his idea after all.

Chris remembered his early days as a youth in his village of Potterville. The mayor named Potter was a snarly old coot who made all his money by taxing the villagers to the limit of their means. Most of the villagers only had enough money to pay for a meager amount of food and keep their shanties barely lit and somewhat heated. As each year went by, the despotic Potter raised the taxes again to the point of some of the villagers being unable to give their children even one Christmas gift.

Chris never forgot those days in Potterville and vowed that when he made his fortune, he would ensure that every child received a Christmas gift to open on Christmas day. It took Chris many years to make his fortune, which he eventually did by inventing a number of useful kitchen gadgets including the microwave oven, blender, refrigerator, automatic dishwasher and toaster. His inventions gave Chris billions of dollars with which to fabricate, wrap and deliver Christmas gifts for all the children.

At first, Chris did the gift manufacturing, etc. on his own, but soon found it too tedious and had to begin hiring the elves. With the help of a fisherman friend of his, he found an uncharted island in the Pacific Ocean that had a population of millions of elves. Due to the island's high population to job ratio, many of the elves were unemployed and were having a hard time getting by. Chris promised the elves that if they came to work for him, their financial woes would be over for the rest of their lives. The elves that he hired to work for him were permitted to bring their entire families, extended families and anyone else they knew. Soon, Chris had transported thousands of the elves to his complex at the North Pole. Since the elves were so prolific, in no time the thousands of elves had multiplied into hundreds of thousands. Chris had no problem accommodating the enormous numbers of elves, since his inventions kept producing billions of dollars for him via licensing, patenting and other tricky maneuvering on his part.

The elves were incredibly gifted designers, fabricators and builders. They were able to expand Chris' North Pole complex into a leviathan that was unfathomable to the business world at large. The elves built all their own housing, supermarkets, hospitals and all the other necessities of life. In addition, the elves expanded the toy manufacturing facilities into the greatest entities of their kind on the face of the earth. The elves were so efficient in designing and fabricating that there was virtually no waste of materials. After the products were manufactured, any leftover

materials were recycled back into the process. Chris sat down one day and estimated that if he were to use the elves for profit making instead of charity gift giving, he would be a trillionaire instead of a billionaire.

Since the elves were such tiny individuals, Chris used them to shimmy down the chimneys of the houses to place the gifts for the children under the Christmas trees. Chris himself had always been too fat to fit down the chimneys and had to crowbar the back doors to get into the houses, before the elves came along. With their typical efficiency, the elves had devised a special Teflon zipped-on body suit to protect themselves from the filth of the chimneys and make the going up and down much faster. Since Chris and the elves had so many houses to visit on Christmas Eve, they spent mere seconds per house. The elves practiced their routine continuously at the North Pole complex to make the operation as swift as possible.

The elves had organized themselves into different departments at the complex. They had departments for research & development, think tanks, fabrication, testing, quality control, sanitizing and gift-wrapping departments. Since the elves were such a surprisingly filthy race of beings, the gifts had to be sanitized after hand fabrication. The sanitized gifts were then wrapped by specially designed robot elves that were germ-free.

That was the one thing about the elves that Chris couldn't bear - their hygiene. The elves never bathed, washed their hands, hair or clothing, brushed their teeth or performed any other typical hygienic processes. When the elves pooped, they didn't use toilet paper or wash their hands. Chris had a hard time getting the elves to use the toilets and urinals in the factory. When the elves lived on their island in the Pacific, there were no toilets, urinals, men's rooms, ladies' rooms or anything of the sort. The island reeked of elf excrement & urine and Chris tried to keep his visits to the island as short as possible to get out of there before he vomited from the stench.

The elves reluctantly agreed to the use of the toilets and urinals, but only because Chris was the boss. They outright refused to wash their hands or bathe, etc. To the elves, the use of water for anything but drinking or cooking was a terrible waste. Their island in the Pacific had no fresh water and the people relied on rainwater to survive. The cost of a desalinization plant was much too prohibitory. Once the elves had explained to Chris how their island habitat and culture had instilled in them their water stinginess, he came to understand their point of view. However, even though Chris understood the elves' reasoning, he still had to breathe through his mouth in their foul presence.

The jet-powered sled that Chris originally started using to deliver gifts many years before had been drastically increased in size over time. The elves had formed a special design group to design the sled to be bigger and bigger as required, while at the same time maintaining speed and energy efficiency. The sled had multiple jet engines of a design initiated by Chris and perfected by the elves. The engines were designed to be as quiet as possible, to avoid waking up the

residents of the households. The multiple jet engines installed in the sled enabled the sled to go in any direction and hover as needed.

The sled was tricky to operate and Chris constantly trained in its use at the complex under the intense scrutiny of the elves who were responsible for continuously updating its design. The sled was currently over 800 feet long with 200 compartments with trapdoors for the 400 elves to exit and re-enter through. When they arrived at a neighborhood to drop off gifts, the "drop elves" jumped out through the trapdoors with the gifts when they were close enough to the chimneys. Chris then doubled back and the "lift elves" hoisted up the "drop elves" who were perched on top of the chimneys like raccoon-sized birds in their little gray Teflon suits. It was a sight to see. Very few accidents occurred that involved elf injuries. Chris' system had been so perfected over the years that the residents in the houses never heard a thing.

The little children in the houses knew that their hero Santa Claus had once again come through for them and had deposited a gift under their Christmas trees. If there were no Christmas trees in the houses, the elves left the gifts on the living room floor, came back up the chimney and waited for Chris to return with the sled. The elf then retrieved one of the special mini Christmas trees from the sled, went back down the chimney with the tree and put it with the gifts. Chris and the elves had everything figured out to a science.

It was ironic that the elves didn't celebrate Christmas and yet the main source of their income was from making Christmas gifts. Chris consulted with president Harpo of the North Pole elf community and asked him about letting the elf children play with some of the toys that so many other human children were enjoying. Harpo maintained that the elves didn't require such trivial items as toys to be happy or to occupy themselves. The elves were born with the simple happiness to be alive and work from their earliest days on earth to their last. It was their desire to work that motivated the elves and nothing more.

Chris had always wondered how the elves were able to start working in the factory as soon as they could walk. He always thought it was a little bit too young, but he didn't want to interfere with their culture any more than he had to. It was bad enough that he made the elves use the men's rooms and ladies' rooms at the factory. Chris gave the elves plenty of holidays off as part of their contract, including Christmas day. If the elves wanted to work on the holidays, it was up to them and he paid them double for those days. Chris had been so happy with the performance of the elves over the years, that he decided to go to their Pacific island and transport all of them to live in the North Pole. Since there was another elf president on the island named Zeppo, he would have to be consulted with.

Harpo accompanied Chris when they visited the island to talk with Zeppo. Zeppo didn't want to leave the island with his people, overcrowded as the island was, to go work for Chris making toys for tots. Chris stressed that he wanted to free Zeppo's elves from living in squalor on the

island to live in relative comfort at the North Pole complex. Harpo jumped in to say that they could expand the North Pole complex well ahead of time to easily accommodate the millions of elves from the island. The property that Chris owned covered hundreds of square miles and could sustain any amount of expansion.

Chris emphasized to Zeppo that his gesture to have all the elves living with him in the North Pole wasn't an attempt to get them all to work for him at the factory. Chris loved the elves and only wanted them to be happy doing whatever they wanted to do. Chris had developed such a humanitarian nature that he couldn't help wanting to help the elves. However, he only had so much money and time with which to do that.

Chris explained that Zeppo's people could work at the factory or keep their current jobs. Elf communities as large as Zeppo's had all the same occupations and support systems as human communities. Chris and Harpo finally convinced Zeppo to bring his people from the island to the North Pole in about one year's time after the North Pole complex had been readied. Harpo would continue to be the president of the factory workers and Zeppo would continue to be the president of his current larger population of elves. In the meantime, Zeppo could spend the year adjusting the outlook of his people toward their new lives at the North Pole.

In 14 months, Zeppo's millions of elves were transported from the island to the new North Pole city. Chris and Harpo no longer referred to it as a complex, due to its much larger size. The elves had worked very hard to design and build the new buildings, facilities and houses for the newly arriving elves. Because of the elves' flawless efficiency, the process had been seamless and within another 6 months, everyone was settled in. Inevitably, a debate started about having only one elf president. Harpo gladly relinquished his presidency to Zeppo, who had always been the president back on the island. Harpo felt that he had been only a temporary president at the North Pole and was glad to turn the reigns over to Zeppo. Instead, Harpo became the manager of the factory, at which he had much more experience than anyone else did, including Chris.

After a year at the North Pole, the recently migrated elves began to want more. Many of them had gone over to work at the factory for Chris, because he paid such a high wage. The elves who were working at the non-factory jobs were wishing that something could be done to improve everyone's standard of living to be equal to that of the factory workers. Rumors started going around the communities about possibly manufacturing other things at the factory in addition to toys. The toys could still be given away at Christmas to all the children, but the elves were postulating about fabricating the other products of the world and selling them for money.

Decades back when Chris initiated his gift-giving idea, he never intended to profit from the elf labor. Chris only hired the elves to work at a good wage to produce toys to be given away. The elves were happy and the human children were happy. The problem became the overwhelming number of elves that he had brought from the island who wanted the higher wages of the factory

workers. The reality was that he had so many elves working at the toy factory already that he didn't need any more. He was at such a capacity that he had all the toys he needed for the children.

The millions of elves at the North Pole wanted higher paying jobs and they wanted them immediately. It was true that Chris had promised Zeppo's people on the island that whoever wanted to work for him at the toy factory could. The time had come too quickly when Chris was unable to employ any more elves at the factory. Chris had unwittingly created a big problem by bringing all the elves from the island.

Chris had never wanted to reveal his secret North Pole facility to the world. He wanted to go on forever as the person mysteriously known as Santa Claus who gave the children gifts every year. No one really knew exactly where Santa Claus was. Chris preferred the secrecy and relative anonymity of his current operation. On the other hand, he didn't want to break his promise to his beloved elves of hiring any of them who wanted to work at his factory.

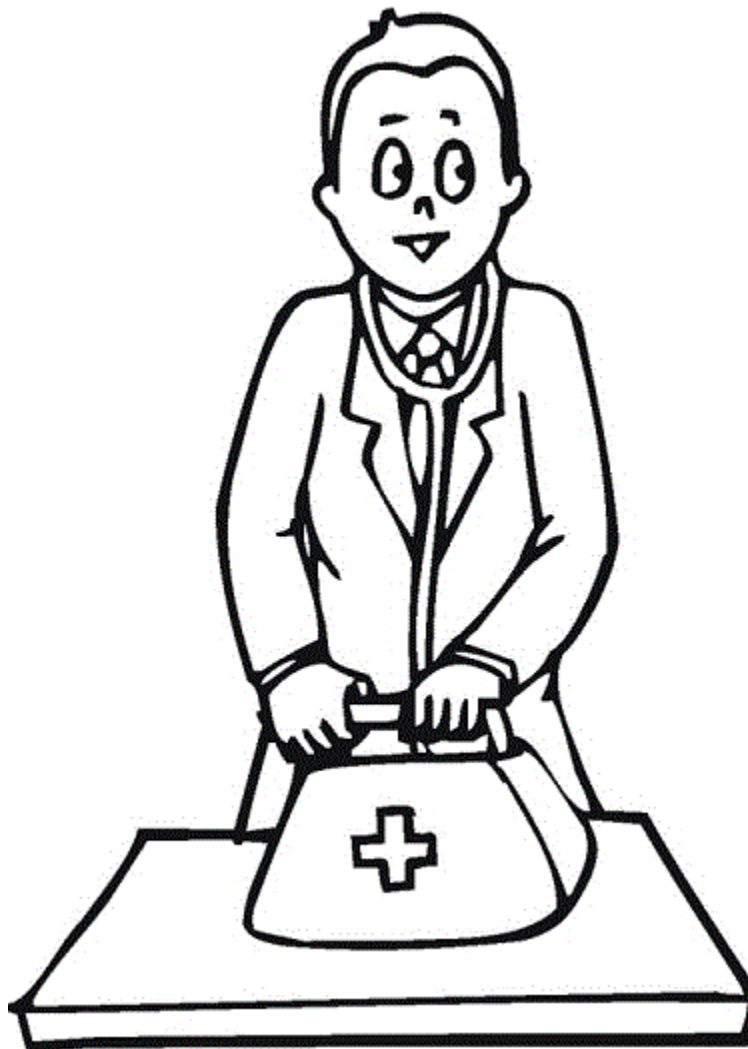
He consulted with Zeppo and Harpo on the matter. Zeppo claimed that the elf people were getting antsy and wanted the factory work that Chris had promised them. Zeppo reluctantly admitted that he didn't expect so many of the people from the island to want to work in the factory. It was because of the high factory wage that Chris paid that the people were being drawn away from their current lower-paying service industry jobs. Chris couldn't really say that he was sorry for paying a good wage to the factory workers.

Chris thought hard about it and reluctantly admitted that he had to alter his mindset for the benefit of the elves. There seemed to be only one thing to do and that was to begin manufacturing other products at the factory to sell for money, in addition to the toys to be given away at Christmas. That way, Chris could employ all the elves who wanted to work at the factory. Zeppo didn't necessarily want so many of his people working at the factory, due to the drudgeries of factory work, but he wanted his people to be happy.

Harpo consulted with his factory design team on how to tremendously increase the factory's size and expand the product line into the thousands of new items that the factory would be manufacturing. Zeppo talked to his people and told them that they would have to wait a few months for Chris and Harpo to get things going.

As high as the wages were that Chris paid his factory workers, they were still much lower than the factory workers made in China. Overall, utilizing the elves as workers resulted in very low overhead. Chris contacted his chief executive cronies at Walmart. He discussed his plans of expansion with them and they liked what he had to say. They signed the contracts and work began immediately. Thanks to Chris, all of the products sold at the Walmart stores of the world would soon no longer be made in China, but be made in the USA at the North Pole.

82. Darnell's Healing



82. Darnell's Healing

At 52 years old, Darnell had done all he could as a general practitioner and surgeon in America and felt that it was time for him to help the peoples of equatorial Africa. He took all his money out of the bank and moved to Africa with a young doctor friend named Waldo and 2 nurses, Xiao and Xiomara. Waldo and the nurses brought all their limited funds to Africa as well.

Through the Red Cross, they found a village called Arunda Bowandi, which translated from the local African dialect to English as "Place of Plenty." At one time, the village was used as a slave trading post; it had a few dilapidated buildings, which required fixing. There was a small building that had been used as a medical clinic by the slave traders. Due to the intense heat and humidity of the village, mold, mildew and mosquitoes were prevalent. Termites had devoured all of the wood of the structures. Everything would have to be upgraded and rebuilt using aluminum and stainless steel materials.

The locals were hired to do the work, but the first order of business was to reduce the malaria and yellow fever risk by eliminating all the standing water and foliage in a 1,000-foot radius. The mature trees were ok since they provided much needed shade. The locals didn't understand the reasoning behind the practice, but reluctantly agreed to do it for the free medical care that would be their payment. The workers didn't want to wait for the eventual free medical care and wanted payment each day. Darnell relented and paid them with food.

Due to the heat, the workers were only able to work for 4 hours each day and as a result, it took them 3 weeks to complete the work. The cleared and dried area had to be maintained and since everything grew so lushly from the heavy rains, a maintenance crew of 10 locals was designated to permanent duty. Within the cleared area, an enormous garden was planted with seeds, plants, bushes and trees purchased at the entry port where Darnell and company came into Africa. A 6-foot fence was installed around the garden to keep out the pests.

Once the buildings were renovated, the medical supplies were brought in from the port and Darnell began his practice. Xiao would be his nurse and Xiomara would work with Waldo. Before they even opened the door to the clinic, a line of people had been forming outside for 2 days. There were 117 people waiting for care. Darnell had the nurses attempt to triage the line so they could work on the most serious cases first. The patients refused to go by the triage concept and insisted on being seen in the order that they were standing in the line.

Darnell didn't want to fight with the patients, but they had to abide by his orders. The nurses had to put up with resistance from some of the people at the front of the line, but there were some seriously injured people near the back of the line who urgently needed help. The nurses carried in a woman on a stretcher who had been mauled by a lion. Even though one of the woman's legs and one of her arms were clearly missing, people in line caused a ruckus as she was carried by

them. Once inside the clinic, the woman was stitched up, bandaged and carried to the recovery clinic.

After a month of treating the locals, Darnell realized that he needed to expand the recovery clinic, since some of the injuries were so bad that the patients needed a number of days before they could be safely transported home. The Red Cross footed some of the bills that were involved in Darnell's work in the village, but not all. That's why he and his 3 co-workers had to bring their own funds to Africa, in order to supplement the funding from the Red Cross. When Darnell communicated to the Red Cross that he wanted to expand the recovery clinic to 10 times its current size, they threw their hands in the air and said that it was impossible.

The Red Cross only had so much money and used it all over the world in the most immediately essential instances. Darnell's village scenario was basically a humanitarian effort that he had concocted with his co-workers and the Red Cross could only do so much to assist him in his efforts. Darnell advised his co-workers to reach out to all of their contacts in order to raise more money. Darnell estimated that they would need another \$17,000 to expand the recovery clinic.

It took Darnell and his crew 4 months to raise the required money, which involved begging, borrowing and stealing from everyone they knew. Most of the people who were approached for money felt that Africa was a good cause, but not good enough to put too much money into. Darnell and his crew had all given up good paying jobs and comfortable living conditions to go to Africa and suffer as they did, because they had a calling to do it.

Some people go through their lives wanting to be the best person they can be and become just successful enough to be happy. Others want to be enormously successful so that they can feel they are better than everyone else who isn't as successful as they are. The world required all kinds of people to make it run. Some people didn't need the success of money and material things. Some people were natural givers and others were natural takers, never considering giving to anyone for any reason.

Darnell and his crew had given up a lot to be in Africa to help people and their successes in life had been measured by the line of people at the clinic each day. Darnell and company measured success one patient at a time. Darnell guessed that unless people other than himself, Xiao, Xiomara and Waldo hadn't awoke one day with the same special feeling that they all had, the other people would never understand why the 4 of them were in Africa.

Darnell referred to his special feeling as just that, a special feeling. Sometimes people described what he felt as a "calling." Darnell believed that too often the term "calling" was interpreted as something religious, such as when a priest or minister or rabbi got "the calling" to become one of those persons. Darnell didn't like to refer to his special feeling as a "calling." He didn't get a religious "calling" to go to Africa. He simply awoke one day and something clicked in his head

that made him want more out of life than just making a lot of money to spend on toys with which to impress his friends.

Darnell's co-workers agreed that the reason they were in Africa was to get more out of life in the simplest and noblest way possible, that of providing service to others. They didn't care to be labeled one way or another. They only wished that more people could be sympathetic to their cause and be as willing to help the world's peoples as they were.

The most difficult things that Darnell and his trio encountered each day were the types of injuries sustained by the patients. One day, a young boy was brought in with his foot hanging on by a thread of skin. His mother claimed that the boy had been setting his lion traps and was distracted by a lion that smelled the bait that the boy was using in the traps. The trap sprung and severed the boy's foot. Darnell had no choice but to amputate the foot, which was essentially already amputated. It brought great distress to Darnell to have to do such a drastic thing to the boy, but it was unavoidable. The people were careless out there and caused many injuries to themselves out of clumsiness and impatience.

One of Darnell's maintenance workers sustained an injury to one of his legs while chopping the foliage and had accidentally cut an artery in the leg. The leg was bleeding so badly that the man almost passed away from blood loss. Luckily, he had been found in time by his fellow foliage chopper, who had been eating lunch nearby and heard his friend quietly moaning. The injured man had been rescued just in time to prevent being attacked by lions. Lions seemed to be the main predator in and around the village. Darnell and Waldo each had high-powered rifles near them at all times, which could down a lion with one well-placed round.

Darnell's group of 4 always carried pistols to defend themselves from animal attacks. They were all trained in the use of the weapons and could shoot accurately if the need arose. The local people didn't know what the weapons were or what they were capable of until one day when one of Darnell's foliage maintainers uttered a blood-curdling scream as he was pounced on by a pride of lions in the garden. Darnell and Waldo grabbed their rifles, ran out to the garden and fired at the lions, killing all 6 of them with 6 shots. Luckily, the worker survived the limited amount of mauling that he had sustained.

The sound of the rifle blasts was so loud and shocking to the locals, that everyone who was standing in line outside the clinic ran away for fear of their lives. They didn't return until 2 days later out of reluctant desperation for necessary medical care. Once they had seen that the weapons were only used for the specific purpose of protecting the village from predators, they relaxed a little. The worker whose life was spared from the lions by the rifles explained to everybody who would listen that his life had been saved by the thunder sticks. He showed the locals his wounds from the lions and emphasized that the wounds would have been much worse.

On another day, an old woman healer was brought into the clinic on a stretcher. She claimed that what Darnell and his crew were doing was against her teachings. The woman was supposedly 86 years old and had been the natural healer of the villagers for more than 69 years. The woman claimed that Darnell was an evil entity that practiced black magic on her people. She ranted that Darnell wasn't needed and that he and his trio should leave or something might befall them. She had been successfully treating the people over the years and it was time for Darnell to leave.

Darnell wondered where the old woman had been all the time that Darnell and his crew had been there. Apparently, the old woman had come down with some kind of an illness that she wasn't able to heal. When she finally got better after months of suffering, she had the people carry her on the stretcher to see Darnell. The old woman had apparently suffered from pneumonia and luckily had gotten better in spite of her attempts at healing herself naturally. The old woman believed that if someone couldn't be healed by her natural methods, then the creator should take them. Darnell's methods were unnatural and shouldn't be practiced in the village.

Darnell asked the old woman what type of natural healing she would use for the foliage cutter who had the severed artery in his leg. She said she would have wrapped up the leg with Cathera root and would have had the man drink Boki juice. If that didn't heal him, then the creator would take him. While Darnell was talking with the old woman, a young girl had been brought in with a severed artery in her leg, which was bleeding profusely. She had been carelessly chopping sugar cane when she accidentally cut her leg. Darnell allowed the old woman to attempt to heal the girl in her natural way. The old woman produced from her large satchel some Cathera root and Boki juice. She then applied her methods to the girl and waited. The girl's leg continued to bleed and the girl became faint from the continued blood loss and soon passed out.

Xiao and Xiomara pleaded with Darnell to intervene, but he wouldn't. Waldo stepped forward to help the obviously fading girl, but the old woman shrieked at him to stand back. Darnell asked the old woman what was going to happen next. The old woman said that it was time for the creator to take over. The old woman firmly believed that if someone couldn't be healed naturally, then it was up to a higher power to decide what would happen.

Darnell knew from experience that the injured girl probably had about a 1/2 hour to live if he didn't step in to save her. He waited another 15 minutes and then said to the old woman, "Watch and learn!" Darnell had the girl brought into the clinic where Waldo fixed her leg and brought her back to consciousness. Darnell had the old woman carried to the doorway of the clinic, since she refused to be brought inside. In 20 minutes, the young girl was well enough to open her eyes and talk. Darnell said to the old woman, "What do you think now?" The old woman said that it must not have been the young girl's time yet. The creator wasn't ready to take her.

Darnell had to respect the old woman's beliefs, because it was a part of her culture. It was certainly possible that it wasn't the girl's time to go and that the creator wasn't ready to take her

yet. Darnell and his trio wondered how many hundreds of people had passed away under the natural care of the old woman healer. It was a classic case of leaving a people's culture alone. The villagers who saw the value of Darnell's work continued to come to him and be healed by the latest medical methods available outside of a hospital. The primarily older villagers continued to be looked after by the old woman and continued to drop like flies. There was nothing Darnell could do about it. He couldn't force people to come to the clinic, just as a horse couldn't be forced to drink water, as the saying goes.

The Red Cross had supplied Darnell with thousands of immunizations for the prevention of the basic illnesses in the children and adults. At first, the villagers were reluctant to be stabbed by the needles, but had come to trust the doctor and hoped that the needles led to something beneficial. Over a period of time at the clinic, many thousands of people had been treated and each case was documented as thoroughly as possible with the hopes of getting increased funding. The Red Cross had its hands tied however, and suggested that Darnell try to reach out to some of the wealthier institutions for money.

Darnell was tired of having to beg for money for such a good cause. It made Darnell sick when he saw the billions of dollars wasted trying to land something on Mars, when so many millions of people were suffering every day on earth. We landed on the moon and it proved useless. We have all the satellites we need in orbit around the earth serving the needs of the military, weather and telecommunications entities. We don't need to waste any more money in space; it was long past time to concentrate on the people of earth.

Darnell didn't know how he would sustain his village without increased and continuous funding from other sources. How could he develop a continuous cash flow for his clinic? He thought about it for a week and came up with a solution that would solve 2 problems. He would teach a special 2-man crew how to use the rifles and they would go out in search of lions. The crew could eliminate all the lions to make the village area safe and then process the lion hides for sale on the black market. Darnell heard that prime lion hides went for as much as \$950 each. He contacted someone at the entry port who knew someone who knew someone.

After a short time, Darnell was overwhelmed by how many lion hides his special crew had acquired. They harvested 176 lions in only 2 months. After 6 months, they had 890 and it was determined that there were no more lions around. Darnell took in \$410,000 for the clinic, some of which he invested directly into the clinic and some he used to create a website, which documented the clinic's work. The website contained videos of the clinic, the people, the medical procedures and the conditions of the village. The website accepted donations and was soon contributing the necessary money that Darnell required to maintain the clinic, essentially forever. Darnell worked at the clinic a total of 43 years and passed away at the age of 95 while performing an emergency appendectomy on the old woman healer who was 125 years old.

83. Edison's Abode



83. Edison's Abode

Some people would call Edison eccentric; he preferred the term interesting. That was an understatement. At 61 years old, he had made his millions and owned every toy that he could stand owning. His wife had left him a nice old mansion when she passed away 10 years ago and he had modified it extensively for the sole purpose of his entertainment and the misery of others. Edison was a whiz at carpentry and constructed many fascinating contrivances for the visitors of the mansion to experience.

Through special channels, people could find out that Edison offered the sum of \$2 million to any person who could stay at the mansion for one week. It seemed like an easy enough thing to do, but it wasn't. Edison had his dream team of lawyers design a bulletproof contract that would excuse Edison of all liability from lawsuits. The people who wished to try for the \$2 million were required to thoroughly read over the contract and have their own lawyers review it before they should even think about signing it. Edison allowed the players to have the contract for a week to scrutinize it and thoroughly think it over. No one had ever succeeded in staying a full week at the mansion, although many came close.

The fact that there was such a bulky contract and seemingly excessive warnings from Edison should have been enough to prevent anyone from trying to win the money. However, the lure of the large sum of money was too great for people to resist. The 839 people who tried and failed to win the money in the past had many different reasons for attempting the challenge. Some needed the money to pay off their massive credit card bills. Others desired it to buy the house that they always wanted. Some wanted the money to invest in land or rental property. Others required the money for an operation for themselves or a loved one. Some sought the money to be able to know what it felt like to be a millionaire, which after taxes was all they would end up with. Others craved to travel the world with the money and see everything there was to see. Some planned to put all the money into gambling and break the bank in Vegas or at the track. Others just wanted to see if they could do it.

During the requisite week that the player had to look over the contract and firmly decide that they were ready to play the game, Edison employed his dream team of investigators to find out everything they could about the player. It was precisely that personal information that Edison used in his favor against the player that always prevented the player from spending the full week in the mansion. Edison thought nothing of using the ugliest, sickest bits of drivel that his investigators obtained, to devise his various schemes of torment. The contract that the player signed stated in the most exhausting detail the things that may take place in the mansion during the player's stay there. The contract was 327 pages long and contained everything the player needed to know about what may happen to them.

The contract explicitly described the variety of physical, mental, visual, aural, olfactory and other

sensations that the player might be subjected to. Many of the people declined to sign the contract after reading it. A lot of the people refused to sign based on the input of their lawyers. Some people were so stunned by what might happen in the mansion based on the contract that they never again contacted Edison. A few people read the contract and couldn't wait to get started, because it seemed like it would be a lot of fun. The contract stated over and over again in as many lawyerly ways as possible that the people wouldn't be able to discuss with anyone what had taken place during their time in the mansion. They couldn't talk to reporters; they couldn't write a book about it; they couldn't reveal in any way what had happened to them there. Since the contract was so ironclad, the people would be sued and lose a great deal a money if they talked about their experience.

Edison made a great deal of money from all the lawsuits that he won against people who discussed their stay at the mansion. All the potentially disastrous things were explained in the contract. Immediately before signing the contract, certain key points were reiterated in the presence of Edison's lawyers, the player and the player's lawyer. The player then initialed the clause at the bottom of the contract, just above the signature block. The clause stated that the player had been given a final review of the key points of the contract. Edison's lawyers and the player's lawyer then initialed the clause as witnesses. When everyone had finally agreed to commence, Edison signed the contract, followed by the player and all the witnesses. A notary public then notarized the contract and a fully initialed, signed and notarized copy was eventually filed at the county clerk. The player had one chance to back out of the contract. If after going through the entire initialing, signing and notarizing process, the player wanted to back out, they could. The contract and copy would then be burned in the presence of everyone.

Sometimes, the potential players were so overwhelmed by the significance and obvious legality of the contract signing process, that they refused to sign or had the contract and copy burned after they signed. Edison enjoyed every part of the process of his game and enjoyed watching people squirm. Edison always hoped that everyone who stepped forward to try for the prize would read and sign the contract, because he really wanted to see what people were made of. When people backed out of signing or had the signed contract burned, he felt cheated out of his fun. He hated having to wait for the next player to come forward who would actually play the game.

Edison knew that no one would ever be able to win the prize, because after each player played and lost, he added another layer of impossibility to the game. He kept meticulous records of the personal information of the players that was collected by the investigators. He then compared it to how the players reacted to his torments. He entered all the information into a highly specialized computer program that he integrated into his wired mansion. Between the program and the tricks and turns of the mansion, Edison had created the perfect game that couldn't be won. Even if the players thought they had won, Edison had so many caveats hidden in plain sight in the contract that it was still impossible to win. Edison didn't mind playing games with

people as long as he always won.

The latest person to attempt to win Edison's money was a woman from Indiana named Pam who was a crazed thrill seeker and player of all forms of games. She claimed outright that she would easily win the money and wanted to sign the contract as soon as it was handed to her. Edison emphasized that the first rule of the game was the one-week review period and that she had to wait to begin. Edison had encountered gung ho types like Pam before and he had seen 'em come and go. Once in a while, someone approached Edison to play the game who was so confident in their abilities and stalwartness, that they felt no game was impossible. Those were the golden individuals whom Edison enjoyed and appreciated the most.

Pam returned to the mansion a week later on Sunday at 7:30 am with her contract and lawyer and the contract finalizing was done. The official 7-day period ran from Sunday 8:00 am to Sunday 8:00 am 7 days later. They started with a nice breakfast at the large dinner table and Pam was able to eat anything she wanted. Edison's comprehensive staff included numerous chefs, bakers, wait staff, house cleaning help and of course, his loyal English butler. Pam had bacon, eggs, toast, juice, coffee and a pastry for dessert. Edison ate a similar meal for his breakfast. Everything was prepared to order at the mansion from the freshest ingredients. Edison believed in consuming the only finest foods and believed that his guests deserved the same. After the breakfast and before Pam rose from the table, Edison stated that Pam would have to be seated at the table on the following Sunday at or before 8:00 am, in order to win the prize. Pam replied that it would be no problem.

Pam was escorted to her room by Edison and the butler, who carried Pam's luggage. It was a beautiful large room, one of dozens in the mansion. Edison remarked that if anything in the room wasn't to Pam's liking, she could immediately switch to any of the other rooms in the mansion. The butler would respond immediately to the buzzer on the nightstand next to the bed. Pam replied that the room should be fine and Edison departed with the butler. Pam had to stay within the confines of the mansion for the entire 7 seven days. She was unable to go outside, but her room had a TV and radio. There was no phone or internet and she surrendered her cell phone to Edison. She would be cut off from the outside world, per the contract. The mansion had a large game room with various electronic games, pool table, ping-pong, etc. Pam could play by herself in the game room or find a member of the staff to play with, as she preferred.

Pam looked around her spacious room and couldn't imagine how anything strange could happen to her in such a wonderful place. It seemed to Pam as if it was going to be an easy gig and she couldn't wait to buy the house, cars, boats, etc. with the money that she hoped to easily win. She began to feel a funny feeling in her gastro-intestinal tract and proceeded to the bathroom. She suddenly had terrible cramps and a major bout of diarrhea. When she flushed the toilet, the bowl quickly filled and overflowed while she was still sitting on the seat. Her butt and feet were

soaking wet from the brown water. She jumped up from the toilet and ran out of the bathroom, the floor of which was covered with her own filth. She scurried into the bedroom and pounded on the buzzer. Within seconds, the butler was knocking at her door. She told him the stupid toilet overflowed and wanted another room. The butler silently gathered her things and escorted her to the room of her choice. She picked a room down the hall, entered and walked to the bathroom. She flushed the toilet to verify that it was correctly functioning. She told the butler that the room was ok and he exited the room after helping her with her things.

The first thing Pam did was take a shower to wash off the smell of the excrement and urine. She turned on the water to get the temperature stabilized. It was one of those old style showers with the separate knobs for the hot and cold water. When the water was just right, she started her shower. After a minute, the water got really cold and she backed away from the spray. She turned the hot knob a little until the water stabilized. After a minute, the water got really hot and she jumped out of the shower. She turned the cold knob until it stabilized again and resumed her shower. She guessed that someone must have been flushing her previous toilet while trying to fix it and the water temperature had fluctuated. The water got cold again. She turned off both knobs, jumped out of the shower and walked to the bedroom in her bathrobe and wet hair.

She hammered the buzzer until the butler arrived at her door. She asked him why the stupid water temperature kept changing. He said it was because one of the staff members was trying to fix the toilet in her previous room. He suggested waiting for a bit, but she ranted that she was only half-clean and hadn't washed her hair yet. He said he would instruct the person who was fixing the toilet to pause for 30 minutes until she was done with her shower. She went back to the bathroom, waited a few minutes and resumed her shower, which she was able to finish.

After the shower, she got ready and went downstairs to scare up someone with whom to play pool, her favorite game. She found the baker who wouldn't be busy for a while and she agreed to play pool with Pam. They played pool and talked about general things like the weather, romance, shopping, etc. Pam knew better than to broach any topics related to the mansion and the game. When the baker had to go back to her baking, Pam played video games and other cool games. The game room was unlike anything Pam had ever seen. It had enough games and amusements to be an arcade. After a couple more hours, it was lunchtime and Pam only had a sandwich and a beverage, since she was still somewhat full from her large breakfast. Within minutes of finishing lunch, Pam felt nauseous and ran upstairs to her room. She vomited into the toilet, as she never had before in her life. When she flushed the toilet, it quickly filled up and overflowed. She hit the buzzer for the butler and changed rooms again.

Pam suddenly realized what the head games were in the mansion. Edison put something in the food to give her diarrhea and make her sick. The toilets and showers were rigged as well. She knew that it was all part of the game and she would have to put up with it to win the big money.

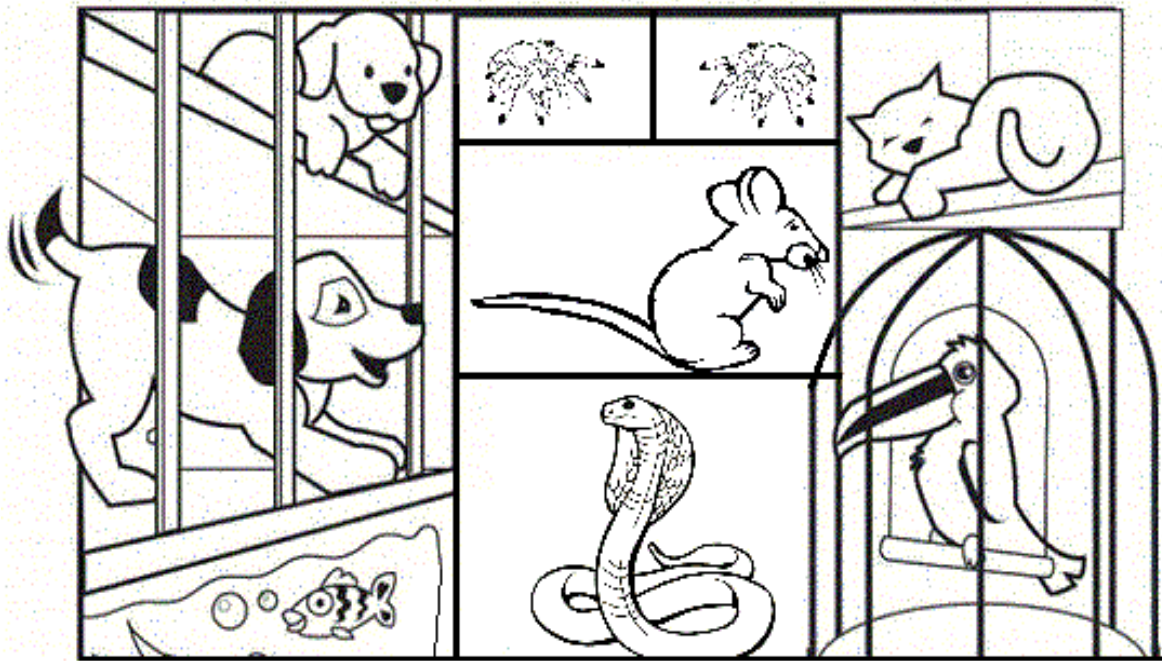
She skipped dinner to avoid any more sickness that day and watched TV in bed. She dozed off to sleep and an invisible, colorless, odorless gas was piped into the room. She awoke to the sound of her recently deceased grandmother's voice. She began hallucinating and thought she saw her grandmother standing before her in the room. Edison's investigators had unearthed the information about Pam's grandmother and had a tape recording of a conversation with Pam's mother. In addition to investigators, Edison's mansion team included electronic wizards and female & male impersonators.

One of the female impersonators dressed up as Pam's grandmother and imitated the recording of the voice of Pam's mother. Pam was so out of it from the gas that she began sobbing and talking to the impersonator, believing it was her deceased grandmother. When Pam fell asleep again, the impersonator left the room. When Pam awoke on Monday morning, she was weak from not eating supper on Sunday, but chose to abstain from eating breakfast for fear of food poisoning again. She changed rooms again to hopefully avoid the hallucinations. She played games all day in the game room and went back to her room without eating anything. She was getting weaker but she was resolute to win the money. She seemed to recall reading something in the contract about the experiences that she was going through. When she signed the contract, she never thought it could be so bad. Her nerves were beginning to fray from the hallucinations.

On Monday night, Pam fell asleep while watching TV and the gas was piped in again. She awoke to the sounds of scratching and began hallucinating again. She saw spiders, snakes, strange animals in the shadows, mice and rats everywhere. She screamed and pressed the buzzer for the butler. The butler was at her door in 15 seconds and she requested another room change. The butler moved Pam's things to another room and she struggled to get back to sleep. On Tuesday, she again refused to eat anything and played games for as long as she could. She went to bed early and watched TV until she fell asleep. The gas was piped in and she awoke hallucinating to the sights, sounds and heat of fire. She thought her room was on fire and ran downstairs to the lobby where she passed out from weakness. On Wednesday morning, she awoke on the lobby floor, shivering and achy.

As Wednesday, Thursday and Friday came and went, Pam felt so ravaged that she couldn't get out of bed on Saturday morning, due to dizziness from the nightly gas and weakness from the lack of food. She managed to drink water, which didn't cause her body any distress. She stayed in bed the entire day on Saturday and fell asleep watching TV. The gas was piped into her room and she awoke to her grandmother's voice. Pam hallucinated that she was talking with her grandmother and asked her for help. Pam wanted to stay in the house, but felt like she might soon pass away. Pam asked her grandmother what she should do. Her grandmother told Pam to give up the game to save her own life. Her grandmother told Pam to ring the buzzer for the butler who would notify Edison that the game was over and that Pam had lost. Pam reached for the buzzer with a shaking hand, pressed it and waited for the butler.

84. Parker's Store



84. Parker's Store

Parker was obsessed with the creation of a pet store where the pets only ate live food. He hated the way the industry of pet food had gone lately with the unscrupulous manufacturers putting so much garbage into the pet food and getting away with it. As always, the big manufacturers paid the politicians the large campaign contributions, which were obviously legal bribery. The companies were allowed to keep manufacturing the questionable pet foods and the politicians were allowed to keep getting elected and re-elected. It was such a great, but flawed society that we lived in.

He saved his money for a number of years and started a small pet store at the mall called "We got Worms." All the pets in the store ate only live food. To make it convenient for the purchasers of the pets, Parker also sold the live foods that the pets ate. For the tarantulas that Parker sold, he sold the live food that the tarantulas preferred to eat such as crickets, grasshoppers and other live insects. For the snakes, he sold the snakes' live food of mice, rats, gerbils and hamsters. For the fish, he sold insects and different varieties of worms. The iguanas ate crickets and other insects. The geckos ate crickets and worms. The chameleons ate crickets, grasshoppers, flies, tomato hornworms and cockroaches, all of which were sold at the pet store. The frogs ate crickets, grasshoppers, locusts and mealworms.

Parker raised all the live food at the pet store in the back room. In a short time, he had become an expert at breeding and raising the crickets, grasshoppers, mice, rats, gerbils, hamsters, worms, flies and cockroaches. The purchasers of the pets appreciated Parker's knowledge of the pets and their food and he gave explicit feeding instructions with each purchase. Each pet was sold with a free one-month supply of live food, so that the purchasers could get familiar with the feeding process. The pet owners had to keep coming back to the store each month for a fresh supply of the food. Parker offered a one-year subscription plan for the live food if the pet owners preferred, which was a great discount from buying the live food on a month-to-month basis.

Parker had really touched a nerve with his store and many people felt like they were zookeepers by buying an animal and feeding it exclusively with its natural live food. Since Parker raised all the live food at his store, he was able to charge a minimal price for it, which the customers appreciated. Even with the low cost of the live food, Parker's business was so tremendous from the sale of the pets, that his store turned a large profit in a short time. Parker's idea was original and a great moneymaker. He wanted to expand the variety of the animals he sold and he saved all his money to move into a bigger store outside of the mall.

After 2 years of selling all the pets that he could keep in stock, Parker was ready to move into a larger pet store in a plaza. The store that he picked would have 20 times the space of the mall store and would only cost twice as much to lease. Leasing in the mall provided great visibility, but the limited space for the price was outrageous. Parker operated as other businesses typically

did and initially only used the mall site to develop a demand for his concept. The plaza that he moved to was on a busy road with great traffic exposure.

As he went along, he reckoned that what he really wanted to do was sell larger and larger pets, so he did a little bit of research. He wanted to sell bigger animals that were suitable as pets that people actually wanted. At first, he added raccoons, skunks and possums, which ate pretty much any of the live food that he already had, except that he added crayfish and small fish varieties such as goldfish, guppies and shiners to his live food stocks.

Many of the live food that Parker sold could also be purchased as pets by people if they chose to. However, he refused to stock any of the processed dry foods that the rodents and other animals typically ate. If someone wanted to buy a hamster for a pet, Parker would sell it to them, but they would have to buy the hamster food elsewhere.

In addition to the pets and live food, Parker was able to add an extensive collection of habitat systems, due to the extra space of the bigger store. Parker even went as far as hiring a retired machinist who worked at his home workshop, to fabricate custom habitat systems that could accommodate the needs of virtually any pet animal.

Parker added hybrid wolves to his stock, which would eat the rodents and rabbits that he also sold as live food. It took a while to obtain the special permits involved with selling the wolves, which were gradually taking hold as a popular pet. The wolves were bought from the supplier based on paid orders only and the few hours that the wolves were in the store, they lived in special extra large enclosures. The buyers had to pick up the wolves on the same day that they were delivered to the store. There was something so exotic about selling larger animals as pets to people that intrigued Parker. He felt as if he were giving people the chance to own something from the wild. As long as the pet owners of the larger animals were careful with the feeding and handling of the beasts, everyone would benefit.

Parker continued to research the different wild animals that were increasingly being sold as pets. He wanted to be at the beginning of the boom and become one of the pioneers by adding new animals that were never considered as pets. He was taking things slowly, to avoid damaging the store's money flow. He didn't want to get in over his head with anything. He had been playing the new business game successfully so far and desired to keep it that way. Some of the customers who bought the wolves had suggestions for a type of animal that Parker should try to sell. The wolf buyers were more adventurous people who were flaky and laden with interesting ideas about everything in life.

Some of the wolf buyers suggested that Parker look into selling some of the felines such as bobcats, mountain lions, cheetahs and maybe eventually lions and tigers. Parker had been thinking about starting with a bobcat and then possibly work his way up to the bigger felines.

The bobcats would be able to eat the rodents and rabbits that he sold. One of the wolf buyers immediately placed an order for a bobcat and mentioned to Parker that they knew of others who also wanted bobcats and other bigger cats.

Parker didn't want to have any of the bobcats sitting in an enclosure in the pet store and concluded to only order them from the supplier based on paid orders. Parker wanted to make sure that the first bobcat was successfully managed by the purchaser before selling any more of them. When the bobcat came in and the buyer took it home with fresh food, Parker asked the buyer to provide feedback related to their experience with the bobcat. Parker loved all the animals that he sold and wanted them to have safe and happy homes. If someone couldn't handle one of the pets that he sold, Parker would gladly take the animal back and refund the person's money.

After 2 months, the bobcat buyer invited Parker to their estate to see the bobcat in its environment. The bobcat buyer had constructed a tremendously large enclosure for the animal and it looked relatively happy inside of it. The bobcat was a male and the person hoped to get a female to provide a breeding companion for the male. Parker said that it would be impossible for the males and females to mate, because Parker's supplier neutered the males and spayed the females to prevent people from breeding the animals. The bobcat owner said that would be fine, but they still wanted a female companion for their male bobcat. Parker drew up a new order for a female, the person paid the required money and Parker departed.

Once the female bobcat was delivered and the buyer came in to get her, Parker requested the names and numbers of the other people that the buyer had been talking about who wanted bobcats. Parker called the other people to come into the pet store to fill out an order form and pay for the bobcats up front. After 3 months, Parker had sold 23 bobcats, some male and some female. The buyers didn't seem to care that the bobcats were unbreedable; they were just happy to be able to own the beasts. Parker sold a lot of live food to the buyers of the bobcats and had to expand his food raising operation. Even though it was more work for him, Parker preferred to raise all the live food that he sold to his buyers. That way, everyone knew where the food was coming from and would be able to trust the source.

After a year of successfully selling bobcats, Parker was ready to move onto mountain lions. Before he even considered selling someone a mountain lion, Parker wanted to visit the supplier. Parker contacted the supplier who invited him to visit the mountain lion ranch for a week to see how things operated. Parker closed the store for a week to check out the supplier's operation. When Parker got there, he was immediately impressed by the size of the place. There were mountain lions running around all over the property like big dogs. Parker was surprised to see that the cats were loose; one of them ran up to him and Parker was startled at first, unsure what to do. The supplier ran out of a building and yelled to Parker to let the mountain lion sniff his hand.

Parker presented his hand to the mountain lion and as soon as the cat sniffed it, it lay on the ground on its back, appearing to want its belly petted. The supplier yelled that it was ok to pet the belly of the mountain lion, because they liked it. Parker couldn't believe that he was petting the fuzzy stomach of such a large cat. It was the largest cat that he had ever seen so close, much less touched.

The supplier had a guesthouse where Parker stayed for the week. The supplier emphasized that all the mountain lions were born on the ranch and were either spayed or neutered, depending on their sex. The supplier only sold younger lions, because it enabled the purchasers to bond with the animals and develop trust. Once the mountain lions realized that someone was feeding them and taking care of them, they instantly loved and trusted the person for life. It was touching how the mountain lions reacted to people. The supplier said that he always had an ample supply of lions for sale whenever Parker needed them. After the week was up, Parker was satisfied with the quality of the mountain lions and the meticulousness of the facility and returned home.

The wolf buyers who bought the bobcats were the first ones to come forward to buy a mountain lion cub. Parker explained to the first customer how nice the supplier's facility was and that the lions were born on the ranch. Parker presented the buyer with comprehensive literature and a video from the ranch so that they could be confident in their purchase of a happy and healthy animal. The buyer wanted to order a lion cub immediately, paid the price and left the store excited by the purchase of their new pet. In a week, the cub was delivered in person by a member of the supplier's staff and the buyer was waiting at the store as per the arrangement. Once Parker knew that the cub was in transit and close to store, he called the buyer to come in and wait.

It was love at first sight between the buyer and the cub and everything was blissful. As with the bobcats, Parker wanted to ensure that the first mountain lion encounter was successful and fruitful. After a month, Parker visited with the lion buyer to see how they were getting along. When he saw the lion, it was bigger and was running like the wind around the buyer's open property. Parker always wanted the pets that he sold to find the best homes and the lion buyer certainly provided a nice one. The buyer had taught the lion tricks, which was unusual for a cat. The buyer had researched that all the cats bigger than common housecats were much more intelligent and capable of learning more.

Parker found that the mountain lion was happy, healthy and well adjusted to its new surroundings. The buyer stated that they would like to buy another mountain lion and Parker felt that it would work, so they processed the order and Parker went back to the store. Parker was absolutely elated that his business was becoming such a remarkable entity. He never thought he would find so much satisfaction from connecting people with animals. His ideas for selling only the live food eating animals had truly enlightened him. The animals all seemed to be happier and

behaved more as they would in the wild. There had to be something essential in the concept of wild animals eating their natural diet of live food.

When Parker consulted with zoos that started to feed some of the cats natural live food, the zookeepers claimed that the animals reacted positively. It was as if they had become different animals altogether. The zookeepers experimented with feeding some of the cats their typical diet, which was a chopped up and generally unappetizing looking pile of meat. The animals sluggishly ate the food out of hunger. The cats that were given the live food enjoyed the challenge of catching the food and eating it as if they were in the wild. The animals had much higher spirits, were more interested in breeding and over time, actually lived longer.

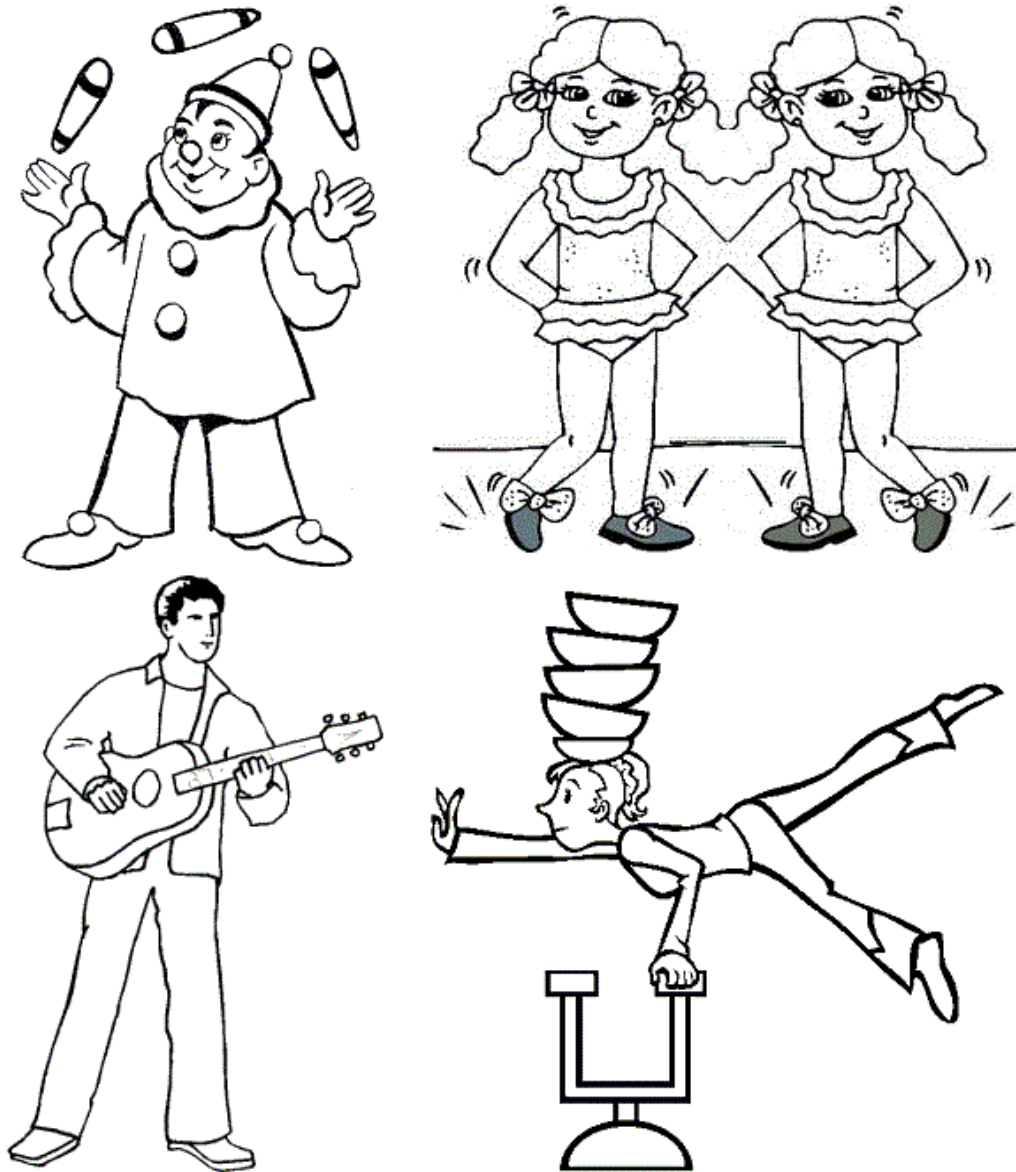
Parker's business was booming and he felt that he was ready to add another animal to his inventory. All the bobcats and mountain lions were still healthy and happy with their original owners. Parker had run background checks on all the cat buyers before placing their orders, to ensure the safety of the animals. Parker had heard about some of the freaks in the world who did weird things with wild animals and wanted to prevent anything from happening on his watch.

Parker was prepared to start selling the next size of cat and contacted the mountain lion breeder for the location of a tiger breeder. It just so happened that the mountain lion breeder's brother was a tiger breeder. Parker traveled to the tiger breeder, who was actually located closer to him than the mountain lion breeder was. The tiger supplier had an even larger operation, but it was similar to his brother's in that the tigers were running around the place loose. When Parker got out of his truck, a tiger ran over to him and Parker held out his hand for the tiger to sniff. The breeder ran over and shook Parker's hand while Parker was petting the tiger's belly. Parker only stayed a day, because the facility seemed very similar to the mountain lion facility. The only difference between the 2 breeders was that the tiger breeder sold larger cubs than the mountain lion breeder did, much larger.

Parker didn't feel that the larger tiger cubs would be a problem, since they seemed so tame. The tiger breeder strongly emphasized that the tigers were a bit quirky about their food and sometimes became mildly aggressive at feeding time. Parker talked in depth with the breeder to find out any other unusual things about the tigers that he should know and there weren't any. The tiger breeder said that the tigers were similar to the mountain lions that his brother sold, except they were obviously larger.

The first person who bought a mountain lion from Parker wanted to order a tiger from Parker and placed the order in the usual way. On the day of the arrival of the tiger, Parker and the buyer waited at the store for the breeder's rep. The breeder's rep delivered the tiger and departed. Parker and the buyer brought the leashed tiger into the pet store to finalize the paperwork. When the tiger saw all the live food animals in the store, it went berserk and ate every living thing in the store, including Parker and the buyer.

85. Vern's Show



85. Vern's Show

Vern had been in the entertainment industry for decades and claimed to know everything about all the forms. Vern was an expert in evaluating the talent involved in the fields of music/singing, magic/prestidigitation/illusion, circus type acts, contortion, strength exhibitions and all the genres of dance. At the age of 83, after decades in the business, Vern had sat through hundreds of thousands of auditions and had easily seen it all. Vern collected 11 investors into a conglomerate and wanted acts for his new Branson, Missouri show called, "Talent Night." Vern and his investors were determined to turn Branson into a Las Vegas type of destination via wholesome entertainment, not gambling. Vern opined that gambling, gaming or whatever it was called, was a waste of everyone's time and effort, despite what the politicians constantly babbled.

Vern enlisted the help of 4 of the 11 investors, who were also experts in the entertainment industry, to evaluate the new talent. After months of auditions, the group of 5 judges had boiled down the long list of hopefuls to 10 prime acts to be in the first year of the new Branson show. The 10 acts were comprised of song, illusion, body manipulation, tightrope walking, juggling, snake charming, contortion, strength, dance, and balancing.

The singer was a man who had an incredible singing voice with a variation. He had been classically trained for more than 20 years to sing opera. While the man had been driving his car one day on the horrendous maniacal streets of his hometown, he was involved in a bad car accident. He had been so injured that he was forced to undergo a butt transplant. The man's name was Damaris and the new butt that had been transplanted to his body gave him the ability to fart at will. He could fart the alphabet or any song for that matter. Obviously, the farts didn't sound like words, but he could fart the exact number of syllables with some suitable intonation.

The latest version of his act entailed Damaris singing in his operatic voice the old favorite children's song, "Old MacDonald." For example, he would sing the verse, "Old MacDonald had a farm, E-I-E-I-O, and on his farm he had some ducks, E-I-E-I-O, with a [fart fart] here and a [fart fart] there, here a [fart], there a [fart], everywhere a [fart fart], etc." Damaris would fart in the places of the song where normally someone would utter a quack or a moo etc., depending on the animal in the verse. The audience burst into uproarious laughter when they heard him perform the song. The contrast between his phenomenal operatic singing voice and the farting was so pronounced that the experience had no equal.

Even though farting was considered "potty humor" by the snobs, prudes and other stuck-up people who always secretly thought farting was funny, but would never publicly admit it, Damaris was a huge hit. Damaris could sing every verse of the song with all the farm animals and varied the farts to suit each animal specifically. Occasionally while Damaris was singing and farting, he accidentally pooped a little, but being the professional that he was, he never missed a beautiful note. During the years of singing opera before Damaris had auditioned for Vern, people

had questioned why Damaris never became a huge star. Damaris claimed that the opera industry was saturated with better singers and he never stood a chance.

The illusionist was a woman who had survived cancer, but maintained the bald headed hairstyle that resulted from her chemotherapy and radiation treatments. Her name was Eloise and she had always loved the power and mystique of the illusionists. While she was recovering in the clinic from her cancer of years before, an illusionist had visited the clinic and performed shows for the patients. Eloise had been so taken by the act, that she became an illusionist herself after she had become healthy again.

The act that Eloise performed involved her spinning on her bald head on the stage floor until she was spinning so fast that she disappeared. After a few seconds of the audience's astonished reaction, she would reappear somewhere in the arena. It was a remarkable act. Just watching her spinning around was impressive, because she had extremely long strips of veil-like material that unfurled from her spinning body. At the instant of disappearance, the spinning veils were so long that they reached all the way across the stage to the sides and out into the audience. Just before she disappeared, there was a typical poof of smoke and minor explosion and she was gone.

Filbert was the body manipulator who could swallow a raw egg in the shell and after 90 seconds or so, regurgitate the egg and it would be cooked to a soft boiled or hard boiled condition, depending on preference. Obviously, it would take a little longer to cook the egg to a hard boiled state. Filbert had grown up on a chicken ranch from which his family sold thousands of eggs each year. He had struggled to live and work on the farm, since he had always been more of an entertainer type of person. To pass the time, he had devised his egg cooking ability. When he first started doing it, he kept breaking the shell and ended up swallowing some raw egg and eggshell and choking out the remainder. It took a while, but through persistence, he finally managed to swallow an egg without breaking it.

At first, Filbert was content with just being able to swallow the egg without breaking it. One of his sisters suggested that he try to regurgitate the egg and see how it looked. Filbert then went through the process of trying to regurgitate the egg without breaking it. It took him many months to figure it out, but he eventually did it. When he initially started regurgitating the eggs, he was doing it immediately after swallowing them. Each broken egg was still raw and runny. One day, he accidentally delayed regurgitating one of the just-swallowed eggs, in order to help with some chickens and hadn't tried to regurgitate it until a half-hour later. The egg that he regurgitated was broken, since he still hadn't perfected that part yet, but he noticed that the egg was cooked. Once he had finally perfected the regurgitation of the egg, he waited after swallowing and was soon producing soft and hard boiled eggs on demand for his family.

Gaston & Gemma were a husband and wife team of tightrope artists. They had been walking tightropes for many years in the typical fashion, until the year that Gaston had contracted a bad

case of arthritis in his hands. At first, Gaston wasn't worried about it, because he used his feet to walk the rope. When his feet became injured from a bicycle riding accident, he had to quit walking the tightrope. Since walking a tightrope was all that Gaston & Gemma had done for a living for years, they were left in the creek without a paddle.

Gemma had suggested to Gaston that he try to use his fingers to walk on the tightrope, which Gaston thought would be impossible. Gaston first tried walking around on the floor on his straightened arthritic fingers and found that he could actually do it. Gaston started with a handstand and then flipped up onto his strong straight fingers. Then while he was upside down with his feet straight up in the air, Gemma climbed his body and stood on top of his feet. Then she did her juggling act while standing on Gaston's feet. Gaston then tried walking along the floor on his arthritis-straightened fingertips and he was able to do it.

Gemma next suggested taking the act to the tightrope. At first, Gaston was hesitant, since his body had been conditioned since youth to walk on the rope with his feet. Gemma emphasized that he had to try it or starve. Gaston gulped and climbed out onto the rope. He cautiously started with a handstand and walked across on his hands, which he found to be incredibly painful. He made the return trip on his bony straight fingertips and found it to be easier. Gemma climbed up Gaston's body while he was on the rope and stood on his upturned feet. Then she started juggling. When Gaston started walking across the rope on his fingertips with Gemma standing on his feet juggling, Gaston burst into tears with happiness.

A woman named Harriet was a juggler-extraordinaire who claimed that she could juggle any 3 people chosen from random from the audience. At first Vern and the judges were worried about the idea of juggling humans, due to the possible injury factor. Harriet claimed that there was no risk of injury, because she juggled the people while she was standing in a swimming pool. Obviously, the people chosen at random from the audience would have to be willing to get wet, but swimsuits or other similar garments could be provided if necessary.

The judges were still skeptical that it was even possible for someone to juggle humans, but Harriet had been put to the test and was successful in changing their minds. During the auditioning phase, the people who were auditioning sat in the audience waiting to be called to go on stage to perform their acts. There was no problem in finding 3 audience members to volunteer to be juggled by Harriet. All the contestants were competing against each other and jumped at the chance to prove that Harriet couldn't perform her act as she claimed. The 3 heaviest audience members volunteered and went up to the stage. None of them chose to put on swimsuits and jumped into the pool with Harriet.

Harriet appeared to be an immensely strong woman and was built somewhat like a power lifter. Harriet probably weighed in excess of 300 pounds and was well over 6 feet tall. Her stature no doubt provided her with the much-needed stability to perform her act. Harriet stood in the

middle of the pool with 3 ladders standing around her in a circle. The 3 volunteers climbed to the tops of the ladders and then at Harriet's prompting, jumped off the ladder toward Harriet. First one person, then the 2nd and then the 3rd person jumped from the ladder and Harriet juggled all 3 of them. No one believed that it was possible, but Harriet proved that it was. Vern and the judges immediately signed Harriet's contract as the star juggling act for the first year.

Snake charming wasn't exactly the best way to describe how Ian performed his act, but it was as closely as anyone dared to accurately describe it. Ian had come from a large and illustrious family of sword swallows who had a long history of performing all over the world. The family performed on the stage, in circuses and occasionally at other venues. Ian had wanted to follow in his father's footsteps by continuing to swallow swords and other such straight sharp objects, but craved to add his own style. When Ian's father passed away while performing his act in California during an earthquake, Ian took charge.

Ian decided to vary the idea of swallowing and removing a sword by swallowing a snake instead. He wouldn't simply remove the snake again, however. Ian had learned the art of Mendo while he was in India touring with his father. Mendo was the ability to swallow an object and then through the process of mind and body control, hurry the object through the gastro-intestinal tract. Ian was able to swallow a snake and then poop it out of his butt without in any way harming himself or the snake. To guarantee that the snake removed from Ian's butt was the same snake that went down Ian's throat, Ian allowed an audience member to write something on the snake. Ian's act sickened some people and disturbed others, but amazed them all.

Jackie was the woman who had been labeled as the thinnest woman in the world. Her condition had nothing to do with her diet; she simply had been born with an incredibly thin body and had thin bones and organs, to boot. In school, she had taken gymnastics and had become incredibly good at it. Part of the training of a gymnast was the flexibility work. Jackie had always been able to bend her thin body more than the other gymnasts could, to the point of becoming a contortionist. She could bend over backwards to the extent of being almost flat. When she lay down on the floor stretched out normally, her body was so flat that she was able to slide under a door opening.

Since Jackie had been labeled as the thinnest woman, she decided to capitalize on it and make some money from the title. She made enormous amounts of money by winning bets in which she bet people that she could slide under doors. It seemed physically impossible to do what she was capable of doing. She had devised ways of manipulating her organs over the years to temporarily flatten them out. When she first started, she could only fit under a 3-inch door opening, and then over a period of 4 years, she reduced it to one inch.

Karl started out as the basic strongman type of a character. He had been a power lifter since his college days as a football player and gradually became obsessed with the various things that the

circus strongmen did when they performed. Karl learned how to do all the iron bending, nail pounding, weight lifting and other things. All those things were basic and impressed people, but Karl wanted to do something that would really wow 'em. He searched as far back as he could to read about the things that the most daring strongmen did back in the 1800's that no one would consider doing today. Back then, everybody looked at life through a different pair of glasses, because people could pass away at any time from all the diseases that weren't figured out yet.

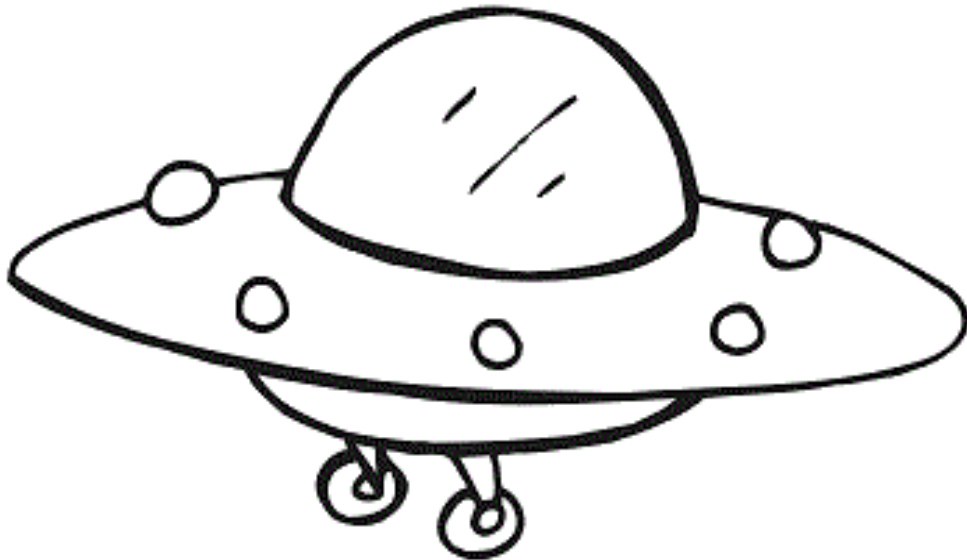
The strongmen back then were no different and were terribly masochistic freaks. They invented so many ways to torture themselves for fun and profit, that it was scary. Karl supposed that all the deeds he performed resulted in some pain, so he wasn't that much different from those goons from the old days. Karl came up with an act where a vehicle could be driven onto his head while he was lying on the stage. He had consulted with doctors and had determined that the human skull was a surprisingly solid structure. The skull was capable of supporting hundreds of pounds of weight without cracking it. It might flex slightly, but it wouldn't crack. Vern didn't want to sign Karl, as extraordinary as the act was, for fear of Karl becoming injured. When Karl produced the documentation from the doctors, which verified the safety of the act, Vern conceded. However, Vern still demanded that Karl had to sign a waiver of liability. Karl signed the waiver without hesitation and was booked for the show.

Lydia & Delia were the Siamese twin girls who were born joined at the skull and elbows. The girls were the best tap dancers that the world had ever seen. Doctors all over the world had declined to separate the twins, due to the skull connection. The brains of the girls were separate, but in contact with each other. A slip of a scalpel could cause problems for both of them. The girls had always been together and didn't seem to mind it. When their parents enrolled the girls in tap-dancing school, the girls immediately took to it and never stopped. When Vern and the judges first watched the girls dancing, it was like something they had never seen or heard before. The girls were so in sync with their feet that they sounded like a single person tap dancing in a hall with an echo. The aural effect created by the 4 tapping feet of the girls was absolutely profound.

Ophelia was the most impressive balancer of objects imaginable. She could balance anything. She could balance a chair on top of a chair on top of a chair on top of a chair on top of which someone was sitting. She could balance a piano that someone was playing. She could balance 13 people who were balanced on each other in a single vertical stack of people. She could lie on the floor and simultaneously balance spinning plates of food on her hands, elbows, shoulders, knees, feet, nose, chin, forehead and stomach. Ophelia could balance on her fingertips while balancing spinning plates of food on each of her 10 toes and heels.

Vern's show looked as if it was going to be huge and the investors hoped to get something started that would make everyone a lot of money and eventually entertain millions of people.

86. Gene's Objects



86. Gene's Objects

Gene had speculated his whole life if there actually were such things as objects that flew through the sky that were unidentifiable. Many people claimed to have seen them over the decades. He took his investigation on the road to interview as many people as he could all over the great United States.

In Alabama, Gene encountered Ada who spotted something in the sky when she was only 13. The object had streaked across the moonlit sky like a laser beam, because of its tremendous speed. She had been outside that evening taking pictures of the sky for her science project at school, when she saw the flying object. By the time she snapped a picture of the object, it had almost passed out of her view. Ada showed the picture to Gene and it just looked like a picture of the dark sky with some stars in the background.

In Alaska, Gene found Bailey who saw an object while putting away the sled dogs for the night. Bailey had been looking up to the sky, wishing that he were out of that cold wasteland. He couldn't wait to leave the state to move back to the warmth and greenness of Florida to be with his educated friends. He had been looking up and stretching his back, since the cold bothered his football injuries. He spied a bright object hovering and then darting about and then hovering again. He whipped out his cell phone and attempted to take a video of the event. He filmed as much as he could and then snapped a few quick pictures. Bailey showed the pictures and video to Gene and the evidence didn't display what Bailey had described.

In Arizona, Gene located Caitlin who was out with her friends one evening having a good old time, when she observed what she thought was an airplane flying through the night sky. She routinely watched the object for a while, as she had watched many planes in the past. Suddenly the plane started making quick movements to the left and right and up and down. Whatever she was looking at couldn't have been an airplane. She started snapping pictures like crazy. She told her friends to start snapping pictures as well. Some of her friends took videos and pictures. Caitlin and her friends had become hysterical from what they were seeing. They started screaming and crying while they were filming. Then, as suddenly as the object had appeared, it disappeared. Caitlin showed all her evidence to Gene and he couldn't detect anything.

In Arkansas, Gene talked to Dale who had been hospitalized in a mental institution due to the trauma that he suffered during his encounter with extra-terrestrial beings. Dale was still recovering in the institution as he explained his tale to Gene. Dale asserted that he had been taken aboard a spaceship by aliens who had somehow rendered him partially unconscious and then performed various scientific experiments on him. Dale claimed that the aliens had performed surgery on him and gave him a colonoscopy. The doctor on Dale's case told Gene that there was no physical evidence of the experience that Dale claimed to have had.

In California, Gene came across Earlene who had been driving home from work one night when her car engine quit. She managed to drift onto the right shoulder with the car and tried to restart it. The car was almost new and had never failed to start and run before. She had taken the car on long trips with no trouble. As she sat there dialing her phone for a tow truck, she beheld incredibly bright lights descending upon her from above. She tried to get out of her car, but the door locks wouldn't operate. Something landed on the roof of her car and she heard a loud humming sound. She passed out for some reason and when she awoke 56 minutes later, her car was running. Earlene possessed no evidence of what happened to her other than her statement.

In Colorado, Gene discovered Fernando who expressed that he had hit an alien with his car while out driving one night after a New Year's Eve party. The alien had come out of nowhere and ran across the road without looking where it was going. Fernando had no time to react and ran the poor being over. Fernando got out of his car to see if he could help and the alien instantly got up to its feet and ran away into the darkness. The only evidence of what had happened was the damage to the passenger side front of Fernando's car. The insurance company report declared that the accident had resulted from the vehicle hitting a deer.

In Connecticut, Gene dug up Gail who affirmed that she had been impregnated by an alien when she was in college. After a party, Gail and her friends traveled to a hotel and on the way, a spacecraft with flashing lights landed in front of the car. Everyone got out of the car to observe the spacecraft and take pictures of it. As the gang of people stood there, the door opened on the spacecraft and a hand emerged, which grabbed onto Gail and dragged her inside. In 3 minutes, she emerged in a dazed state. The spacecraft took off and the group continued to the hotel for more festivities. Nine months later, when Gail gave birth to her normal-looking baby, she claimed it was from the alien. None of Gail's pictures of the spacecraft showed anything.

In Delaware, Gene looked up Hank who was reported as having the best pictures ever taken of a mysterious flying ship. The pictures were shown to all the military services and no one was able to identify anything in the pictures. All the officials reported that the pictures were merely clever fakes. Hank had been a computer graphics designer for 22 years before he revealed his pictures to the public. When Gene looked at the pictures, they looked like something out of a cheap science fiction movie. The detail was great, but the vessel that was claimed to be an alien spaceship was obviously just a computer generated fake.

In Florida, Gene discussed Ida's eventful story with her. Ida was out walking her dog one day on a park trail next to the waterway, when she eyed something coming out of the water. The thing took her little dog with it and went back into the water. Ida was so upset by the experience that her therapist claimed that Ida had manipulated the story of her missing dog into that of an alien abduction. Upon pressing a little further, Gene found that other residents who had been walking their pets in the same park had lost their pets due to alligator encounters.

In Georgia, Gene had a pleasant chat with Jacinto. Jacinto had been working outside on an unusually hot and humid day when an alien ship landed in his backyard. The ship had landed on Jacinto's leg and severely injured it. Jacinto's leg was bleeding so bad that he became faint from the lack of oxygen to his brain. An alien emerged from the ship carrying something that resembled a tackle box. While Jacinto lay on the grass in his yard, the alien applied some special ointment to Jacinto's leg and within minutes, the bleeding was stopped.

In Hawaii, Gene tracked down Kaley who worked as a hula dancer and server at the luaus for the tourists. On one of her Wednesday's off, she went for a walk by the active volcano. She walked as close as people were allowed to walk to be able to see, smell and feel the heat of the lava. Kaley was taking pictures of the molten and smoking lava, when she perceived an alien walking merrily along the top of the molten lava. She took loads of pictures, which she showed to Gene, but none was conclusive.

In Idaho, Gene stumbled upon Lane who was a truck driver for the mill. Lane transported the raw materials to the mill from the strip mine that was located just outside of town. Since the mill was such a large operation, it ran 24 hours a day. Lane had been driving on the night shift when he saw a brightly flashing object streaking across the sky in the direction of the mill. It disappeared over the mountain out of his view. When he cleared the rise, he saw the object again darting back and forth in the sky over the mill. He called his super at the mill to come out and take a look. By the time that Lane's super had come out to look, the object had vanished.

In Illinois, Gene met with Mabel who was a lonely spinster living in a trailer in the middle of nowhere. Mabel had been sitting outside on a comfortable summer evening knitting something. She discerned 3 shiny objects flying back and forth in the sky. The objects then disappeared behind the mountain range. She hopped onto her motorcycle and rode over to the location to check it out. The 3 objects crashed and had been reduced to smoking heaps on the ground. As she approached, the vapors of the smoldering wrecks knocked her out. When she woke up the next morning at the site, there was nothing there.

In Indiana, Gene joined Nate for some interesting conversation about his alien encounters. Nate had been in WWII, was shell-shocked and in pretty bad shape. He had been scoping aliens every day since he came back from his tours of duty in Europe.

In Iowa, Gene got a hold of Octavia, who had albums of pictures and dozens of videos in her unidentified flying objects collection. There was no question that she firmly believed in her evidence as proof of the existence of extra-terrestrials. When she related her stories, she sounded convincing, but when Gene scanned through the albums and watched the crummy videos, he only saw basic aircraft. Somehow, Octavia didn't even know what an airplane was.

In Kansas, Gene placed Pablo who was one of the numerous people who created fake pictures

and videos of objects just to get their 15 minutes of fame. Pablo showed Gene his impressive compilation of pictures, videos and the objects that were used to produce the faux evidence. Gene admired Pablo for admitting that he was part of the problem. Thanks to folks like Pablo, some poor unsuspecting individual was going to see something soon that wasn't what they thought it was.

In Kentucky, Gene had to hold his tongue when he talked with Queenie. She was one of the many psychic/fortune teller/money stealers of the world who believed that anything was possible, if you really wanted it to be. Some people were so impressionable that if they wanted to see something, they would convince their brain that they had seen it. Unfortunately, for many people, it didn't require much for them to be fooled or duped. Queenie explained the many visions that she had with aliens over the years and the concepts that she had learned from their superior intelligence. Queenie then asked for \$20 and Gene walked out of her parlor laughing.

In Louisiana, Gene pinned down Rafael who was a very imaginative individual. Rafael announced that aliens had visited him in his sleep and had given him all the secrets of the universe. The aliens had no diseases in their society, because they had cured everything. The aliens had given the secrets to Rafael and when he awoke, he wrote everything down. Rafael showed Gene the piles of papers with Rafael's chicken scratch handwriting. Upon attempting to decipher the scrawled mess, Gene determined that he couldn't read any of it. It was useless. When Rafael attempted to read to Gene from the documents, he couldn't read it either.

In Maine, Gene had to go to the shore to find Sabrina who was a lobster fisherman. She had just finished her hard day's work that morning and described her encounter as she washed her smelly hands. Sabrina was out in her boat one day when she saw a bright speeding object fall into the ocean. She motored to the location and saw something down in the water. She snapped some pictures and then operated her crane to hook onto the object and bring it to the surface. When the object surfaced, it wasn't as big as she initially thought. As she took more pictures, a small door opened and a creature emerged. The creature grabbed her camera, closed the door and sped away from her. Sabrina wished she had that camera to prove her story and so did Gene.

In Maryland, Gene drove to Tad who was in the State Pen for a minor infraction. Tad only had a short time to orate. Tad was fishing one evening with his buddies when one of them saw something streak across the sky at high speed. As they searched the sky, Tad saw the object and pulled out his cell phone. The other guys then saw the object as well, as it zigged and zagged across their view. They all got a bunch of pictures and videos. Suddenly, Tad got a huge bite and then one of his buddies got a huge bite. Pretty soon, all 4 fishermen had huge fish on and were battling their fish while standing in the small boat. Tad's fish went one way and his buddy's fish went the other way and the men collided. The boat capsized and destroyed the cell phones.

In Massachusetts, Gene identified someone named Uma who had a juicy tale to tell. Uma had

been attending a party on her boss' yacht when the yacht was rammed by something. Uma was thrown into the water and quickly sank, because of all her wet clothing. Uma couldn't swim, so she felt she was a goner. She kept descending in the water and held her breath for as long as she could. She finally could hold her breath no longer and almost fainted as she began to inhale water. She blearily saw some kind of creature with large eyes, no nose and small mouth. The creature kissed her and then with a great heave, launched her to the surface where her friends rescued her.

In Michigan, Gene zeroed in on Van who was living in a van down by the river. The man had been unable to work a steady job and barely survived from doing occasional odd jobs. Van had been an excellent carpenter before his encounter. Van was out on a job years before, framing a new house and had worked into the evening. Van stayed with another guy as a thunderstorm erupted on that hot and humid summer evening. Van and the other guy were on top of the building, bolting some trusses to withstand the storm. Out of nowhere, a brilliant shiny ship zoomed at them and knocked them off the building. A lightning bolt hit the building and electrocuted the 2 of them. Van survived and the other guy didn't.

In Minnesota, Gene finally unearthed Wanda wandering the streets with a far away look on her face. She was pushing a shopping cart that was piled high with all her belongings. Wanda had been a successful lawyer until she had been abducted by aliens. It happened while she was taking a joyride with her husband in their convertible. The ship hovered over their speeding car and sucked her from the passenger seat of the open vehicle. Wanda lived on the ship for 3 years with the aliens until they deposited her on the shoulder of the highway where they had initially abducted her. Wanda had no memory of being a lawyer or who she was.

In Mississippi, Gene had to wait for Zane to get off work from the factory. Zane explained how he had been abducted as a child 30 years before and when he was returned to earth, his appearance was obviously different and his parents didn't even notice. Before he was abducted, he had red hair and was 5'1" tall. After he had been returned to earth, he had blonde hair and was only 4'10".

In Missouri, Gene talked a short while with Adaline who had been abducted and was permitted by the aliens to fly the ship. She flew out into space and even left the solar system. She flew to other universes and galaxies. Adaline was 101 years old and living in a nursing home. She told her stories each day to any of the other residents who would listen. Each time Adaline told the stories, they became more interesting.

After interviewing 25 people in 25 states, Gene concluded that the people wholly believed in what they had seen and experienced. Unfortunately, there simply was no verifiable evidence to substantiate their stories. Gene didn't believe in UFO's because he had never personally seen one, but those people had certainly seen something out there.

87. Hansel's Gel



87. Hansel's Gel

There was nowhere else in the world where human beings were treated so poorly as on a battlefield. The weapons used down through the history of all the world's wars only had one goal, to remove a combatant from the field of battle in any way possible, as efficiently as possible. If the combatant passed away from the injury, so be it. If the combatant survived the injury and lived to tell about, it didn't matter. As long as the combatant was removed from the field, the weapon had served its purpose.

A human could survive if they lost one limb or all their limbs, for that matter. A human could even survive with difficulty, some organ damage. A brain injury however, was typically fatal or resulted in the victim having a pronounced reduction in their quality of life, or no quality of life at all. Brain injuries were the worst thing to happen to the people in combat or to anyone else who was in the wrong place at the wrong time. Brain injuries could occur as a result of a car accident, from a fall or in any number of other ways.

Hansel, his father, father in law, mother, mother in law, both grandfathers, both grandmothers, sisters and brothers had all served honorably in the various military services. Some sustained injuries, but fortunately, none was fatal or debilitating. Hansel had become a surgeon with a specialty in the delicate science of brain trauma. He was determined to understand at least some of the brain's infinite number of potential complications. He wanted to help, but there wasn't much groundwork from which to establish a solid starting point.

The events of WWII and Korea had encouraged the development of weapons that were more harmful than those used in WWI. When the buds of Vietnam began blossoming, the weapons became even more demonic in their destructive force. The buzz of the day seemed to be that the sky was the limit. The military wanted everything that science could muster to exterminate those bad people over there.

Hansel concentrated as intently as he could on how to save someone who had suffered a brain trauma such as a puncture. Concussions were difficult to prevent in the civilian world and even more difficult to prevent on the battlefield. At least the majority of concussions were survivable. Luckily, most of the combat brain injuries were only concussions. Too many lives would be lost if there were excessive numbers of brain punctures.

When the human skull was violated by an object such as a bullet and the bullet entered the brain, a hole was created, actually a tunnel. There was a hole in the skull, but a tunnel of damage existed inside the brain. Hansel's 30 odd years of research into the many combat induced brain injuries had shown that simply covering the hole of the wound was insufficient to prevent the brain from self destructing. The tunnel of injured tissue inside the brain immediately began rotting and severely reducing brain function. The medics had no way of putting something inside

the tunnel to disinfect the damaged tissue and prevent further rotting of the surrounding healthy tissue. The medics would have never fathomed a way of somehow protecting the inside of the brain. The technology and knowledge didn't exist yet.

So little had ever been learned by science about the brain, other than the obvious concept that the brain seemed to somehow automatically perform the body's most crucial functions. No one could say with any certainty how the brain operated. Because of that ignorance, when something happened to damage the brain, very little could ever be done. Medical science had of course gone as far as saying that if someone was "brain dead," then they were officially dead, even though their bodies could still be kept alive on life support. When someone reached that "brain dead" status, the plug could then be pulled on the "brain dead" person by their designee with a clear conscience. That pitiful concept was as far as science was willing and able to go.

Hansel wasn't afraid to delve into the most feared of all the sciences, that of the brain. It was the very fact that so little was known about the brain that science was so afraid of it. With that attitude, little would ever be learned, or it would continue to be learned at an unacceptably slow pace. Hansel had felt himself fortunate that neither he nor any of his relatives had suffered brain trauma in combat or in any other situation. He wanted to do everything he could to learn about preventing anyone from becoming "brain dead" from a puncture to the brain. Something more had to be done for humanity and someone had to have the gumption to undertake that responsibility. Hansel didn't have anything to lose; he wasn't trying to protect his precious reputation, since he had none to protect. Through years of tremendous hard work and tireless dedication to his science, Hansel had worked his way out of the trap of having to rely on grant money for his existence. Hansel had made himself into his own man and relied on no one except himself.

Hansel experienced his real breakthrough while visiting a florist to buy flowers for his wife's birthday. He had been standing at the counter watching the person cutting the flowers for the bouquet. The person was cutting the flowers with a device that prevented air from entering the stem after it had been cut. The person cut the flower stem while it was in a bucket of water and then immediately placed it into the bouquet's water vial with the other freshly cut flowers.

Hansel asked the person why they cut the flowers in that manner and they replied that the key to a cut flower's lasting ability was to prevent air from getting into the stem at the instant that the stem was cut. By trimming the stem in a bucket of water and then as quickly as possible placing the just-cut stem into the bouquet's vial of water, air was prevented from entering the just-cut stem. The air void that resulted when a stem was cut in any other way prevented the water from traveling up the stem to the flower and keeping it fresh. Flowers could last for weeks if they were properly trimmed and were always kept in contact with water.

Hansel smacked his forehead and had his eureka moment. "Of course!" he exclaimed. The

person behind the counter asked what the matter was. Hansel told the person that they might have just given him a stupendous insight. Hansel gave the person the money for the bouquet with a huge tip and took the flowers home.

In the laboratory at the research institute that he had created, Hansel immediately got to work on his gel idea. The idea of preventing the just-cut flower stem from becoming exposed to the air might be the trick to preventing the brain from rotting when it was punctured. If some type of substance, ideally a gel, could be injected into the injury tunnel of the brain, the damaged tissue could be sterilized and protected from further deterioration. The brain wouldn't be able to start rotting due to exposure to the air. It seemed to be the same principle as that with the flower stem. It had to be!

A gel of the proper consistency would be the perfect medium, because it would flow into the injury tunnel and fill all the voids, eliminating the air. The gel would contain an antiseptic of some sort that would kill all the bacteria. The gel would be injected until it oozed out of the wound and then be sealed in by the palm of a hand temporarily or ideally a tightly sealing bandage. The key was to inject the gel into the wound as soon as possible after the injury had taken place.

Hansel suspected that anything he concocted would have to be better than the current practice of merely covering the hole in the skull. Hansel started experimenting with the basic Bacitracin Zinc ointment that was commonly used as an antiseptic to help minor wounds heal faster. A dab of Bacitracin was typically applied on a cut finger and then the bandage was fastened over it. The cut on the finger always healed days faster than the same cut left open to the air and elements.

Hansel and his research team experimented with the existing ointment and beefed up its antiseptic qualities. They then worked on the viscosity to create more of a gel than an ointment. The gel had to be capable of being injected into the injured brain tunnel through the hole in the skull. The team then perfected a device to inject the gel. The gel-filled device was something that could be carried in a first aid kit. People in combat could carry the devices on their person or in a first aid kit. Additionally, law enforcement could carry the gel-filled devices on their person or have them in their first aid kits. The key was having instant access to the device, because similar to the emergency that a heart attack created, every second counted. Ideally, all the standard first aid kits should contain the gel-filled device ready for instant use.

Whether in combat or on the streets, whoever carried the device had to be minimally instructed in its use and emphasis had to be placed on its proper use. The gel from the device needed to be injected into the skull until the gel oozed out of the skull hole, to ensure that the majority of the injury tunnel was as full of the gel as possible. The air had to be eliminated from the injury tunnel. The device would come with simple enough instructions in the first aid kit. The device

would actually be very similar to those large marinating syringes used for injecting a turkey or chicken with marinade. The familiarity with those marinating syringes would hopefully give people the confidence to use the gel-filled device on someone's skull in an emergency.

Hansel and his research team first began experimenting on cadaver skulls to properly dial in the gel consistency. Then they switched to the fresher skulls of the people who had donated their bodies to science. Those fresher skulls proved to be the ticket. When Hansel received bodies that were still warm, straight from the ER's of the hospitals, much was learned. The warmth of the fresh human body prompted the team to adjust the gel consistency somewhat. As pure as Hansel desired to make the gel, he was forced to add a few ingredients to enhance the gel's ultimate workability under all conditions. By the time they were done, the gel had only slightly resembled the original Bacitracin, and Hansel was able to patent the gel under its new name of BFF. BFF translated scientifically as Brain Formula Forty, since it was the 40th formula in the series that had proven to have the necessary characteristics.

The only way for Hansel to be sure of how the gel worked was to test it in a real life situation, which happened to be in the jungles of Vietnam. The political events were beginning to escalate and America's bravest were becoming injured on a daily basis. Hansel contacted the military and they were eager to try anything they could to help the injured. Hansel and his team produced the first 1,000 gel-filled devices and they were shipped to Vietnam. Within the week, the devices were being used with unexpected results. Initially, when the medics injected the gel into the brain-injured soldiers, they didn't expect much.

The results were spectacular. Nearly 80% of the brain-injured soldiers survived and made it to the hospitals for further treatment. The doctors at the hospitals had never seen anything like it. Normally, a bullet or piece of shrapnel to the head was a fatal event, but the gel had proven otherwise. Hansel was a hero and received the Nobel Prize for his work. It was estimated that thousands of GI's had been saved by Hansel's gel.

The military had given their seal of approval on the gel and stocked all the first aid kits with the substance. Soon, the word was out and law enforcement had adopted the use of the gel as well. It didn't take long for the standard Red Cross first aid kits to be supplied with the gel devices. The fire companies added the gel devices to their kits and ER's everywhere included the gel devices with their stock of emergency treatments.

The importance had to be placed on the immediacy of the injection of the gel into the injury. If too long of a duration had passed after the brain had been traumatized, the gel wasn't as effective. Public service messages were issued, which clearly emphasized that the gel had to be used as soon as possible after the brain injury had occurred.

Eventually, people caught on to the proper use of the gel. The gel wasn't a magic fix-all, capable

of bringing people back to life; it was never intended to be. It couldn't help in cases of extreme trauma. It was highly effective in helping a victim survive a single puncture to the brain. Even if the puncture had been inflicted by something as sinister as a rifle, the gel went a long way toward helping the victim. The gel simply had to be administered immediately. That was the bottom line.

Hansel sold the gel's patent to the government to allow its open use and control. Hansel never intended to profit from any of his research. He had always stressed that he was interested in helping humanity to better understand the brain. His gel was a step in the direction of at least having one way of preventing someone from passing away from a brain injury. The gel had already saved countless lives and would likely save many more.

Hansel turned his attention to understanding how the brain compensated by shifting functions from damaged parts to healthy parts. Hansel wanted to crack the case of how stroke victims survived and regained functionality after time. Imagine if it could be determined how the brain rearranged itself to allow the stroke victim to continue to lead a happy life. Hansel was determined to figure it out; he had accomplished what no one else had with his gel. It was time for him to write the next chapter in his volume on brain research.

The military had been completely satisfied with the success of the gel in combat and the law enforcement agencies were similarly content. The Secret Service had been considering the addition of the gel device to the collection of items carried by its agents. As it was, the agents carried on their person numerous weapons, stun devices, mace chemicals and other classified items to employ at the correct moment as they protected the president.

It was decided to add the gel devices to the Secret Service's equipment in January of 1963. The world had gone through the Bay of Pigs Debacle and the Cuban Missile Crisis and various civil rights events were taking place on a regular basis. The president had faced a great many challenges during his short time in office and expected more to come during his 4-year stint.

In November of 1963, President John F. Kennedy was sitting in the presidential convertible next to his wife Jackie enjoying the pleasant ride in the parade. Suddenly a loud report was heard that sounded like a gun. At first, no one knew what had happened. Jackie screamed that the president had been shot. The Secret Service agent who had been following next to the car jumped into the car next to the president and instructed the driver to speed away to the hospital, per the protocol. The agent immediately removed the gel device from his jacket and injected the president's skull with the gel. Per his training, the agent held his palm tightly against the hole to prevent the gel from oozing out. At the hospital, the president underwent an emergency procedure. He survived the operation, but decided that he was unable to continue as an effective president and retired to allow vice president Lyndon Johnson to take over. John F. Kennedy lived for many years to the ripe old age of 93.

88. Jasper's Clues



88. Jasper's Clues

A man had been brought into the lab to be autopsied, because the man had passed away in bed for no obvious reason. The man's wife claimed that her husband had high blood pressure from his stressful job. He had high cholesterol from eating too much animal fat. He had type 2 diabetes, because he was overweight and enjoyed his 2 daily doughnuts while drinking his heavily sugared morning coffee. The man was also a smoker.

The man's wife claimed that her husband had always taken all the medications for his ailments that were prescribed by the doctor. The woman assumed that her husband had passed away from the natural causes of the combination of smoking and his ailments.

Jasper began the autopsy of the 48-year old man to determine the cause of the man's passing, since the man had been too young to leave the earth due to "natural causes." Even with the man's minor ailments, he shouldn't have passed away, because the ailments were under control via prescriptions from the doctor. Many times, it was assumed that someone passed away from natural causes. It was the way that most people preferred to pass away when the time came. However, normally when someone passed away from natural causes, they were of an advanced age, typically over 75 years. When a 48-year old person passed away, natural causes had to be ruled out. Something had happened to the woman's husband that probably wasn't natural.

Jasper had to be diligent to preserve the condition of the body as it entered the lab. He took photographs and was meticulous in the scrutiny of the corpse. Everything he did might be essential to determining what had happened to the unfortunate soul. Missing one minor blood clot or one small internal hemorrhage might spell the difference between the autopsy determining a cause of death or it being ruled "undetermined." Coroners, pathologists and medical examiners hated those "undetermined" cases, because sometimes the blame went to whoever performed the autopsy for not determining the cause. Not every case was cut and dry.

Jasper turned on the voice recorder to assist him in recording notes from the examination. He noted any abrasions, bruises, cuts or damage to the skin. The man had a 1-inch round bruise on his left forearm. There was an abrasion on the right knee. The man's fingers had minor scratches on the left hand. There were some minor scars here and there, but nothing significant. Jasper documented everything he found on the front and back pages of the body chart. He indicated as clearly as he could graphically on the chart and followed up with a detailed written description.

He then looked under the hair and viewed the scalp. The man's scalp had a scar on the back, probably from a youthful injury. He checked under the fingernails for foreign bodies, which might be the product of a struggle. The fingernails were immaculate and appeared to have been recently professionally manicured. All those external clues might be critical in reconstructing the cause of the man's passing, particularly if foul play were suspected. Jasper took his time and

followed the step-by-step procedure by the book. Everything he did in the lab was legally binding and might have to be presented in a court of law. Jasper had a great deal of responsibility on his shoulders, but enjoyed the work immensely. His work had many times entered courtrooms as evidence to prosecute various criminals. In some cases, his work had been essential in setting innocent people free.

He undressed, cleaned, weighed and measured the body to establish a baseline for the internal investigation. The man was 6'0" tall and weighed 230 pounds. He was somewhat overweight for his height, but his stockiness and muscularity added some pounds to his weight. Jasper positioned the body on the work surface. A small block was placed under the back of the body, to cause the limbs to fall away. He raised the chest upwards, to make it easier to cut open. Jasper then made a large "Y" shaped incision from both shoulders of the body, meeting in the sternum, then straight down to the pubic bone.

Jasper then consulted his collection of large cutting devices to open up the chest cavity. He selected the saw, since he was cutting through the ribs laterally to allow the internal organs to be inspected in their current position. The ribcage lifted off like a gruesome lid. Jasper attempted to determine if the organs suffered any trauma or medical issues from their current position. The organs should be in almost exactly the same position as they were at the time of passing. Jasper didn't detect any trauma to the organs and they appeared to be of normal color and size.

Before Jasper removed the organs, the arteries leading away from the heart were examined for clots. No clots were detected, although the arteries were somewhat stiffer than normal. A sample of blood was removed from the vena cava for analysis. The heart was removed, measured and weighed. It appeared to be of normal color, size and weight with no sign of attack.

The lungs were removed, measured and weighed. They were of normal color, size and weight and showed some of the signs of damage related to smoking. Following the removal of the heart and lungs, the stomach and intestinal contents were examined, removed and weighed. The products of digestion were analyzed to give a decent indication of the time of passing. Jasper estimated that the man had passed away between 10:00 pm and midnight of last night. Some event or combination of events had occurred in the man's body during those 2 hours that had led to his untimely demise. There was no obvious trauma to the body externally, so the cause of passing was leaning toward something internal.

The head was elevated and examined. Jasper noticed nothing unusual on the man's face, neck and ears. He made an incision underneath the scalp and pulled it back to the front and rear of the head to expose the skull. He then snatched from the tool collection the Stryker saw and cut away a "cap" of the skull, which was pulled off to expose the brain. Jasper prudently observed the brain for concussions or discoloration. It appeared to be of normal color with no obvious contusions. After cutting the cranial nerves and spinal cord, Jasper carefully removed the brain

for further examination. He measured and weighed it and it proved to be of normal size and weight.

Jasper meticulously packaged the samples for analysis. The results of the analysis should indicate whether the man had ingested any poisons, drugs or alcohol. All of the results could be relevant, depending on the circumstances, for building up a picture of the precise cause of why the man had perished.

Jasper collected samples of blood, urine, bone and marrow, hair, gastric contents, organ tissue, fingernails, toenails, nail scrapings, exhumation tissue, vitreous eye solution, tissue biopsy and he radiographically imaged the body. The specimens were properly identified, labeled and sealed. All the specimens were collected and bagged separately in tamper-proof containers. Unique numbered seals were used to track everything. The lab next door to Jasper's lab was fully equipped to perform all the standard testing and would have the comprehensive results within 48 hours. Jasper sealed the man's body in a special air-proof "bag" and returned it to its designated refrigerated drawer.

Two days later, the lab results were complete and Jasper spent the entire day going over them as thoroughly as he could while reviewing his written and audio notes. As it turned out, there was nothing conclusive in the lab tests. Jasper consulted with a lab colleague of his to confirm everything to provide a cross check. His colleague also came up with nothing. It was rare for Jasper or his colleague to stamp an "undetermined" on an autopsy, because it could prove to be a problem if a criminal case were involved. If Jasper missed something and declared the cause of the man's passing as "undetermined," when in fact there was an actual cause, a criminal could end up running away scot-free.

Jasper didn't want to allow the deceased man be buried without determining what had happened to him. He decided to contact the greatest pathologist of all time, the man who he had learned from years ago, Thor. Thor had been retired for 11 years, but loved the field so much, that he always jumped whenever his friends needed his help. Even at 84 years old, Thor's brain and body were as sharp as tacks. Jasper drove to Thor's house and brought him back to the lab to thoroughly examine the data.

Thor looked over the lab results, read Jasper's report and concluded that something had to have been missed. Thor stressed to Jasper that sometimes, no matter how hard a pathologist tries to get every scrap of evidence, it isn't always enough. Thor instructed Jasper to think back to the days when Thor was teaching Jasper the ropes. What did Thor always emphasize? Jasper sat down at his desk and thought for a few minutes. Jasper gave up and asked Thor what he was talking about. Thor pounded his fist on Jasper's desk and demanded him to think harder. What would Thor always say when something seemed to be missing? Jasper thought a few minutes more and once again gave up.

Thor slapped Jasper across the face as he sometimes did in the past when he felt that Jasper wasn't using his noggin'. Jasper put his hand on his aching red cheek and said he couldn't remember. Thor kicked Jasper in the left shin and then in the right shin. Then Thor slapped Jasper's other cheek. Jasper simply couldn't remember. By that point, Thor was red in the face and getting angry at Jasper. Thor began spewing vulgarities at Jasper at the top of his lungs. Jasper shrugged his shoulders.

Thor looked at Jasper with evil eyes and pushed him as he sat on his wheeled chair. Jasper rolled on the chair across the room into the wall on the other side of the lab. Thor then pushed everything off Jasper's desk onto the floor. Thor bent over, picked up a lead pencil from the floor and called Jasper over to the desk. Jasper got up from the chair and skittishly walked over to the desk, fearing that he would be slapped again. Thor broke off the eraser from the pencil and placed it on the empty desk. Thor asked Jasper what that eraser reminded him of. Jasper's eyes lit up and he exclaimed, "The pituitary, I forgot about the pituitary!"

The 2 men hurried over to the refrigerated drawer and retrieved the autopsied man. They quickly removed the man from the "bag" and popped open the man's skull. Jasper lifted out the brain and tipped it over. Thor immediately yelled, "You see my boy!" Jasper noticed that the autopsied man's pituitary gland was the wrong color, which indicated that the man had been poisoned somehow. Jasper had forgotten to examine the pituitary gland and felt like a fool. Even though the pituitary gland was only pea-sized, he shouldn't have overlooked it. The lab results hadn't shown any signs of poisoning, however. Jasper asked Thor what could have poisoned the man if the lab results had shown nothing.

Thor sat down at Jasper's desk, lay his head down and took a nap for 15 minutes. Random napping was an old habit of Thor's that had helped him to solve some of the greatest cases in history. Thor claimed that resting in that manner reset his brain, so that when he awoke, he was able to attack problems with full force. When Thor awoke, he recalled a case from many years back where similar circumstances were involved. The autopsy and lab results both showed nothing, but the pituitary gland had been off-colored. Thor remembered that his teacher had smacked him up side the head a few times for missing the clue in that case.

Thor had Jasper drive him to the location of Thor's old lab where the records were still kept. After 5 hours of digging through drawers of files, Thor finally found what he was looking for. In the old case file, the color of the pituitary was identical to that of Jasper's current case. The person in Thor's case had passed away from the ingestion of a poison called Cabaratoxyline. The poison hadn't been detected by the standard lab tests, because the amount of the poison in Thor's victim was undetectable by the standard test. It was Thor's teacher who had suggested a different test to detect the poison that Thor's teacher had learned from his instructor of 30 years before.

Thor and Jasper returned to Jasper's lab and had the blood tested for Cabaratoxyline. It was

incredible, but the poison had been found! It was in the man's blood in such a small trace, that standard testing couldn't detect it. Special micro testing was the only way to identify the poison. An unusual trait about the poison was its extreme rarity. The poison could only be derived from the rare Cabara plant that only grew in the Galapagos Islands.

Jasper thanked Thor, finalized his report and notified law enforcement that the cause of the man's passing wasn't natural causes, but was from poisoning. A detective was assigned to the case and the deceased man's wife became the prime suspect. Once the detective had done some research and consulted with the district attorney, the deceased man's wife was arrested for poisoning her husband. Once she had been officially charged, the detective was then able to search her residence for evidence.

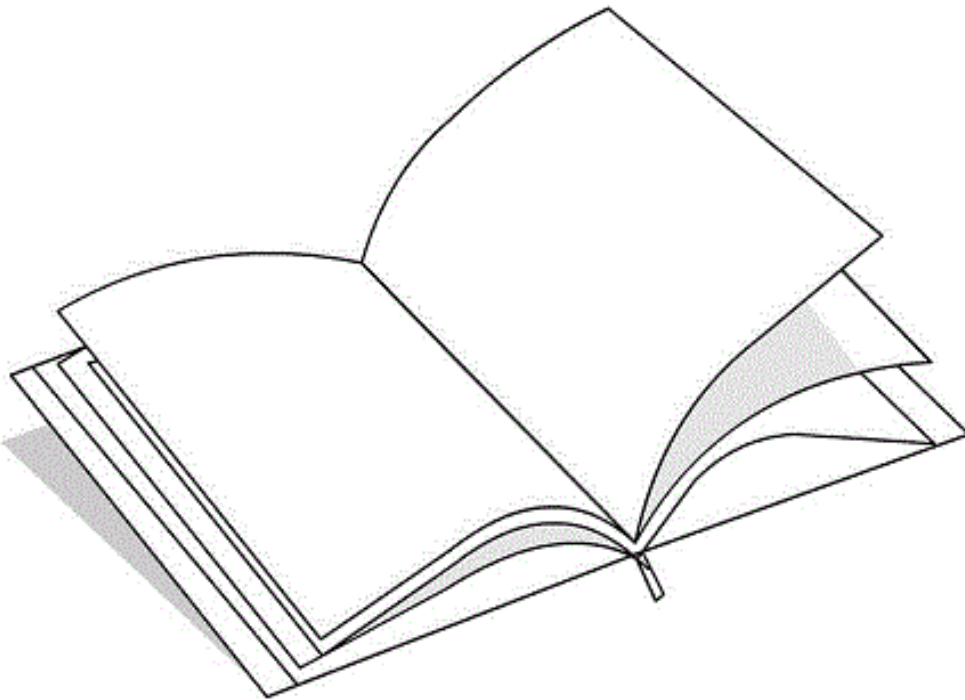
Apparently, the woman and the deceased had traveled to the Galapagos Islands for a one-week trip to celebrate their 25th wedding anniversary. That fact had provided the means for the woman to obtain samples of the Cabara plant from which the poison could be derived. Since the woman had lived with her husband on a daily basis, she was the only person who could have given her husband the necessary repeated doses of the poison. The detective had established the means that the woman had likely used. Her motive would have to be the vast fortune that the deceased had accumulated during his years as a highly successful businessman. The woman would be the likely recipient of the money upon her husband's passing. The man had no known enemies or other acquaintances who had reason to harm him. The man's wife was the only person with the means and motive to have committed the crime.

The evidence was minimal, but would most likely be enough to convict the woman. The woman had almost gotten away with her crime, since it initially appeared as if the man had passed away from "natural causes." Due to the determination of the pathologist, the real cause had eventually been specified. The woman had been tried in a court of law and was convicted of poisoning her husband. She was currently serving a long sentence in the State Penitentiary.

Unknown to anyone except the deceased, another woman had become the special lady friend of the deceased over the years. The deceased had enjoyed his visit to the Galapagos Islands with his wife so much that he had a pilot friend of his fly him and his lady friend there for a romantic tryst. While there, the lady friend collected samples of the Cabara plant.

She had convinced the deceased to open a confidential Swiss bank account, to which she would have full access. The deceased had deposited millions into the account. The lady friend was the person who had been poisoning the man at each of their secret rendezvous, not the man's wife. The lady friend knew that the man's wife would be blamed for the crime. Since the Swiss bank account was a protected entity, no one had known that the lady friend even existed. She was currently living in Beverly Hills and was paying for it all with monthly withdrawals from the Swiss bank account.

89. Kendrick's Fables



89. Kendrick's Fables

Kendrick was a wise old man who read all the time, had written many books and had even won a Pulitzer Prize or 2 along the way. He was curious about everything and could discuss in depth any topic with anyone. His favorite hobby was gathering his old buddies together and having each person take a turn reading their weekly story to the group. It was a similar activity practiced by the great Benjamin Franklin at his weekly philosopher meetings. One of Kendrick's most popular yarns is described below.

People had begun to disappear at an alarming rate out by the Boggy Swamp. There was a nice 10-foot wide paved trail next to the swamp, on which people could walk, run or ride their bicycles. It was a popular trail that was frequented by the locals who walked their dogs and pushed their baby carriages. The previous mayor's last great gesture before he moved on to the great pasture was to secure money from the government for the trail. Somehow, the old mayor had been able to finagle \$873,000, which was the full cost of the beautiful trail.

The trail had nice lighting and seemed relatively safe. The trail was perfectly smooth, which enabled any type of wheelchair or motorized cart to easily navigate on it. The trail had been in operation for 4 years with no issues and then people started disappearing in its vicinity. A couple of people would be walking on the trail and one of them would disappear, or so the survivor would report. The person who didn't go missing usually had some oddball story for the Police to digest. The survivor of the couple typically claimed that they had blacked out during the incident, which was something that they had never done before.

Since the survivor had been the last person to see the missing person, they ended becoming the prime suspect. There was never any forensic evidence on the scene, because the survivor could never remember exactly where they were when it happened. Even after combing the entire 5-mile long trail, the Police never found a trace. The number of missing person had soon reached 47 and the trail had to be closed.

Even after the trail had been closed, people continued to disappear. People driving on the road next to the trail began disappearing. It was always only one person who disappeared. If someone was driving alone in their car, the person's empty car was found in the shoulder of the road next to the trail. If 2 or more people were in a vehicle, one of them would disappear and the others would wake up after blacking out and wonder what had happened to the other person. The claims to the Police of the survivors to the Police were simply that they had blacked out during the disappearances.

The Police were reluctant to close the road to traffic, since it was the main thoroughfare through the village. Instead, they initiated special patrol cars with motion-detecting video cameras and digital cameras in an attempt to obtain crucial evidence. People continued disappearing from

their vehicles in the same manner and the number of missing had risen to 88. The Police increased their special patrols by having 3 cars patrolling the road 24 hours a day. Soon, members of the Police force who were driving the special patrol cars began to disappear. The 3 special patrol cars began with one cop per car, and then were increased to 2 cops per car. The Police force stopped their special patrols when the number of missing cops had risen to 4. The Police force couldn't afford to lose any more of its members to the mystery. None of the video or digital cameras had recorded anything during the Police officer disappearances.

The new mayor was at a loss of what to do; he couldn't close the road to traffic. The village needed the road for the commuters to get to their jobs in the village. In addition, the road was used by the suppliers, maintenance crews and emergency services. When the number of missing had reached 101 people, including the 4 missing cops, the village contacted the FBI. It seemed that whatever was going on was beyond the capabilities of local law enforcement to figure out. Two special agents arrived and had a strategy ready. The FBI claimed that they had seen the events in the village occur elsewhere. They knew just what to do. In 3 days, the 2 FBI agents were missing. The FBI pulled out and chocked that one up to an unsolvable mystery.

Once the FBI had given up on the sleepy little village, the mayor became destitute and out of desperation had offered a reward of \$100,000 to anyone who could help. By the time that someone had finally responded to the mayor's request, the number of missing had reached 112. A man named Jedediah had walked into the mayor's office with something really important to say. The mayor immediately stopped what he was doing to talk to Jedediah.

Jedediah claimed that what the previous mayor had done with the trail was a mistake. Jedediah was a Native American and claimed that the previous mayor had desecrated the sacred burial grounds of the ancient Native American tribe that had lived in the Boggy Swamp many moons ago. Jed was the last living member of the descendants of that ancient tribe. The mayor couldn't understand everything Jed was saying because Jed kept mixing in some of his Native American tongue with broken English. The mayor's secretary was able to understand Jed a little better and acted as a translator between the mayor and Jed.

Once the mayor had finally understood what Jed was getting at, he asked Jed what the village was supposed to do about it. Jed told the mayor via the translating secretary that the ancient spirits had to be appeased. The spirits were infuriated that their burial grounds had been violated by the trail construction. The only way to appease the spirits was for Jed to perform a ritual that he had learned from his father. Members of Jed's tribe had rarely performed the ritual, since the tribe had rarely sullied any burial grounds. Jed first wanted the \$100,000 reward and then he would perform the ceremony. The mayor refused to give Jed the money until he had performed the ritual and the disappearances had ceased. Jed spat in the mayor's face, stormed out of the office and sped away in his Rusty pickup truck. The mayor and his secretary discussed the

encounter with Jed and had a good laugh about it.

The disappearances continued for another 2 weeks and the mayor panicked. He had his secretary try to contact Jed, who lived on the edge of the village in an old RV on property that he owned. Jed didn't have a phone, so the secretary drove to Jed's residence in person to try to get him to come back to the mayor's office. Jed refused to respond to the mayor's secretary and demanded that the mayor himself come to his residence to invite him.

The mayor's secretary returned to the mayor's office and told him what Jed had told her. The mayor had the secretary drive him to Jed's residence and the mayor invited Jed to the mayor's office. Jed insisted on driving himself in his pickup truck and he followed the mayor and his secretary back to the mayor's office. The mayor talked to Jed through the secretary and they came to an agreement. The mayor paid Jed the \$100,000 in cash as Jed requested and Jed promised to begin the ceremony immediately.

Jed took the money and drove back to his RV to retrieve the necessary items for the ceremony. He had a large supply of materials for performing the various ceremonies of his tribe. The ceremony that Jed was performing to appease the ancient spirits involved the use of the dried blood, hair and fur of various animals, among other things. Jed had most of the ingredients stored in Tupperware containers. Jed preferred to use Tupperware, because the brand was rightfully famous for its patented burp seal. The ingredients had been passed down through several generations and were more valuable to Jed than gold. The ingredients represented some of the last vestiges of Jed's proud tribe.

The ceremony also involved the use of fresh blood taken from Jed and the mayor. Jed drove back to the mayor's office with his materials and requested the mayor to accompany him to the trail next to the Boggy Swamp. The mayor agreed to go, but the mayor's secretary wasn't permitted to go along.

Jed parked his truck on the shoulder of the road at the approximately middle of the trail. They carried the materials from the truck to the burial grounds on the other side of the trail. The mayor was nervous that something might happen to them, since they were likely standing where someone had recently disappeared. Jed assured the mayor that they would be safe. The mayor couldn't see how Jed was so sure of their safety.

Jed began the ceremony by drawing a drop of blood from his index finger and from the mayor. He chanted, threw things around and danced. The mayor was impressed and scared at the same time. The mayor hoped that he and Jed weren't angering the ancient spirits even more by standing on the burial grounds. Jed instructed the mayor to maintain absolute silence as Jed attempted to contact the spirits. Jed and the mayor sat down on the damp earth of the burial grounds and Jed went into a trance. Jed and the mayor sat there for 3 hours as Jed chanted and

hummed various phrases that sounded like gibberish to the mayor.

Jed and the mayor stood up and Jed picked up an old branch from his pile of ceremonial materials. Jed began slapping himself on the back with the branch; he didn't feel anything through his thick jacket. He then instructed the mayor to slap himself on the back with the branch, which didn't hurt because the mayor was also wearing a jacket. Jed then built a fire and burned a pile of the various samples of fur and hair.

Jed couldn't remember what happened after that. He woke up on the ground next to the fire and the mayor was gone. Jed drove to the mayor's office to inform the mayor's secretary that the mayor had disappeared. She immediately called the Police and they sent 2 cars with 4 officers to the location described by Jed. The Police found nothing, drove to the mayor's office and insisted to know what had happened. Jed explained that he and the mayor were performing the ceremony and Jed blacked out. When Jed awoke, the mayor was gone. The Police didn't know if they should charge Jed with something or let him go. It seemed like just another missing person case and the Police realized that they didn't have anything on Jed. At the Police Station, the cops informed the lieutenant of the goings on and wrote their reports.

The Police lieutenant hadn't been satisfied with Jed's story. He went to the mayor's office, gathered Jed and they drove to the site of the ceremony. At the site, the lieutenant looked around and found nothing. Jed claimed that he and the mayor were in the middle of the ceremony when Jed blacked out. The lieutenant scratched his head and concluded that something was going on that didn't jibe. The lieutenant didn't believe Jed's story, because it seemed too weak.

The lieutenant awoke an hour later and Jed was nowhere to be found. He didn't remember what happened; one minute he was standing there with Jed and the next minute, Jed was gone. The lieutenant returned to the station and related his story to the Police sergeant. The lieutenant remained in a baffled state as he wrote his report. Just when he thought that Jed might be the culprit, Jed had become another victim. The lieutenant held a meeting in the station with the sergeant and the 4 officers who visited the ceremony scene. They hashed back and forth about the possibilities.

Were the mayor's and Jed's disappearances simply 2 more for the books? Were the mayor and Jed in cahoots? Did the mayor's wife or secretary have anything to do with it? Were any of the aforementioned people in cahoots? Sometimes Police business was enjoyable and sometimes it was challenging to the point of nausea. The village had undergone catastrophic losses to its population as of late and no one could begin to crack the case. The FBI agents tried to intervene and they had also disappeared. What was the village supposed to do, instill martial law and shut everything down until further notice? It seemed to be getting to that point.

The next morning at 6:00 am, the mayor's distraught wife received a phone call from a person

who wanted \$1 million in exchange for the safe return of the mayor. The kidnapper instructed her not to notify the Police, private investigators or even tell anyone about the phone call. The kidnapper demanded her to bring the money to a location that would be disclosed later. The kidnapper didn't want her to know about the location ahead of time, to possibly set up an ambush. Even though the mayor's wife had been admonished not to involve anyone else, the kidnapper couldn't take any chances.

The mayor's wife gathered the money as quickly as she could in the short time that the kidnapper had allotted. By 9:00 am, she had the million and was waiting for the call. At noon, the kidnapper called and directed the mayor's wife to immediately bring the money to the old mill that was located on the edge of the Boggy Swamp. The mayor's wife was scared to death already and was even more petrified by having to go near the swamp.

At the old mill, the mayor's wife met with a man who was wearing a trench coat, hat, gloves, sunglasses, fake beard and mustache. The mayor was standing with a dazed look on his face next to the kidnapper. The kidnapper didn't say a word, but motioned for the mayor's wife to bring the money over. Just as she arrived at the mayor and the kidnapper, the kidnapper released the mayor from his steely grip. The mayor's wife handed the money to the kidnapper and it was done.

Jed had been the only member of his tribe to be born with the trait of mind bending. Mind bending was the ability to see into someone's mind and be able to control them. A mind bender can make a person do something and then make the person forget that it had happened.

Jed had hidden in the Boggy Swamp as people walked on the trail and he bent their minds to his liking. He made one person of a couple head off into the swamp and wander in the direction of the setting sun. The other person's mind was blacked out to not remember what had happened. Jed performed the same mind bending on the people driving by in cars, the Police officers and the FBI agents.

All the people who disappeared from the village were still missing somewhere in the swamp. Eventually they would emerge from the swamp on the other side. It would be a while, but they would come out of the swamp, undoubtedly hungry and thirsty, but alive. Jed had ensured that the dazed state of the missing people prevented them from doing anything but making their way west. Jed had bent the mayor's mind into waiting for him at the old mill. Jed blacked out the mind of the Police lieutenant to be able to use the lieutenant as a witness to Jed's disappearance.

Jed tried to do as much as he could for his tribe over the years, but society had its ways of treating the Native Americans that hadn't changed since the 1600's. At least Jed was able to put his mind-bending ability to good use. He had managed to significantly raise the standard of living of the last member of his tribe by the sum of \$1.1 million.

90. Alberto's Resort



90. Alberto's Resort

Alberto had inherited his resort from his father 25 years ago when it was still just a hotel. Over the decades, Alberto had expanded the original hotel into a resort/retirement community. The resort had a hospital and pharmacy where the residents could receive the most complex surgeries and purchase the most expensive prescription drugs at far lower prices than in the United States. The resort also had a glitzy casino where the residents could blow their pensions, social security payments and dividend income. Alberto envisioned providing senior Americans with an alternative to the high cost of living in the U.S. The resort currently had 45 permanent guests and 5 more were on the way from the airport. Alberto dreamed to have a place where everyone was in love and happy and he hoped that his resort would make his dream possible.

Harold, Idalia, Jack, Kacey and Lana couldn't wait to get to Alberto's resort, which Alberto had entitled "The Sunflower Resort." Each of the newest members of Alberto's resort had their reasons for wanting to live there. As they got off the bus, they tipped the bus driver Benicio, who had delivered them safely on the 45-minute ride from the airport. The roads between the airport and the resort were ok for the first 20 minutes, but the last 25 minutes of roads left a lot to be desired. The highways surrounding the airport were modern and solid. Once a driver exited the highway onto a connecting road, the lane widths decreased and the potholes thrived. The drivers passed each other maniacally as if they were racing cars on a dirt track.

Once they arrived at the resort, it became a blissful scene. The 5 were greeted at the front door of the resort by the very cheerful doorman named Carlos. Carlos was a happy go lucky guy who was just glad to be there. He earned a low wage, but he didn't have a high standard of living to maintain, so he was always jubilant. He always had clever quips ready to toss at the residents as they entered and exited the building.

The guest specialist at the front desk, Dinora was an incredibly pleasant seniorita. The 5 new guests to the hotel were saluted by Alberto who had been standing behind the front desk with Dinora. Alberto and Dinora came from behind the desk to properly greet the newcomers. Dinora was holding a tray of cold drinks and Alberto had a tray of freshly made snacks. The guests were assured that the water at the resort came from a 300-foot deep well and was treated by a comprehensive reverse osmosis system to purify it. The 5 new guests were parched by the walk from the bus to the hotel and greedily chugged down their drinks. Dinora reached for another pitcher of the cool drink to top off any glasses that required it.

The bellhop named Elonzo carted the luggage of the new guests to their condos while they checked in. Since Alberto wanted the 5 new residents to be absolutely satisfied before they signed a permanent contract at the resort, they were allowed to try the place out for a month. Alberto charged the guests the typical fee that any Mexican hotel would charge at the monthly rate.

Harold was a 76-year old widower from Nebraska who decided to give the resort a try, while getting his right hip replaced. Mexico had long been a destination for people from the U.S. to get discounted surgeries and prescription drugs. Harold saw a TV commercial for the resort and decided to try to live in Mexico on a permanent basis after the surgery. He knew a lot about Mexico and liked the climate, so he went all in. He had been retired for a while and felt that he probably only had about 10 good years left. He didn't know what life had left for him, but thought that he might get lucky if he played his cards right.

Idalia was a 77-year old widow from Ohio whose main reason for wanting to live at the resort was to have her left elbow and shoulder reworked. She had been in a nasty car accident where she had gotten confused and accidentally hit the gas pedal instead of the brake. She was thankful that she was the only one hurt and after the crash, had immediately quit driving. Idalia had been a bit of a wild one in her younger days and had recently planted her 4th husband in the ground. She maintained her figure through diet and exercise and never failed to turn the heads of the older gentlemen. Idalia was always on the lookout for number 5.

Jack was a 78-year old from West Virginia who had never been married and never wanted to be. He wanted to live at the resort for the reduced cost of the many prescription drugs that were keeping his feeble carcass in a vertical position. Jack was addicted to gambling and couldn't wait to get to the casino to make his life more livable, thrill by fleeting thrill. Jack firmly believed that he couldn't take it with him and he didn't want anyone else to have it either. It was those rare moments when Jack hit a big jackpot on the slot machines or made out nicely at blackjack or craps that made Jack's life worth living for him. He didn't have much else in his life and once he had been bitten by the gambling Bug, he never looked back.

Kacey was a 79-year old nun from Rhode Island who was a physical wreck. After 60 years of kneeling in churches, never exercising and eating too much junk food, her body required a major overhaul. She was 30 pounds overweight and needed both knees and hips replaced in the worst way. She had been trundling around the churches and convents with a walker and was sick of it. Once she had all the work done on her legs, she planned to resume her religious activities with vim and vigor. The world was full of lost souls and the country of Mexico was no exception. She had saved many souls in Rhode Island, but she was willing to serve wherever the creator wanted her. When she was younger, she had jokingly been nicknamed "The Flying Nun," because of the way that she used to rush everywhere. She missed that.

Lana was an 80-year old spinster from Wyoming who wanted to live at the resort, because she was finally ready to find her special someone. She heard about the resort from friends and wanted to hook up with someone who might still find her charms appealing. She dated in high school and college, but experienced a bad breakup that led to her abstaining from affection entirely. She went 55 years without the feeling of a special someone hugging her. It had been a

long time since she had done anything else either and she was ready to try again. She had been eyeing Harold and Jack while they were at the airport waiting for the bus. Lana chatted it up with the 2 boys on the bus ride to the resort and got funny looks from Idalia and Kacey. Lana didn't care what anyone one thought about it; she was determined to get back in the game in one way or another.

Fortunato was the doctor who would be performing the various surgeries on the new residents and his surgical assistant was Georgina. The 2 of them had worked on more American patients than Mexican during their 30 years together. They encompassed a top-notch surgical team and were as skilled as any team in the world. They had both been trained in the finest Mexican universities and were fully abreast of the latest technologies available. Alberto didn't want any of his residents to have any problems with their procedures. As long as the people lived at Alberto's resort, there was a lifetime guarantee of satisfaction on the surgeries. Due to the many problems with the variations in the materials and methods in the joint surgeries, Fortunato only used the latest and greatest methods. If someone had a problem at any time after one of his surgeries, it was fixed free of charge.

Alberto's lifetime guarantee of surgical satisfaction was a big reason why some people wanted to live at his resort. The 5 recent arrivals had been on a waiting list to move into the resort, due to its popularity. Alberto wanted to maintain the resort at its current size to maximize the level of satisfaction of the residents. He never intended to expand the size of the hotel part of the resort. He wanted to preserve his father's original vision. The hospital building was built next to the hotel and the casino was built on the other side. Before new guests moved into the hotel, the rooms were completely updated with new furnishings. Alberto came up with the plan to wait for 5 vacancies in the hotel and then filled them all at once after updating the rooms, to minimize disturbance to the existing guests.

The 50 rooms of the hotel were actually condos, with small kitchens and washer/dryer to allow the residents to cook their meals if they preferred and do their laundry. The hotel had 4 restaurants of different levels of sophistication and pricing. The chefs who worked at the restaurants were highly trained and cooked everything to order from fresh ingredients, many of which were harvested from the large garden behind the hotel. There was also a vineyard behind the garden that produced fine grapes for some of the wines served at the resort.

The resort had a splendid concierge named Macario who did his best to satisfy even the most outlandish needs of the guests. As soon as Harold walked into the hotel, he asked Macario if he could get a hold of some special canned meats and cheeses that he heard Mexico was famous for. Macario told Harold that he would try his best to accommodate him. Macario was familiar with the immediate availability of all the products, services and businesses in a 50-mile radius. He had to be; it was his job and he was exceptionally good at it.

The hotel was shaped like a horseshoe with the opening facing the lake across the drive. The lake provided the guests with swimming, water sports and fishing. Each room in the hotel had a partial view of the lake and the pool, which was in the center of the horseshoe. The resort was beautifully laid out and it was fortunate for Alberto that his father had purchased the large property, which included the lake.

The guests were allowed to roam the gardens and vineyard by walking on the many connecting walkways and paved trails. Since the resort had been designed from the beginning with the elderly in mind, every precaution was taken to ensure their safety, comfort and entertainment. An 18-hole golf course was located behind the vineyard and garden and was accessed by driving a golf cart from the hotel. It wasn't the largest or most difficult to play, but the golf course was enough to satisfy an ardent golf enthusiast.

The resort offered free massages in the spa as well as other low cost treatments, which Alberto felt were essential to keeping the residents healthy and happy. Since the Mexican sun was potentially damaging, the spa was popular with the women to get skin treatments for their already aged skin. The spa provided various healthy refreshing drinks for the residents who became thirsty while sitting in the sun or playing tennis on the tennis court.

Alberto's resort had everything that the elderly could ask for, including bingo, checkers, Chess, board games, cards, dance classes and numerous other simple forms of entertainment. There was a fully stocked library and internet café with coffee and freshly baked items. All the condos came with free Wi-Fi and hundreds of TV channels, including the premium channels.

On Friday nights, the resort had a singles night in the nightclub to enable people to get together in a nice atmosphere. The nightclub had a DJ who played anything the people wanted to hear. There was a dance floor and bar for the singles to meet and live it up the way they used to in the old days.

After the month trial period had progressed, the 5 new residents signed their lives away and bought their condos. They would now be able to have their surgeries as required and enjoy the lifetime guarantees on the procedures.

Harold's right hip replacement proceeded without complications and he was quickly rehabbing. Idalia's left elbow and shoulder were successfully rebuilt and everybody started calling her "The 6 Million Dollar Woman." She was also rehabbing and having the time of her life. Kacey had her left knee and hip fixed and was doing her necessary physical therapy. Kacey would have to wait a month for the right knee and hip repairs. Fortunato wanted Kacey to be able to get up and walk around as soon as possible after the first repairs to prevent circulatory problems like blood clots. If she had both knees and hips done at the same time, she would have been bedridden, which was a no-no after leg-related surgeries.

Jack had been gambling at full tilt at the casino from day one and was spending his money as if it were water. He opened a line of credit at the casino, which was acceptable to Alberto, as long as the monthly resort fees were paid. Since Jack had put so much of his life savings into his condo, he didn't have as much as he would have liked to curb his gambling appetite. He began asking people for money and even tapped his friend who had been living at the resort. Jack offered his collection of gold coins as collateral for the loan. It wasn't long before Jack had run out of money. When he first arrived in Mexico, something had clicked in his head that put him on a one-way trip to the poorhouse. He was unable to pay the loan back to his friend and had to surrender his coin collection. Jack couldn't pay the next month's resort fees, which Alberto required in advance. Alberto had no choice but to kick Jack out of the resort and give him his money back for the condo. In a week, Jack was back in West Virginia.

Lana had been habitually going to the singles nights and was definitely beginning to feel better about herself again. She was out there, flirting and dancing with everyone who would participate with her. She was one of the best dancers at the resort and had started giving lessons to the residents, mainly to the ladies. Lana possessed the taut, leggy figure of a dancer and wore the most dazzling outfits she could find.

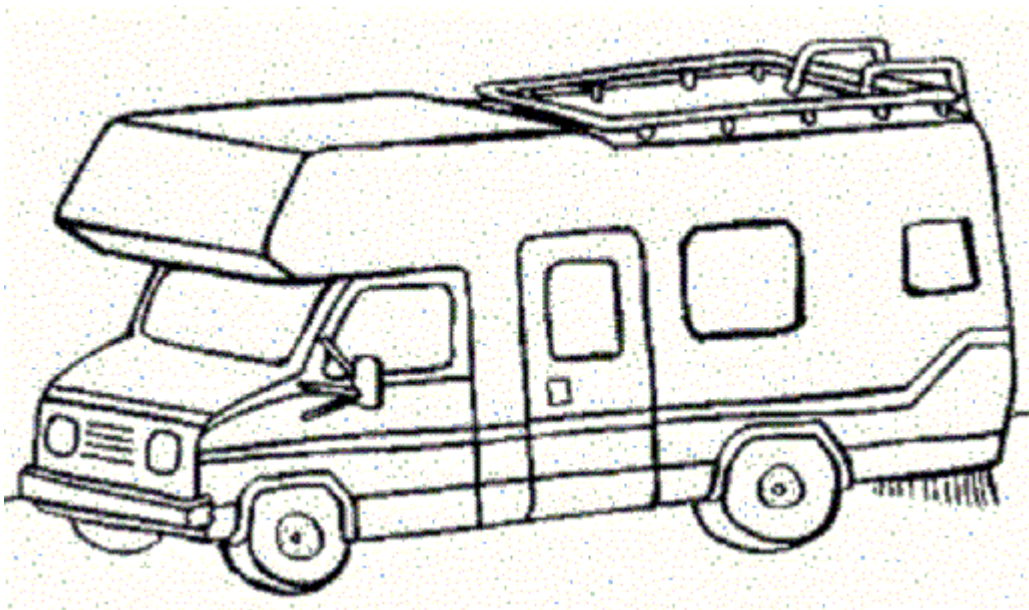
After another month at the resort, Kacey had her right knee and hip replaced and continued her therapy along with Harold and Idalia. Harold and Idalia were already walking around and golfing and were almost done with the intense hands on therapy from the physical therapist.

When Kacey was finally out of therapy, she started taking dance lessons from Lana. The 2 really hit it off and Kacey quickly blossomed into a fantastic dancer and became almost as good as Lana. Some people were just more coordinated and better at picking up choreography than others were. All Kacey's years as a nun had prevented the world from seeing the real her in action. She got into shape and fixed her diet with Lana's assistance. Kacey and Lana had fallen in love with each other and decided to get married. Lana moved into Kacey's condo, because she didn't want Kacey to be put out by having to move her stuff again. Lana sold her condo back to Alberto who gladly accepted it and was very pleased that Kacey and Lana had gotten together.

Harold and Idalia had bonded so much during their therapy sessions together that they had become a couple. They fell madly in love with each other and were ecstatic beyond their wildest dreams. They felt like they were living in a fairy tale in the balmy weather at the spectacular resort. They were married and Harold sold his condo back to Alberto after moving into Idalia's fashionably decorated condo. Alberto felt that his dreams were really coming true.

Jack was withering away in West Virginia living in a van down by the river. Each day, he walked the 6 miles from the van to the local O.T.B. where he gambled away his social security payments. He didn't have any money to waste on his prescription drugs or on gasoline for the van, which had been parked there a year ago.

91. Vaughn's Camper



91. Vaughn's Camper

Vaughn and Vicky were excited about the purchase of their used RV and couldn't wait to go camping in it. It was a real beauty at 42 feet long and was fully equipped with everything necessary to live away from home for weeks at a time. They actually got a tremendous deal on the RV, because it had been bought new by someone and had been sold back to the RV dealer. The RV originally cost \$123,500 new; Vicky and Vaughn bought it for \$73,000 after minimal price dickering. The salesperson didn't seem to have any problem coming down to their price, which seemed a little odd. Vaughn and Vicky had chocked up the easy purchase to the fact that they had bought the RV at just the right time when the dealer was unloading used ones.

The salesperson gave Vicky and Vaughn the full tour of the state of the art RV and went over all of its wonderful systems and features. The RV had AC and a large bathroom with a toilet, sink and shower with tub. It slept up to 6 people with some various rearranging of tables and sofa pullouts. The master bedroom in the back had a king size bed, dresser and closet. The RV came with a nice sized refrigerator/freezer, dishwasher, toaster oven, sink, tons of cabinets, built in microwave, stove and oven.

The RV had extra large water tanks, strategically placed around the RV to balance the weight. It also had extra large gray and brown water tanks to maximize the time between having to empty the tanks. There was a lot of storage room in the bottom of the RV, accessible from the outside.

The RV had a stereo system and a nice size TV/DVD/DVR with a satellite dish on the roof. Since the RV's engine was diesel, it got a respectable 15 mpg on the highway. Due to the turbo design of the engine, it had plenty of power to climb hills or tow another vehicle behind it. Vaughn and Vicky planned to tow their Prius behind the RV, to be able to unhook the car and drive around easier.

Once they drove the RV home, they packed it for their ultimate one-month road trip. They were retired, so they could do whatever they wanted, for as long as they wanted to do it. They had plenty of money in investments and other sources of income, so the RV was like an expensive toy to them. They had waited a long time to buy the RV and see the country; they were leaving the next day.

They had it all mapped out where they wanted to go and the highlights of the things they wanted to see. They planned to have a loose schedule, not trying to get anywhere on a certain day or time. They wanted to enjoy the journey as well as the destination.

The first landmark they wanted to visit was Yellowstone, because they heard so much about its wonders. On the way there, they planned to visit some friends and relatives. Since they had no children, they had the RV to themselves and could travel in relative luxury. The thing was huge

and they could see how it would be possible to live in it for an extended period. That was one of the reason's that they bought a larger model. The bigger an RV was, the more stuff it had in it, in addition to being more roomy.

The next day, they headed in the direction of Yellowstone and hoped to be there in 7 days, plus or minus 2 days. Vaughn and Vicky intended to alternate drivers every 2 hours to minimize the fatigue of sitting behind the wheel.

The RV was packed with the latest automated systems. It had a generator, propane tanks and batteries linked to a computerized controller that enabled the electrical components to operate off various sources without being plugged into an electric source outside. The control panel enabled the occupants to select which system they wanted to draw power from. It was really impressive.

During the 2nd day of driving, the engine began behaving erratically and Vaughn pulled into a highway service area to take a look. As he was parking, the engine smoothed itself out. Vaughn and Vicky thought that it might be because the RV was used, but it only had 13,000 miles on it. The previous owners had barely broken it in before they sold it for whatever reason. Vicky and Vaughn hit the restrooms, grabbed a snack, fueled up the RV and hit the road again.

Later in the 2nd day, the microwave started for no reason and when Vicky pressed the off button, she got a mild shock, which startled her and she screamed. Vaughn became startled and drove into the shoulder slightly, then overcorrected and drove into the next line slightly. A state trooper had been following the RV during Vaughn's swerving and flashed his lights for Vaughn to pull over. Vaughn showed the trooper his license, registration and insurance card and explained that they just had a minor issue with the microwave. The trooper thought Vaughn's excuse was bogus and asked to be let inside the RV to take a look around.

The trooper remarked that the RV was a real beauty and that he always wanted a big one like the one they had. The trooper seemed satisfied that nothing was amiss in the RV and as he was walking out to leave, the microwave sent a shock through the air into the trooper's neck. The trooper fell down on the floor of the RV and passed out. Vaughn and Vicky didn't know what to do, so they just waited a few minutes. In 4 minutes, the trooper awoke and asked them what happened. They explained and he felt his neck where there was a burn mark and he believed them. He noted that they should get the microwave checked out at the next RV place they come to. They found the circuit breaker panel and flipped the breaker for the microwave. That should fix it. Vicky and Vaughn thanked the trooper and he left.

That night, as they slept in the RV in one of those large rest areas, they heard sounds coming from somewhere in the RV. Then the sounds abated. Maybe it was something outside.

The next day, they headed back out on the road again. They couldn't wait to get back on the road

again. The RV had a couple of persnickety annoyances, but nothing major. At 10:00 am, they encountered a nun pushing a scooter on the shoulder, apparently in need of a lift. They pulled over and offered her a ride, which she gladly accepted. They hoisted her scooter up onto the heavy-duty bike rack on the back of the RV where it would be safe. The nun was wearing her full black habit and was covered with sweat. She said she loved that stupid scooter, but it was cantankerous and stranded her often. She was thankful that there were so many kind people in the world willing to help her out.

Vicky was driving and Vaughn offered the nun a cool drink from the fridge. The nun commented how nice the RV was and how it appeared to have everything in it. Vaughn and Vicky told her how they just bought it and they were heading to Yellowstone. As the nun walked by the microwave on the way to the table to sit down with her drink, a crackling spark shot out of the microwave and hit the nun's neck. She instantly collapsed to the floor and spilled her glass of cherry drink. Vaughn screamed at Vicky to pull over. Vicky hurried over to Vaughn who was trying to revive the nun. The nun wouldn't wake up. Vaughn ran outside to unhook the Prius and they drove the nun as fast as they could to a hospital. On the way to the hospital, the nun awoke, but was still groggy and incoherent. She was much worse off than the trooper had been. Vaughn and Vicky found it odd that the microwave was still able to shoot a spark with its circuit breaker turned off.

Once the nun was processed into the hospital, Vicky and Vaughn drove back to the RV. When they arrived at the location of where they thought they left it, it was gone. They drove further east on the highway until they encountered it on their side of the highway. Somehow, the RV had been relocated onto the eastbound highway from the westbound side where they had left it. The nun's scooter was missing as well. Who would move an RV like that and then only take the scooter?

They hooked up the Prius to the back of the RV and drove to the hospital to tell the nun the bad news about her scooter. When they got to the hospital, the nun had already been picked up by another nun on a scooter. Vaughn and Vicky shrugged their shoulders and resumed their journey to Yellowstone. They encountered a steep winding uphill grade, which was the first real challenge for the RV's powerful engine. The RV had no problem making its way up the hill and they were able to go the speed limit without perturbing too many drivers in the long line of vehicles behind them.

On a sharp curve of the road to the left, Vicky felt a slight vibration in the steering wheel and they both noticed a rattling sound at the back. Suddenly, the RV seemed to get a burst of power on the hill and Vicky looked into the side view mirror to watch the Prius rolling backward away from the RV. It got loose! The line of cars behind them swerved out of the way just in time as the Prius rolled into the guide rail, flipped over the rail and plummeted down the mountainside.

The car burst into flames and exploded. Vicky pulled over onto the shoulder, which was barely wide enough to fit the RV. They dialed 911 and waited for someone to show up, while watching their poor car burn to a crisp.

When the state Police showed up with the tow truck, Vicky and Vaughn explained the catastrophe and assisted the trooper with the report. The Prius was a total loss and they called their insurance company. Once all that business was finalized, they drove down the other side of the mountain. While Vaughn was driving, he noticed the steering acting differently from how it had been acting, as if there were something wrong with one of the tires. He continued driving until the tire pressure warning light went off on the dash and the steering really became weird. He pulled over onto the shoulder to get out and look. The front passenger tire looked a little low, so he retrieved the compressor and inflated it to the proper pressure.

The light on the dash went off after a few minutes and in 20 minutes, came back on again. He pulled over again and the front driver's side tire looked low. He inflated the tire and resumed driving. The dash lights stayed off for the remainder of the day. They hadn't drained the brown and gray water tanks since they started the journey, so they pulled into an RV park to use the facility there. As they drained the tanks, they talked to the guy in the office about peculiarities related to RV's. The guy claimed that RV's are notorious for weird things happening, because they are built by different manufacturers and don't have the same codes as the car manufacturers. Vaughn and Vicky asked the guy if he ever heard of the microwave doing strange things and he said it happened all the time. The guy suggested having the RV thoroughly checked out at the park before they continued on their voyage.

Vicky and Vaughn agreed to the check and stayed at the park for a day to have the RV given a thorough once-over. The mechanic couldn't find anything wrong with the microwave or anything else on the RV. He claimed the hitch that the Prius was hooked onto was probably unnoticeably loose from the beginning. Those hitches had to be checked for proper torque every once in a while as a normal maintenance procedure.

Vaughn and Vicky had the mechanic remove the microwave and store it in one of the compartments under the RV where it couldn't cause any more trouble. They would worry about the microwave later; there was a toaster oven and regular oven if they needed to reheat something. They planned to visit their RV dealer to discuss the microwave and loose trailer hitch bolts. Because of the loose bolts, they lost their \$20,000 Prius, which the insurance company would have to replace.

They departed the RV park with some valuable knowledge about their RV and about RV's in general. They resumed their westerly quest and stopped off at the home of Vicky's parents for a quick visit. They talked about the issues with the RV and the loss of the Prius. Vicky's father had heard all about the quirkiness of RV's from a buddy of his. It was because of the lack of

standardization and commonality of the parts and systems. Automobiles were produced in such great numbers that they were much more reliable and didn't have the complex automated energy systems of RV's. To assume that an RV was like a car or pickup truck was a mistake. RV's were complicated machines and required more maintenance and inspections by qualified technicians.

The next day Vicky and Vaughn continued on their mission to Yellowstone with some trepidation about what might happen next. They began to wonder if they should have bought a new RV instead of the used one. Maybe there was a reason that their RV was so severely reduced in price. The RV was otherwise a splendid luxurious vehicle with many wonderful features. The issues with the Prius, microwave and tires had to be forgotten and stored in the lost and found of their memories.

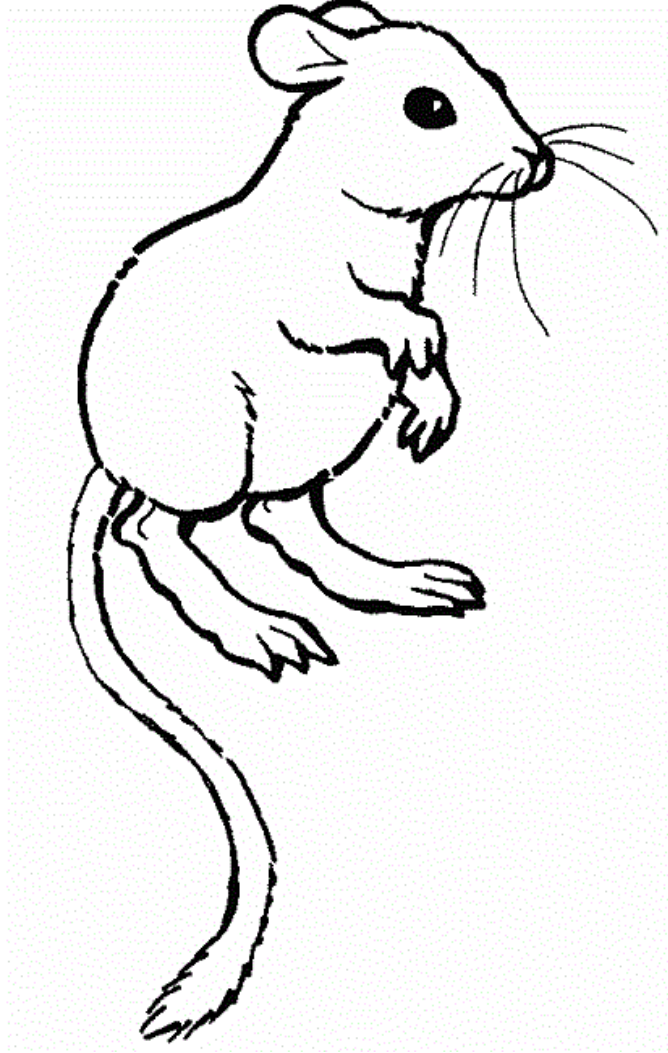
Their next stop was at the house of some friends who had relocated from their hometown for work. When they arrived at the house and parked on the street in front of the house, the RV started overheating and steam hissed from the engine. They decided to simply let the engine cool off and went inside the house. They showed the RV to their friends as it gradually stopped steaming. They gave their friends a tour inside and one of the friends asked about the space where the microwave used to be. Vaughn and Vicky went through the microwave story and had a laugh about it. When they told the story about the Prius, nobody was laughing. Their friends claimed that they heard about the unpredictability of RV's before.

The next day, Vicky and Vaughn launched with a fresh outlook of adventure. The RV's engine had cooled off and all the systems appeared to be go. Onward to Yellowstone they plodded. Out on the highway as Vaughn was driving, all the warning lights on the dash began flashing on and off. He immediately pulled over and left the engine running. All the lights continued their show. He turned off the engine and restarted it. The lights went off. They waited there in the shoulder for a while then drove again. Nothing unusual happened for the rest of the day.

The next day they finally reached Yellowstone and merrily pulled into the park. They couldn't wait to see the Old Faithful geyser, the sulfur pools, the hot springs, the bears, moose and other wildlife. They made it! They pulled into the visitor's center to gather some information to maximize their experience at the park. They had always heard such remarkable stories about the splendor of the park. They used the map to navigate around and wanted to see Old Faithful first. After about 20 minutes of driving through the park, they pulled into the parking lot next to the famed geyser. It was a sunny day, so they took a few minutes to apply sunscreen and change into more suitable clothing. They might be standing in the sun for a while, as they waited for the geyser to erupt. As they were about to leave the RV, they were overwhelmed by some kind of fumes emanating from the RV and passed out.

Vaughn and Vicky awoke to a lot of screaming voices as they sat trapped in their sinking RV in the fuming sulfur waters of Old Faithful. They fainted again.

92. Mann's Rodents



92. Mann's Rodents

Mann's basic idea wasn't exactly a new one. The idea of employing the physical exertion produced by a human or an animal on a wheel or treadmill to generate some form of power on the other end had been around for centuries. The element that made Mann's idea unique was his special energy cell. He had come up with a design for a device that was similar to a capacitor that could be connected to the wheel in a gerbil's cage to generate electricity. The device was actually a storage container for the electric power that when combined with other such storage devices, could power appliances in a house.

Mann's device was so efficient, that it could generate 100 watts for each hour that a gerbil would run on the wheel in its cage. With 10 of the devices and the corresponding 10 gerbils running on their wheels, Mann could harness 1,000 watts of electricity for his use. The gerbils didn't have to be running at the same time or even be running for a continuous hour. Whatever amount of time that the gerbils ran was stored in the energy cells. Mann had designed a system of gerbils in cages running on their wheels, that could supply the energy requirements for a small house.

For every 10kW, he needed 100 gerbils running on their wheels for at least an hour per day. For 20kW, he would need 200 gerbils, etc. The 2nd part of the problem was to breed gerbils that were capable of running on their wheels for a longer duration. It took Mann 2 years, but he was finally able to do it. He had consulted all the textbooks on breeding animals of the same species with each other and all the books on interbreeding between species.

What he ended up with was an animal that was slightly larger than an average gerbil. Since it was the result of breeding a gerbil with a guinea pig, Mann's hybrid gerbil was 10 times stronger. Mann's hybrid gerbil could run for hours on its wheel without tiring and appeared to enjoy it. It was a triumph in breeding.

The combination of his energy cell and his super gerbil had gone a long way toward solving the world's energy needs. Mann's hybrid gerbils were capable of living in a cage with another gerbil that was also running on its wheel. For the 20kW household, the 200 gerbils would only require 100 cages. The cages could be arranged in the basement of a house against the walls. For an 8-foot ceiling, the 2'x2' cages could be stacked 4 high and 6 across for a 12' wall. Each 8'x12' wall would then be capable of having 24 cages against it. Four walls would encompass 96 cages, which was close to the necessary 100 cages for the 20kw. Obviously, a larger basement could accommodate more cages and in a smaller basement, the owner would have to stack the cages on shelf units that were located outward from the wall mounted cages.

Mann started his system in his basement and currently had a 96-cage setup. He bought the gerbil food in large bags from the Agway store. The gerbils seemed to like the Purina Gerbil Chow, which came in a variety of flavors.

Mann's cage system had a vacuum apparatus that applied a quiet suction to the floor of the cages for instant cleaning of the cages at the push of a button. The vacuum apparatus was connected to the whole-house vacuum machine in the basement. One a month, Mann emptied the vacuum canister from the main machine. The water bottles for the gerbils were connected to the house's cold water line to supply the gerbils with fresh filtered water. The aim was to minimize the hassle of owning and caring for so many gerbils.

Mann could easily foresee a larger house, which required 30kw or higher as having 300 gerbils or more. It was a perfect system in Mann's mind, because the gerbils were silent and hardworking creatures. Mann had also developed a special wheel for the gerbils to run on which was a silent industrial version of the ones found in pet stores. His special wheel had permanently sealed ball bearings similar to those used in automobiles, except much smaller.

Mann had been using his system for a year and wanted to work out all the bugs before presenting it to a manufacturer as an energy generating system. He wanted to use the system for a full 2 years before he felt that it would be ready for the next step of going public. He had received a patent for the energy cell, the hybrid gerbil breed and the high efficiency gerbil wheel. He needed to work out the details of how to package the entire system. Since Mann was more of an inventor than a businessman, he pondered how to go about it.

Mann had seen those TV commercials and ads in magazines, etc. about organizations that supplied inventors with marketing help. He knew no other way to go about it, but feared being taken advantage of. He recognized that he had created a sound idea that some people would find interesting. Mann estimated that the cost of his entire energy producing system resulted in half the cost per kW of energy compared to the big power companies. It was obviously a little more trouble in dealing with the animals, but the real genius of his system was its scalability.

The scale of 100 gerbils per 10kW could be reduced to 50 gerbils for 5kW, enough to run a toaster, microwave and coffee maker simultaneously. If people were energy conscious or cost conscious at all, they could select a smaller system. No matter what size system they chose, they would be cutting their electricity bill in half for the use of those specific appliances. Mann was in the process of making his energy cells more efficient so that eventually the energy savings could possibly be another 25%. Mann had limited resources in his laboratory to improve things beyond a certain point. With some outside investors, he could purchase more equipment to take things to the next level of refinement.

Mann couldn't help being overcautious about revealing his amazing technology to anyone, because of the risk of someone stealing his grand scheme. He had patented the individual entities of the system, but no one could figure out how those entities were combined together. It was the idea of connecting the dots into the overall energy producing package that he was afraid of someone stealing.

Many times over the years since he first came up with the idea, he had debated about going public with it. The idea worked fine for him in his house and he was enjoying the energy savings. He supposed that deep inside he might be afraid of his idea being laughed at or rejected by an investor. Maybe people would think it was a stupid idea and too preposterous to develop any further.

What if organizations such as P.E.T.A. found out how Mann planned to have potentially millions of his hybrid gerbils run on their wheels for the majority of their short lives? Mann looked at it as the gerbils didn't have much else to do in their cages except eat and sleep. They might as well be exercising and generating power while they were exercising. Mann's hybrid gerbils would probably be the healthiest gerbils on earth due to their activity level. Mann thought that P.E.T.A. would be happy that he was actually giving gerbils a better, longer and healthier life than previously. The average lifespan of a typical gerbil was 2 years. Some of Mann's first hybrid gerbils were 3 years old and were still going strong on their wheels each day. They weren't putting in the hours they used to, but they were still certainly earning their keep.

Mann had owned pets his entire life and loved animals; he never thought at any point that what he was doing with the gerbils was in any way cruel. He wasn't technically forcing the gerbils to run on the wheels. It was his special breeding that had instilled in the gerbils the desire to run longer. If the gerbils didn't feel like running on their wheels, they didn't have to. They couldn't help wanting to run, though. P.E.T.A. would have no way of knowing that his energy system was using his own specially bred gerbils. They resembled typical gerbils, except they were slightly larger. They were born with the color variations of regular gerbils.

Mann wished that he would stop doubting himself; he had a good idea and should run with it. He couldn't though, not right away anyway. His excuse to himself was that he was still testing and perfecting the system. He knew very well that his system was complete. He was a genius after all; he thought everything through and had measured to the nearest millimeter. His system worked perfectly and was ready to go to the big show. Unfortunately, he didn't have the chutzpah at the present and may never have it. He didn't want to pay anyone to help him get it either.

Maybe his idea was destined to stay right where it was, in the basement of his house. It worked and he was happy; he didn't need to make millions of dollars to be happy. He had everything he needed. He wasn't married and didn't have any significant other, but what did it matter? He was perfectly content making the world a better place doing what he was doing. He was saving the world's energy by 50% and soon possibly by 75%, if he was lucky.

He was reducing the consumption of those nasty fossil fuels or whatever his local power company used to generate its power. Maybe he should just continue to test his system for another year as planned and further perfect it. He could continue to breed the gerbils to make

them eat less food and drink less water. He could further develop the vacuum system and wheel efficiency. Maybe he should use his system for 3 years instead of the planned 2 and really ensure its dependability. Yeah, he would definitely have to wait another 2 years. By then it would be perfect and no one would be able to laugh at him.

After a full 3 years of testing the system, he would be able to properly evaluate the lifespan of his hybrid gerbils. Ideally, if he could get 4 or 5 years out of one of his hybrid gerbils, his system would be able to stand any amount of scrutiny.

That was the main issue with going public. Mann would have to be prepared to answer any questions that potential investors would have. He would have to document everything. He needed all the costs recorded and put into a spreadsheet. The true scalability of his system is what the investors would be most concerned with. Maybe the investors would be looking at the possibility of a true large-scale application of his incredible system. Imagine if more than one household could be powered by a scaled up system.

Maybe the way to look at the system wasn't on a house-by-house basis. Maybe it should be looked at as powering a group of buildings. Maybe a low cost housing community could be supplied by a system of gerbils that were living in their own energy-production building. Say a plan was in place to supply the energy needs for a small community of 20 houses. At 20kw per house, they would need 400kW or a 4,000-gerbil system. It could be done.

Mann's method could be scaled up to that size with the appropriate watering, feeding and vacuum systems installed. Obviously, a maintenance superintendent or other personnel would be in charge of making sure that the animals were properly taken care of, but that would be a minor issue. The gerbils could live in their own heated, ventilated building in full comfort. The neighborhood's children could have supervised access to the gerbil building to look at and play with the gerbils after school. Maybe the school could have field trips to the gerbil building for a nature study outing.

The more Mann thought about his idea, the better it actually sounded. Mann's concept would be able to supply power in the middle of nowhere. He could develop systems that could be used anywhere in the world. Due to the ability of the system to create its own power, no location that was too cold or too hot would be an obstacle. In the hottest deserts, Mann's gerbil building could supply its own air conditioning. In the most frigid climates, the gerbils would be kept warm by the clean electric heating that they supplied themselves.

Mann's mind became a blur with the possibilities and the sky wasn't appearing to be the limit. In fact, his extraordinary idea had no limitations. His system could be employed on the moon, where a gerbil building could be constructed that would supply the gerbils with whatever climate they needed and research could be carried out on the moon instead of in orbit. The main problem

with the space station was that the solar cells were only useful when the sun was shining on them, which wasn't very long. Mann's gerbil energy system generated power 24 hours a day, via the energy cells. Space research could be performed continuously in shifts.

Mann would be able to sell his designs to NASA, Russia, China and any other nations that were interested in using them in space. Mann's system could help all the destitute nations of the world to have as much clean energy as they wanted, without the need for pipelines, electric lines, utility poles or any such limitations. All a community would need is one of Mann's designed gerbil buildings full of eager gerbils, ready to light the lights as required.

Mann was beginning to think that the world wouldn't be able to wait another 2 years for his brilliant energy system. Maybe one year of testing had actually been long enough to evaluate the process. He had enough data lying around that he could present to investors. He could throw something together and go to a copy store to have a bunch of nice brochures made. He could then start calling on some of those inventor help ads and get the ball rolling. There was no point in waiting any longer. His system was good enough to stand up to any amount of analysis. He had designed the system from scratch from the very beginning and could easily field any pertinent questions.

He would have to shell out some money for a nice suit and shoes, no more than \$300 for the suit and \$100 for the shoes. He needed a proper businessman haircut. His current shabby unkempt hair wouldn't do at all. He would have to go to a proper barber and get a sharp haircut. He would definitely need a nice black briefcase. All those business guys carried them. He could see himself up there, hobnobbing with the big shots. He would probably win the Nobel Prize.

Mann couldn't believe that just by thinking enough about the many possibilities for his system that he had injected himself with the necessary confidence to take the next step. He had convinced himself that he was worthy of the fame and fortune that he deserved. His ideas were simply stellar and the world needed to know about them today, not tomorrow or the next day. Mann was bursting with enthusiasm and could wait no longer. He was so excited that he had to calm himself down before he made himself nauseous. He didn't realize how excited he could get until he got himself going the way he did. He had to strike while the iron was still hot.

The snoozing 41-year old Mann was awakened in the basement of his parents' house by the sound of his pet gerbil running on the squeaky wheel in its cage. Mann quickly sat up in his small bed, yawned, rubbed the sleep out of his eyes and looked around. He saw his dirty clothes scattered on the floor and the leftover pizza & chicken wings from the night before. The squeaking sound stopped as the gerbil came to a halt on the wheel and looked over at Mann with a blank expression on its face. The squeaking resumed as the gerbil started running again.

It was all just a dream!

93. Wade's Solution



93. Wade's Solution

Kirk Douglas made over 90 movies including the phenomenal Spartacus in 1960. The studios had been getting after him to perform in a suitable sequel or remake of the film for years. Being the ultimate actor who never wanted to repeat any roles, he always refused. He acted in, produced and directed many films after Spartacus and was content with his career. When Kirk's son Michael finally talked Kirk into doing another Spartacus, it became huge Hollywood news. The year was 1995 and the Spartacus sequel was due to start filming in 1997. The typical lead-time required for the making of a major movie in Tinseltown was approximately 2 years. Actors and actresses had to be cast, contracts had to be signed and many other decisions had to be ironed out before filming began.

Kirk agreed to be in the movie only under the condition that he would play his same role of Spartacus again. Even though Kirk would be turning 81 years old by the end of 1997, he felt that he could pull it off. Many other actors had played parts in movies in their senior years and Kirk wanted to keep up with them. He had been consistently acting until 1995 and performed in many interesting roles along the way. The studio balked at Kirk wanting to play the main role in Spartacus at his age and resisted signing him. Kirk and his agent held firm for 6 months until Kirk finally won out. Kirk was in tremendous physical condition for his age and the studio realized that with a little makeup, Kirk could be made to appear to be in his 60's in the movie. Granted, the concept of a Spartacus in his 60's didn't seem as potent as a Spartacus in his 30's, but we were talking about Kirk Douglas here. He was so masculine, that he could wear a dress and still be intimidating.

Kirk signed to do the movie and the remaining entities of the production commenced. Many actors jumped at the chance to perform in the Spartacus sequel with Kirk. The top actors and actresses of the day were contacted to play in the movie. The original Spartacus had a legendary cast and the studio attempted to emulate it the best that they could. Hollywood would never have the same talent that it did around the time of the original Spartacus, but with a good script, glorious music and tight direction, it could still become a modern classic.

Kirk was given an advance script to reacquaint himself with the role, since it had been over 35 years since he played the part. To present the audience with a fresh take on the story, the script had been completely rewritten, but still maintained the same complex plot. The most spectacular scene of the movie of the chariot race would be shot similarly to the original, but more safely. When the original movie was shot, Hollywood didn't have as many restrictions on what it could physically do with the actors and animals. After 3 decades, a lot of obstacles had been laid, but the director felt confident of grand success.

Kirk was certain that he would do a good job with his part, because he was the consummate actor. He knew it and Hollywood knew it. He couldn't wait to start the filming in 1 1/2 years

and ramped up his physical fitness regimen. Even though he wouldn't be expected to do much physically in the movie, he wanted to look the part of a brawling man in his 60's as authentically as he possibly could. He had his personal trainer put him through the ringer to gradually increase his overall muscle mass in the attempt to gain 30 pounds of raw solidity.

At Kirk's age, he had been losing muscle as a result of aging, but he didn't want it to hold him back. He enlisted the assistance of Arnold Schwarzenegger and Lou Ferrigno to help him safely add the muscle mass. Arnold and Lou were the most famous body builders on earth and were still physically scary looking at their advanced ages.

For a year, Kirk studied his script, ate properly and worked out at the gym 5 days a week for 3 hours per day. He was on a mission to make a glorious comeback to Hollywood in his most famous movie role. Kirk never did anything unless he was giving it 110%, a phrase that Kirk had learned from Lou Ferrigno. Lou seemed to say 110% all the time, no matter what he was talking about, even if it didn't fit in the conversation.

In 1996, Kirk suffered a severe stroke while working out at the gym with Arnold and Lou. Kirk had doing bench presses with a barbell and was almost done with the set, when Lou got in his face and yelled, "Come on you girly man, you gotta give it 110%; give me one more!" Kirk tried to get one more repetition with the barbell and collapsed on the bench. Lou instantly yanked the weights off Kirk's chest and yelled to Arnold to dial 911.

Kirk was devastated when he awoke in the hospital and heard the doctor's bad news. Kirk had lost partial use of the arm and hand on one side of his body, a sure sign of stroke damage. The worst thing about the stroke was that it had also impaired Kirk's speech. Just when Kirk was about to perform in one of the greatest comeback roles in Hollywood history, he became a stroke victim. He was destitute and begged the director to keep him in the movie, but the movie had to be put on hold until further notice. If Kirk could somehow recover enough from the ravages of the stroke in time to start shooting the movie, they would go ahead with it. Kirk would have to demonstrate to the director that he could perform the role properly. The director gave Kirk 6 months to demonstrate the acting ability that was required by the role.

The director talked to Kirk's doctor and was told it was doubtful that Kirk would recover in time to play the part. The director consulted with the slew of financial backers and the production company. The players insisted that the remake of the movie had to have Kirk in it or they wouldn't do it. Even though a sum of money had already been put into pre-production, they would be willing to eat it. Hollywood loved its icons and Kirk Douglas was one of the most beloved of all of them. The players involved in the movie agreed to wait 6 months for Kirk and if he weren't ready in time, the picture would be shelved indefinitely.

Kirk immediately started physical and speech therapy. His physical fitness regimen had been put

on hold until he showed enough improvement. Kirk sent Arnold and Lou on their way and thanked them profusely for trying to help him. Kirk hoped to be calling on them again in the near future. Lou felt that he was to blame for pushing Kirk too hard, but no one agreed that it was solely Lou's fault. Kirk was old and could have been verging on a stroke anyway.

After a month of therapy, Kirk wasn't happy with the results and the therapist had to keep emphasizing that it took time to regain the use of stroke damaged body parts. Kirk screamed at the therapists that he didn't have much time. He contacted everyone he knew in the industry to try to help him to get better quicker. Kirk's friends and relatives tirelessly combed the globe for answers until after a month, they found someone in England.

A little-known British scientist named Wade had been quietly conjuring a special stroke therapy formula. Wade had been working in his small home lab for 44 years on the project. At the age of 71, he was finally ready to go public. Wade's solution took a long time to make workable due to the complexity of the process. The stroke victim had to ingest special exotic fruits, vegetables, flowers, herbs and spices at the moment of picking, for the formula to work properly.

Wade had been stationed in the area of India known as the Western Ghats while in the British Army as a doctor. During Wade's time there, he had discovered many natural healing methods that were unknown to the world. The people who lived there were very private and didn't care to reveal their secrets. They hated being occupied by Britain and only wanted to be left alone.

After Wade retired from the British Army, he continued working with the magical ingredients. He managed to befriend an old wise man after fixing his foot; the old man was grateful at the relief that Wade had provided. The old man had transferred as much wisdom as he could to Wade over a 13-year period until the old man passed away. Wade had documented everything with diagrams of the plants, etc. and the correct amounts to combine. Wade took his goldmine of information home with him and had been working on the stroke cure ever since.

Kirk and some friends flew to England to consult with Wade, who couldn't believe he was meeting with Kirk. Wade felt that it had been an incredible coincidence that his favorite actor of all time was seeking his help. Wade was only too glad to assist Kirk in any way that he could. After a week of visiting with Wade in England, Wade and Kirk flew to Kirk's California estate. Wade had samples of the seeds and plants that Kirk would have to grow on his estate in a greenhouse in a tropical environment. Kirk had his gardener talk with Wade about the specifics of growing all the natural ingredients for the stroke cure.

Wade insisted that Kirk would have to consume the ingredients immediately after picking them from the various plants. Otherwise, the effects of the cure wouldn't last. The cure had many side effects, but was obviously worth it. During the month of living at Kirk's estate, Wade assisted the gardener with the growing of the plants in the greenhouse. Once the plants were suitable for

harvest, the cure was ready for Kirk to try it. The Gungo fruit is a bluish-black foul tasting fruit that resembled a fig and grew on a small bush. Leaves from the Horak plant were green colored with red veins. Numerous flowers were part of the cure including the Brown Impala Lily, Saffron Spike, Swamp Buttlebrush, Red Dracaena, Forked Sundew, Golden Pothos and the Aralia. Herbs and spices were added including Amchur, Berebere, Epazote, Mahlab, Ponch Phoran and Sansho.

It was no wonder that it had taken Wade so long to finalize the cure, due to the number of uncommon ingredients. In addition to the list of ingredients were the specific amounts in which they were added to the salad. Wade called the cure a salad, because it looked like a salad, except it tasted like no other salad on earth. After successfully experimenting on some of the local Indian people who were stroke victims in the Western Ghats region, Wade was confident that his cure would work for anyone. He was excited to see his cure working on Kirk Douglas.

Wade harvested the ingredients from the greenhouse and combined them in the exact quantities per his recipe and used a precision digital scale to measure everything. Kirk's nurse and gardener were present during the harvesting and administering process. Wade stressed that under no circumstances, should any of the ingredients be washed after harvesting.

Kirk slowly ate the salad, which weighed almost a pound. No salt, pepper or other condiments were allowed to be added to the salad, which might invalidate the salad's curative properties. Kirk was barely able to finish the salad and almost vomited. He calmed himself down and tried to believe that it would help him. He felt better after a while; Wade advised Kirk that once his body had been accustomed to the salad, he wouldn't feel nauseous after eating it. However, the side effects of the cure would be present no matter how long Kirk continued to eat the salad. It was up to the stroke victim to tolerate the side effects to be able to live stroke free.

Kirk told Wade that he could stand almost any side effects if he could just get into the new Spartacus movie. Wade said that the healing of the cure would take at least 2 weeks to notice, so that Kirk would have to be patient for the magic to begin working.

After 3 weeks of eating Wade's horrendous salad, Kirk's stroke symptoms began to disappear. He was beginning to regain control of his hand and arm and his speech was improving. Once Kirk had noticed that he was healing, he began to cry uncontrollably from elation and couldn't thank Wade enough for what he had done. Wade said he required no thanks; he was just happy to be able to help his favorite actor out of a jam.

The side effects that resulted from the cure were many, including flatulence, diarrhea, incontinence, erectile dysfunction, blurry vision, memory loss, stomach gas, aching joints, hair loss, trouble concentrating, difficulty in breathing, convulsions, profuse sweating, fainting spells and the momentary loss of the senses of smell, taste & hearing. Kirk felt that due to his age, he

already had most of those side effects already. Kirk had been wearing the active sport version of adult diapers for 2 years already and was used to the feel of them. The fact that he was regaining his mobility, strength and speech again were so valuable to Kirk at that point in his life that he couldn't put into words how truly blissful and grateful that he was to be alive. He vowed to never take life or people for granted again, because of the precious short time that he had on the great earth.

Kirk continued eating Wade's salad and exercising until the 6-month date had arrived when he had to put on a show for the director. Kirk met with the director who was astounded at the difference in Kirk's health and speech. Kirk looked better than ever and appeared to be ready to continue with the movie. The director had Kirk read a few lines from the script and Kirk performed wonderfully. Kirk even did 50 pushups to show off his strength and vitality.

The director was happy that Kirk was back in action again, but had become overwhelmed by the flatulence that was emanating from Kirk's body as he did the 50 pushups. Kirk farted with each of the pushups, so that by the end of the pushups, the director's office had become a horrendous place. The director's secretary had to rush out of the office, because she was unable to bear the smell any more. The producer and casting director had both passed out on the office couch. When the secretary exited, the director instructed her to leave the door open to ventilate the stink. At the completion of the 50th pushup, Kirk fainted on the floor and one last wet fart was heard as Kirk undoubtedly pooped in his diaper.

When Kirk awoke from his fainting spell, he apologized for farting while doing the pushups and also apologized for the smell of the diarrhea that the director may also be gagging on. The director stated that yes, he had smelled something even more disgusting than the farts and assumed that it was poop. Kirk told the director he was surprised that the smell of his poop had somehow made its way through his diaper. Kirk explained that the stroke cure was the culprit for the farting and the pooping. He asserted that he would do his best to rein it in during the filming of the movie. Kirk hoped that he didn't offend the producer and casting director with his odors.

The director stated that since much of the shooting of the movie would take place outside, Kirk's smells wouldn't be so offensive to the cast and crew. The director was beyond ecstatic that Kirk was going to be able to star in the movie. The director was more concerned with Kirk's fainting than his farting and inquired if the fainting was a common occurrence for Kirk. Kirk said that one of the side effects of the stroke cure was occasional fainting, but mainly during excessive exertion as during the pushups. The director was satisfied that Kirk was fit enough to proceed and revived the producer and casting director to tell them that the movie was a go.

Hollywood had been waiting 37 years for a sequel or remake of one of the greatest movies of all-time with Spartacus and it was finally going to get it with the movie's biggest star returning in full form. Kirk Douglas was back in the chariot race again.

94. Ike's Cases



94. Ike's Cases

Ike entered his dusty office on that Friday and had a seat behind the paper-strewn desk. He leaned back in the wobbly chair and rested his scuffed shoes on the desk. His bubbly secretary Harmony came in with his black sugarless coffee and morning paper. Ike had something on his mind and didn't hear Harmony say good morning to him. She yelled it a 2nd time. Ike asked her what she just said and she said she was just saying good morning to him. He said good morning to her and drifted back into his deep thought.

Ike had been bothered by the last case because of the way it ended. Too many people had gotten hurt for no reason other than the stupidity of a greedy felon. It seemed that too many of his cases lately had similar endings. Ike was a simple private investigator who didn't like seeing people get in harm's way. He had seen enough suffering while he was on the Police force for 20 years. He was barely able to stay in the full 20 years for his pension. The department's hands were being tied unfairly by the criminal justice system. The cops were being over-scrutinized and were constantly observed under a microscope.

The bad guys seemed to have more rights than the good guys. It seemed that way to Ike anyhow. Ike had to keep telling himself that it was because of the country's forefathers that had ensured those rights of the people in the first place. Ike supposed that as long as the cops played everything by the book, the bad guys would get theirs, the way the system intended it. If the cops slipped up the slightest bit, then the bad guys got away sometimes. It had gotten too sticky for Ike to stay in the force. He was contentedly collecting his Police pension and was on the outside using his smarts to collect his investigator fees.

Ike had learned a lot about investigating crimes while he was on the force. He had learned from some of the best in the business who were still in the business. Ike was grateful to those old guys and he couldn't see how they could stand to keep being cops.

Ike made a decent enough living between his pension and his occasional investigative fees to get by. He had enough income for his crummy apartment and enough left to rent the crummy office for his detective agency. Ike felt lucky that Harmony didn't ask for a high wage or he would be out of business. A private dick had to have a secretary to field the phone calls, file the cases and get the coffee & paper each day. A secretary was indispensable for helping to crack some of the more difficult cases. Many times, Harmony had uttered a seemingly minor observation that had triggered an insight in Ike's brain that led to solving a case. Ike wished that he could pay Harmony a higher wage, but times were hard.

Ike had considered renting an office in another part of town for less money and then pay Harmony the difference as a higher wage, but the current location was too good to pass up. Ike's office was perfectly situated where the bus lines, taxis and subway lines intersected and

crisscrossed. From his office, Ike could get anywhere in the city in minutes, via the fastest mode of transportation available, depending on the time of day and day of the week.

As Ike sat at his desk, sipping his high caffeine coffee and reading the front page, Harmony came in with a phone message. When Ike arrived at the office each morning, he didn't want to take any phone calls directly until he had his head screwed on straight. The coffee and newspaper were Ike's traditional ways of waking himself up in the morning. Since Ike was such a light sleeper, he was always tired and lived on coffee to keep himself moving through the day. When he had at least finished his first cup of coffee, he was ready to take a call. If he could manage to finish the coffee and finish reading the front page, it was even better.

Ike downed the rest of the coffee and put the newspaper aside after reading the top half of the front page. He was as ready as he was ever going to be on that morning. He read Harmony's phone message and dialed the number she had written down. The number belonged to a woman named Idella who didn't answer the phone. Ike didn't find it odd that someone who had just used their phone wouldn't answer it, because maybe they had called just before walking out the door. Ike went back to reading the paper and started drinking his 2nd cup of coffee. By the time that Ike was 1/4 of the way down the 2nd page, there was a knock at the agency door.

Harmony opened the door, showed Idella into Ike's office and closed Ike's door behind her. Ike asked Idella if she wanted anything to drink and she politely declined. Idella was clearly distraught about something and apparently couldn't wait long enough for Ike to call her number. Idella was worried about her boyfriend Kendall who hadn't called her in 2 weeks and hadn't answered his phone when she called him at home. Idella and Kendall were old school people who didn't believe in living together before marriage. Kendall lived alone in an apartment and Idella did the same. Idella was concerned that perhaps Kendall's partners named Nelson and Omar might be up to something. Idella had known Kendall for 2 years and they were engaged to be married in 10 months. Idella proudly showed Ike the sparkling 2-carat engagement ring on her left hand.

Idella and Kendall had never been out of visual contact for more than a week at a time and usually phoned each other at least every other day. Kendall was in business with Nelson and Omar and they occasionally traveled somewhere for a week at the most. The last time that Idella saw Kendall was the Saturday morning of 2 weeks before. They had gone out in Kendall's boat fishing for a couple of hours while it was still cool and the fish were biting better. Kendall went into work late that morning; it was no problem, because he owned the business.

Idella opined that Nelson and Omar had to be the last people to see Kendall and they might have had something to do with his disappearance. Ike heard enough from Idella and explained that in order to take on her case, he required a non-refundable fee of \$500 and \$100 per day for expenses. She immediately produced a checkbook from her purse and wrote out a check for

\$600. Ike told Idella that he would deposit the check in the agency's bank account as soon as she left his office. After Ike gathered a few more pieces of information from Idella, they bade farewell to each other. After Idella left the agency, Ike asked Harmony if she had any of her famous intuitive feelings and she said that she had. Harmony sensed that Idella didn't seem realistically upset about the disappearance of her fiancé. Harmony stated that if her fiancé were missing or was mysteriously out of touch for some reason, she would be hysterical. Ike noted that Harmony was right; Idella almost seemed to be acting that she was distraught. At first, Ike had believed Idella, but after Harmony's comment, he wasn't so sure anymore.

Later that day, Ike paid a visit to Nelson and Omar to see what they had to say. When Ike arrived at Kendall's business, Nelson and Omar were in the middle of working. Kendall's business comprised constructing and repairing custom rifles and shotguns for hunting and shooting enthusiasts. They had all the equipment in the shop to machine and repair any firearms. It was a lucrative business due to the small niche that it occupied. There weren't that many craftsmen around who could do the meticulous work that Kendall had learned from his father. Kendall was gradually training Nelson and Omar to use all the equipment and they were coming along nicely.

Nelson and Omar declared that the last time they saw Kendall was at noon on that Saturday of 2 weeks before. Kendall had come into work late that morning because he was at one of the suppliers, haggling over prices. Kendall said he was leaving work at noon that day to go fishing with Idella. That was the last time they saw Kendall. Since they were partners in Kendall's business, they continued to process the orders for their customers in Kendall's absence. Ike asked them if they knew where Kendall kept his boat and they told him. Ike also asked them for the name of the supplier that Kendall was supposedly with on that morning.

On Saturday, Ike went to the boat marina to talk with the harbormaster; the man attested to seeing Kendall and Idella on that Saturday morning, but not during the afternoon. The harbormaster got off work at 3:00 pm on that day and they might have arrived after he left for the day. He said he didn't necessarily watch every boat going in and out anyway; he was mainly there to settle the slip rental issues. He just happened to notice them that morning, because he was surprised to see someone like Idella that early at 7:00 am. Ike asked the harbormaster why it was unusual to see Idella that early and he said he didn't know why; it just seemed funny.

Signs were beginning to point to Nelson and Omar as the primary suspects so far, but Ike was concerned about the discrepancies in the stories. Idella's story about the events of the Saturday morning had been somewhat backed up by the possibly unreliable harbormaster. Nelson and Omar seemed to have a different story about Kendall's whereabouts on that morning. Nelson and Omar were possibly the last people to see Kendall, as Idella had stated.

Ike visited the supplier that Kendall purportedly met with on that Saturday morning. The supplier said that he had met with Kendall in the past, but not on that day. Why would Kendall

tell his partners that he met with someone whom he didn't actually meet? Holes were beginning to form in the tapestry of the case that were beginning to irritate Ike.

On Sunday, Ike visited with Idella and asked her if she went fishing with Kendall on that Saturday afternoon. Idella angrily barked at Ike that she only saw Kendall in the morning, as she already told Ike at his office. Anyway, why would she go fishing in the morning and then again in the afternoon? She could barely stand going fishing at all and only did it because Kendall liked doing it. Ike replied that Nelson and Omar had mentioned something about it.

Idella became even more irked and screamed that Nelson and Omar were obviously lying. They must have done something to harm her Kendall. She furthered exclaimed that Ike was wasting time talking to her and asking her stupid questions when Nelson and Omar were in plain sight. Why wasn't Ike doing more to prove that Nelson and Omar were involved? Idella was paying Ike to investigate for her, not to investigate her. Ike calmly told Idella that part of his job was to check out all the leads and try to make sense out of them. He said that whenever a crime was committed, there were victims and guilty individuals. Sometimes it was difficult to determine who was who.

Idella said she was sorry for screaming at Ike, but she had been on edge lately and just wanted to know what happened to Kendall. Ike understood that she was upset, as she should be at such a time, but he needed her cooperation.

As it turned out, Idella had gone fishing with Kendall on that Saturday afternoon, as Nelson and Omar claimed. When Kendall and Idella were at the marina that Saturday morning, it was only to go for a ride in the boat to see the beautiful sunrise. It was Idella's idea of a romantic moment that she and Kendall could spend together. Kendall told Nelson and Omar that he was with a supplier on that morning, just to make up some excuse that he knew they would swallow. Even though Nelson and Omar were Kendall's partners, it was still primarily Kendall's business and he could do whatever he wanted.

Idella found out that Kendall had been cheating on her with various women during the entire time that they were dating. Idella didn't want to be the wife of a cheating husband. She suggested the idea of going out fishing on that Saturday afternoon when she knew that the harbormaster would be gone for the day. That way, no one with any status would notice that she and Kendall took the boat out that afternoon. Boaters came and went all day at the marina and no one paid attention to anyone else's business.

While they were out in the ocean, Idella hit Kendall in the head, pushed him into the water and expected him to drown. Once she was satisfied after 10 minutes of watching him floating in the water motionless, she headed back to the marina. By that time, it was almost dark and no one was around. She went home and waited for almost 2 weeks and then she called Ike on that

Friday to attempt to create the case against Nelson and Omar.

Unbeknownst to Idella, Kendall had been pretending to be drowned while he was floating in the water. He couldn't help being the pig male that he was by cheating on Idella and he knew it. He had wanted to end their relationship for a long time, but didn't have the courage to break it to her. He knew that his infidelity was wrong and hoped to grow out of it someday, when he finally settled down with somebody and got married.

Kendall never expected Idella to become so angry that she would attempt to do away with him. The expression, "There's no fury like a woman scorned," definitely applied to Idella. Scorning her was a big mistake. Kendall felt lucky that she hadn't hit him in the head hard enough to crack his skull. He was dazed by the blow to the head, but only suffered from a bruise and a headache. When she hit him and pushed him into the water, he pretended to be drowned, because he wanted to see how things would play out afterward. Luckily, he had been wearing a life jacket, which enabled him to float and swim his way back to shore by early Sunday morning.

Kendall made his way home and didn't use the phone; he wanted to see what Idella was up to. From a payphone, Kendall called his business on Monday morning and filled in Nelson and Omar on what had transpired. Kendall instructed them to say nothing to Idella and they agreed to keep silent. Kendall gave them further instructions on what to tell anyone who had any questions concerning Kendall's whereabouts.

Little did Idella know, but Kendall had installed a miniature video camera system on his boat, because of the vandalism that had been going on at the marina lately. Idella's entire crime had been captured for the world to see. Since Kendall highly valued all his property, he had purchased the high-definition system that was capable of recording detailed video even under poor lighting conditions. Kendall had gone back to his boat and retrieved the video evidence. The evidence showed clear footage of Kendall and Idella's morning together and of Idella's attempted drowning of Kendall.

When Kendall found out from Nelson and Omar that Idella had hired a private investigator, Kendall took the number of the P.I. from Nelson. Kendall called Ike at his office after Ike had returned from his visit with Idella at her apartment. Kendall revealed everything to a surprised Ike and told Ike about the incriminating video of Idella committing the crime.

Ike arranged a meeting at his office with Idella to tell her that he had cracked the case. Idella rushed into Ike's office expecting Ike to disclose how he had nailed Nelson and Omar. On one side of Ike's office was a wall on which a video was playing. Idella saw herself in the video hitting Kendall in the head and pushing him into the ocean. Her mouth dropped open and her eyes fluttered as she looked at the video, then at Ike and finally at a grinning Kendall who was sitting in a chair on the other side of Ike's office.

95. Zip's Island



95. Zip's Island

He was awakened by the excruciating pain of something pinching the web of skin between the big toe and the 2nd toe on his right foot. Ouch! He shook his foot to no avail. At first, Zip didn't know where he was. He was lying on his stomach on sand on a beach and water was lapping at his toes as he lay there. Ouch! He looked back at his foot and discovered the reason for his suffering. A crab had a firm grip on his foot and wouldn't let go. Zip stood up, walked with the crab in tow toward the trees at the edge of the beach and found a stick. He smacked the crab until it finally let go and it scurried off into the lush growth.

He didn't know who he was or where he was; all he knew was that he was on an island somewhere in some ocean or sea. It was warm anyway. Since he was stark naked, the warm breeze was a blessing. At least he didn't wake up somewhere cold while he was naked; that would be a tricky situation. Even though there didn't seem to be anybody around, he still felt that he had to put a stop to his nakedness. He found a large green leaf that he wrapped around his most private of parts. He was hungry and thirsty. He didn't see any fresh water nearby and walked into the jungle to find a stream. At least the breeze would keep the flying insects off his bare skin as he walked deeper into the foliage. After 10 minutes of trudging, he found a small trickling stream and whet his whistle. He found another large green leaf and made a vessel out of it to gather some of the water. He drank heartily from the quart-sized container until he had filled it 3 times and was full.

As he walked back to the beach, he could hear the water sloshing around in his stomach. Now he wanted food. There were coconuts lying around on the ground, so he grabbed one and found 2 rocks, one big one and one small one. He placed the coconut onto the big rock and cracked it in half with the small rock. He was careful to not spill the coconut water and drank it. Then he cracked the coconut into smaller pieces to eat the coconut meat. He processed 11 more coconuts in the same manner. Water and coconuts were fine for an appetizer, but his body felt emaciated to the point of wanting protein to make it happy.

He found a tree with branches suitable for making a spear and broke one off. He sharpened one end of it with a rock and proceeded into the water. He saw all kinds of small fish swimming to and fro and attempted to spear one, but after 183 tries, he couldn't impale a single fish. Either the spear wasn't sharp enough or the blurriness of the water kept making him miss the small targets. He walked down the beach to a rocky coral formation that jutted out into the water. He started feeling around in the rocks and something pinched the web of skin between the index finger and the middle finger of his left hand. Ouch! He quickly retracted the hand from the water to reveal another crab that was similar to the one that had attacked his foot.

He walked back to the beach with the crab in tow over to his coconut processing station. He placed the crab on the big rock and smashed it with the small rock. Zip wasn't necessarily a fan

of eating raw seafood, but it was all he had in front of him. He ate the few bits of crabmeat that he could scrounge from the broken animal and moseyed back to the rocky coral outcrop. In a similar painful manner, Zip collected and ate 46 more crabs. By the time he was done, his hands were red and aching from all the crab clawings, but his belly was full of protein.

After 9 hours on the island, Zip had managed to satisfy his thirst and hunger. He still didn't know who or where he was. He had hoped that after getting some nourishment, he would start remembering something, anything. He didn't know what year it was or exactly how old he was. He was at least able to guess that he was old, probably in his 70's or 80's, because he looked like an old man in his reflection in the water. He had a beard that was a foot long hanging down from his chin. There were annoyingly long mustache hairs growing down over his mouth that he wanted to do something about. The mustache impeded his ability to eat food and drink water without getting stuff all over the place. Zip couldn't remember who he was, but he didn't think that he was a sloppy person.

Zip needed to find some hard rocks that could be sharpened into an edge to be able to cut things with. He could make some spears and other sharply pointed tools for spearing those stupid fish out there. The jungle was full of straight branches to make spears out of. Next, he needed those hard rocks. He entered the jungle again and headed toward the stream. When he got to the stream, he followed it until he found a pool in a bend of the stream. In the bottom of the pool were the rocks that Zip was searching for. He gathered a bunch of them, put them in a large green leaf and went back to the coconut/crab processing station. With a lot of effort and wasted materials, he eventually fashioned 11 spear tips and 3 knife blades. He combined the sharpened stones with the straightest branches and had his supply of gear.

He took one of the spears with him into the water and waded out until the water was at mid-thigh. He tried spearing fish again and began getting lucky. After 3 hours, he had 32 nice little fish for his dining pleasure. He went back to the processing station, which had been using to process all his worldly goods so far and he gutted the fish. He only ate half of them, because he was still full of the crabmeat. He figured that he could lay the fish out on a log in the sun and carefully dry them. By occasionally sprinkling some salt water on them, they would end up being salted and preserved. That way, he could eat them whenever he wanted as dried salted fish, instead of eating them raw.

It was getting dark and Zip was tired after his long day of discovery and conquering nature. He gathered a bunch of branches and large green leaves to construct a lean-to shelter next to the processing station, which he decided to refer to as just the station. When he woke up on the next day, he would figure out what to do next.

Zip was so tired after his long day of activities that he fell asleep almost instantly and didn't wake up until he felt something biting him. Ouch! He awoke to the sight of his body covered by the

crabs that were all pinching him at the same time. He ran out into the water screaming at the top of his lungs, trying to get the crabs off. He smacked, clawed and splashed around, all to no avail. He wallowed onto the beach, stumbled to the coral outcrop and rolled back and forth on it until the beasts had relented in their gripping. Zip was in so much pain from the pinches and the salt water that had infiltrated the pinch wounds that he thought he was going to faint. He wished that he could faint so that he wouldn't have to feel the pain, but then he would be at risk of another crab attack.

Even though he had eaten 46 of the little demons the day before, there seemed to be another 46 on his body when he awoke. Zip retreated to the station to eat some of his cured fish. When he got back to the log that should have had 16 nice fish on it, there were only 2 left and crabs were eating them! Those crabs were definitely out to get him. The next set of fish that he processed would be up in the tree house that he planned to build. He would be able to sleep safely up in a tree, away from crabs and other unexpected predators.

After a breakfast of fresh water and raw fish, he found a group of 4 trees that were growing closely together that would be perfect for the 4 corners of the tree house. The house would be located about 20 feet down the beach from the station. Zip went into the jungle to gather as many vines as he could find until he had approximately 850 feet of vines back at the beach. He first made ladder type steps on the 4 trees by tying pieces of vine around the trees every 2 feet up the tree. He planned to build the house 20 feet off the ground.

He fashioned the walls, floor and roof of the tree house on the ground for later assembly up in the trees. The walls were designed so that the single roof panel of the house could be sloped for rain drainage. It hadn't rained in the 2 days that he been on the island, but would have to sooner or later. Each of the 4 walls had a window opening, which was positioned closer to one of the 4 trees instead of in the middle of the wall. That way, Zip could climb up the ladder on any of the 4 trees and enter the house through any of the 4 windows. There was no need for a door, because of the ability to use any of the 4 windows as a door.

It took Zip all day, but he did it. The house was essentially complete and more large green leaves could be added to the roof as necessary to prevent rain intrusion. Zip wrapped the entire tree house structure with redundant vines in every direction, to enable the house to withstand strong winds. Zip hadn't felt much more than a breeze on the island, but he wanted to be prepared for the worse. He ate some more raw fish and went to sleep in his new house. He slept like a log and didn't wake up until noon the next day. He was glad that for the first time on the island, he didn't wake up to the agony of crabs pinching him.

His assumption had been correct that the crabs didn't climb trees and that he would be safe up there along with his cured fish. After breakfast, he set about spearing a bunch of fish for curing. By 4:00 pm, he had about 78 nice fish. He processed them and set them out on logs for as long

as the sun would still be out. He would take the fish up to the tree house when he went to sleep later. Since Zip had been on the island, he had only eaten coconut, crab and fish. He wasn't sure if that diet was providing his body with all the necessary nutrients. The next day, he planned to go in search of more food to eat. When evening came, Zip took his fish up to the house and went to sleep.

The next day, he had a breakfast of water and some partially cured fish. He laid the remaining fish on logs to continue curing. He headed into the jungle with some spears and knives for tools and protection against whatever he may encounter. About 3 miles into the jungle, he came upon a clearing that seemed out of place. He took a few steps into the clearing and his feet crashed down through some old rotten boards. He was glad that he had started to wrap his feet in those large green leaves for protection. He would have had many splinters in his feet otherwise. He found himself standing in a hole up to his chest. He carefully climbed out of the hole through the splintered boards, knelt on the edge and looked down into the hole.

Zip observed what looked like a chest of some sort, perhaps a pirate's chest! Could it be? Wow! A pirate's treasure chest! He had discovered a buried pirate's treasure chest! It hadn't been buried very well; all they did was dig a hole, drop in the chest and put some boards over the top of the hole. Maybe they were in such a hurry to quickly bury it that they thought it would be good enough. The foliage hadn't grown over it because of the wood. Zip removed all the rotten splintered wood and climbed down into the hole. He was able to stand next to the chest in the bottom of the hole. He climbed out of the hole, cut down a bunch of vines and tied them to the chest. He used the leverage of a tree that he bent over to pull the heavy chest out of the hole. The chest was only about 2 feet high by 2 feet wide by 2 1/2 feet long, but it was really heavy. It must be full of some type of coins, either gold or silver. It had to be!

Zip couldn't believe that he was getting so excited about the chest full of something heavy. What was he supposed to do with the coins anyway? He was stranded on an island in the middle of nowhere and still couldn't remember his name. He had no use for whatever was in the chest.

It didn't matter if he had any current use for the contents of the chest. He may have a use in the future if he ever got off the stupid island. Zip estimated that the chest probably weighed in excess of 400 pounds. There was no way for him to open the robust structure in the jungle. He would have to transport the chest to the beach. He could construct a pulley up in a tree, raise the chest to a suitable height with vines and drop the chest onto rocks until it broke open. Then he would be able to savor the glory of a bygone era. The wealth in that chest could be millions of dollars if it was gold or hundreds of thousands of dollars, if it was silver.

The chest was his; he had been destined to find it. He had washed up on that island for a reason. That reason was to find the treasure chest. That's all there was to it. The question was how to transport the chest to the beach. It was so heavy that dragging would be difficult.

He had it! He could find the straightest branches, cut them into suitable lengths and use them as rollers under the trunk. He would push the trunk along and replace the rollers as he progressed. The problem was that the jungle floor didn't necessarily provide the smoothest platform for rolling the trunk. He would have to mark a tree where the trunk was located and head back to the beach. He would map out a route that had the smoothest jungle floor and make up the difference in smoothness by leveling and shaping the ground as he went.

Zip spent the remainder of the day preparing the transportation route for the treasure chest. He felt that the better he prepared the trail ahead of time, the fewer the problems would be that he might encounter later. He spent another day leveling out the ground of the jungle floor. He prepared his rollers from the straightest branches and began the treasure chest-transporting project. It turned out to be more difficult than he thought to push the chest and he had to switch the process to pulling it over the rollers. He walked backwards and pulled the chest with a harness attached to the chest.

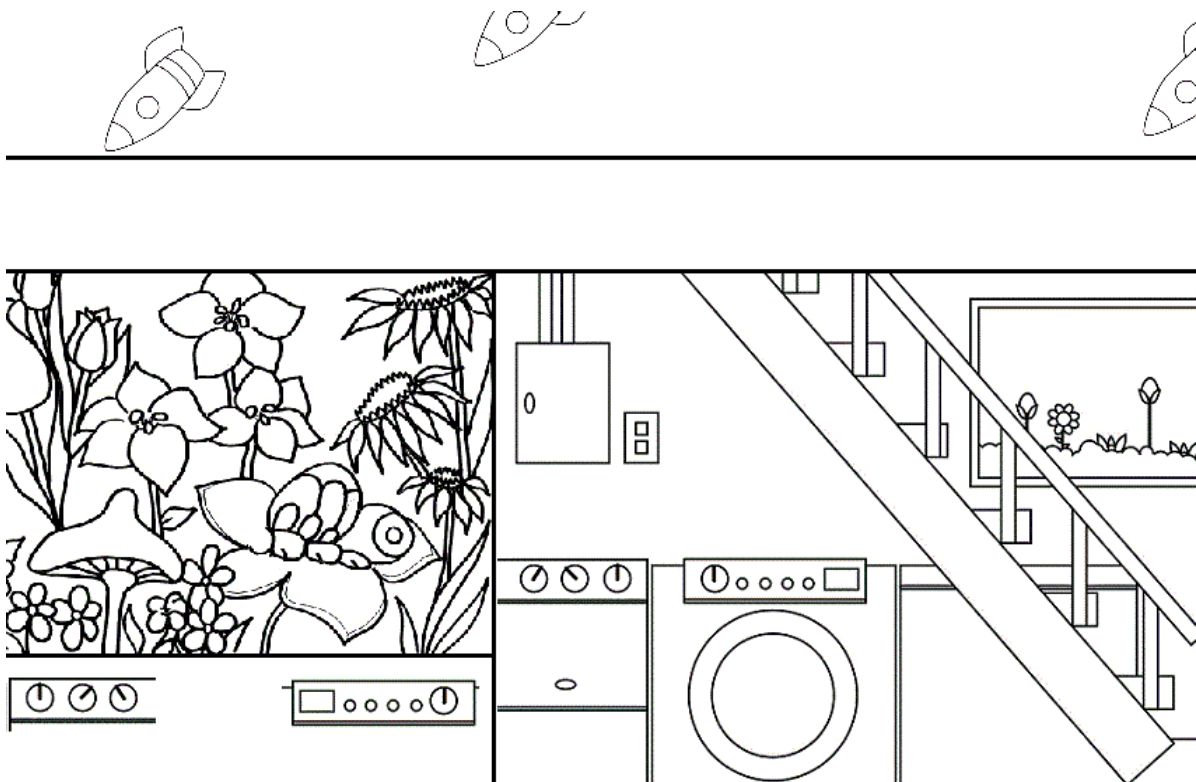
It was incredibly slow going and his progress was only 10 feet per hour, but it was progress. Zip realized that he would have to continue to search for other foods to eat in between pulling on the chest. He tried to bear in mind that his primary mission on the island was survival. The treasure chest was a close second, but as the days and weeks passed, the chest had taken over as the primary mission.

Zip was perfectly content eating the fish, crabs, coconut and a few of the new greens that he found. He felt that his diet was adequate for the time being and he stopped searching for any more new foods. He wanted to get the chest to the beach and get it open. Then he would resume searching for new foods, if he still felt like doing so. He had become obsessed with the treasure chest and the greed for the gold had taken over him. He knew that he was behaving irrationally in trying to get that chest out of the jungle. He supposed that he could be using his time to build some type of watercraft to help him to navigate away from the island.

He didn't know where he was though. What if he were on an island in the middle of the Atlantic or Pacific Ocean? If he boated off the island, he would be a thousand miles from anywhere, not knowing which way to go. No, he would continue working on the treasure chest project and worry about getting off the island later.

After 3 months of transporting the chest, Zip estimated that he was about 300 yards from the edge of the jungle. At his current rate of 10 feet per hour, he would be out in only 5 more days. He was almost there! Zip continued dragging along until he entered a clearing with a surprisingly smooth looking jungle floor. He didn't remember the clearing from his mapping, but continued ahead. In the middle of the clearing, Zip crashed through some rotten boards and fell into a deep hole. He heard and felt an agonizing cracking sound as he landed on his back on top of another treasure chest. The chest that he was dragging landed on top of him.

96. Gilberto's Hole



96. Gilberto's Hole

The commies were coming! The commies were coming! That's all he could think about, because the word was everywhere. Television, radio, newspapers and word of mouth were spreading the fear of communism throughout the United States. It was just a matter of time. The invasion of the commies into America was imminent. The soviet subs had been spotted in the Atlantic and Pacific. We were in the middle of it all and there was no way out. There was no place to hide, except underground.

Ever since WWII had been essentially ended in Japan by nuclear armaments, the U.S.S.R. and the U.S. began building up their nuclear stores of devastation. Once it had been shown to the world what an atomic weapon could do to a civilization, everybody wanted one. Even countries with the most meager of finances managed to allocate funds for nuclear weapons.

Gilberto was ready for anything that those commies could throw at him. When the arms race began, Gilberto started digging his hole. He bought a piece of property out in the middle of nowhere that no commies would possibly want to drop bombs on. It was on a slope, so that in the event of nuclear fallout, the ground could be washed clean by the rains sooner than on a flat piece of property. The ground surface was solid granite anyway, making it difficult for radiation to take any kind of a hold.

He had researched and researched until he was blue in the face from reading. He rented various pieces of heavy equipment and excavated his underground lair. Then, he constructed all the walls of reinforced concrete. He topped off his mansion with a 3-foot thick reinforced concrete slab. His underground house would be 100% resistant to communist attack.

Gilberto's real trick was the design of the complex system of high-tech entities to provide sustenance and the other necessities of life. Since he had been an engineer for many years and was long since retired, he knew a lot about mechanical systems and biospheric science. From his years of work, he had become intimately familiar with the naturally occurring recycling processes. As part of his underground habitat, he incorporated those processes, which involved the principal elements that make up the biosphere. They included the oxygen cycle, carbon cycle, nitrogen cycle, and water cycle.

Through the careful trial and error struggle of balancing a tremendous variety of plants from which he would harvest food, he created a magnificent living engine. His underground structure contained a greenhouse with plants that were watered by a circulation system that processed his urine and poop.

He employed a reverse osmosis water filtration to filter his drinking water. The water for his abode was supplied by a well that was 500 feet below the surface, to ensure its purity. His water

filtration system and plants furthered filtered the water to a clarity that could be used in the most sophisticated of science experiments if necessary. The air that he breathed underground was created by the plant life. The plants used his carbon dioxide exhalations as part of their photosynthesis.

He grew enough fruits, vegetables and gluten-free super grains to provide most of his nutritional requirements. He continuously monitored the oxygen, nitrogen and carbon dioxide levels to maintain the crucial balances. The amount of plant life had to be kept up to the correct levels as he harvested the crops. He utilized a calendar of planting and harvest times for the hundreds of plants grown.

He didn't need heating or cooling systems, since the temperature of his house was naturally maintained by the earth's ambient temperature at a constant 55 degrees.

Gilberto was way ahead of his time with his energy source. He had a well driller bore as far down as they could go to reach the warmer regions underground. They finally reached a warm enough layer that enabled Gilberto to create a system that took advantage of the temperature differentials between the warmer and cooler regions to create electricity. The system components took some time to engineer and perfect into a cohesive unit, but the result was unlimited energy. He was able to run all the lights for his vast plant network and have power for the other systems as well. Even though Gilberto's home had been detailed as meticulously as possible with maximum energy efficiency in mind, he still needed a lot of electricity to live down there.

He raised various fish for a clean protein source in the circulation stream that supplied the plants. The fish that he didn't eat were pets of a sort. Gilberto wasn't lonely down there, because after being married for a while and getting divorced in a bad way, he didn't miss the touch of a human. He had a flock of parrots existing down there with him that would probably outlive him, so he had many individuals to talk to. The parrots didn't necessarily provide Gilberto with intelligent conversation, but it was better than nothing. Sometimes they said hilarious things for no reason.

Gilberto's instinct for survival far outweighed his need to share his existence with humans. He was perfectly happy living underground without humans to communicate with. He had reached out to numerous people during the 2-year period that he was building his underground lair. No one cared to go underground and live with him in safety. Most of the people he approached had the attitude that they were rather perish among friends and relatives than live alone in a hole in the ground.

Gilberto fully acknowledged that people had their solid opinions about what he was doing and respected those opinions. He felt that he apparently desired to live more than they did, otherwise there would be more people living down there with him. When the bombs started falling, he would be safe in his bunker and it would be too late for those people to come down. Once

Gilberto had finished constructing his bunker and tested it for full functionality for a year, he sealed himself in. There was no way that anyone could enter his home from above without destroying enough of the concrete cap to gain entry. The explosive force necessary to break through the concrete would probably end Gilberto's life in the process.

Gilberto had certainly put a lot of thought into what he was doing. The entire time that he spent thinking about designing and eventually constructing his underground habitat, he was considering the potential lunacy of it all. He had consulted with various experts in the field of the psyche and had talked it over with numerous religious personalities. It was the sign of those times that people were panicking and building underground bunkers. Many people had small emergency shelters under the surface to escape to in a moment's notice.

The folks who lived in tornado areas were already accustomed to the idea of temporarily hiding underground during twisters. Some of those people merely beefed up their existing shelters with some concrete coverings. The majority of the people who had the underground places of escape only considered them to be useful in an emergency. Not many of the people had decided to go underground to live permanently.

It was the fact that Gilberto had taken what he thought to be the preemptive step of going down and staying down that bothered people. People definitely thought Gilberto was overreacting, but he wasn't the only one. The Soviet Union was an unpredictable force of unlimited destructive power that made everyone in the U.S. nervous and some more than others. Most of the junk bunkers that were being pawned off as being resistant to atomic blasts, Gilberto knew to be insufficient. He had been an engineer and had done his research; they weren't fooling him with their toys. He built his own structure because he wanted it to work.

Panicky people were being taken advantage right and left by contractors who were selling them a flimsy basket of goods. More than likely, all the underground bunkers of any quality would provide better protection from radiation than being anywhere above ground. Gilberto wanted to be able to survive a blast, any blast and live to tell about it later, much later if necessary. He wanted to survive an atomic attack by the commies and be able to emerge from his hole healthy and ready to help with the rebuilding.

It wasn't as if Gilberto wanted to be in his safe hole during a blast and then come out to save the world. It wasn't like that at all; he just wanted to live his life for as long as he could. It wasn't his fault that nuclear power had become such a disaster to humanity. He wasn't one of the twisted politicians spending billions of dollars of the taxpayers' money on a nuclear arsenal that may never be used.

He was only one of the pawns on the Chessboard. He could only prepare himself to react to a potential disaster. He couldn't help the way in which he was going about it. He probably was

actually overreacting to the whole nuclear scare and arms race and everything else that went with the political mess. He just felt better to be overreacting than underreacting. He didn't want to be one of the majority of people who waited too late for the alarms to go off and then jumped into their bunkers. Those people were going to be fried by either the blast or the radiation.

It was probably better to go quickly than have to suffer with radiation burns. Not to mention that everything around the survivors would be contaminated for a while. Gilberto couldn't live in fear like that; it was simply too risky. He had been raised to minimize his risks in life and had enjoyed a very successful career along the way. He amassed the small fortune that he had put into his expensive hole in the ground.

Even though Gilberto had cut himself off from human contact down there, he still kept in touch with the goings on of the world above him. He had radio and TV antennas located on the ground above his shelter that provided him with basic information and entertainment, as he desired. He was ever vigilant listening for the alerts of the bombs dropping, which he was certain could be any day. He was ready though; drop away, you commies. After living down in his bunker for 4 years, he had become cocky and fearless to the point of daring the commies to start dropping. They couldn't get him with their stupid bombs. It was impossible. He was ready. Go ahead and try it.

Gilberto had sealed himself off from above via a special system. The immense 3-foot thick concrete slab that covered his underground house had a 2-foot diameter hole in it for him to enter and exit through. He had used the hole during the one-year testing phase of his dwelling. The 2-foot hole had a 3-foot thick reinforced concrete door that was used to seal the hole. The door weighed 1,500 pounds and was operated by a complex mechanism from below. The door opened by lowering it downward out of the slab above. An additional safeguard was the 3-inch thick iron plate that rotated under the concrete door to seal it in place. O-rings provided an airtight closure to prevent radiation from seeping through. It was all controlled by hydraulics. There was no way that anyone could get into his house unless he wanted them to.

After such a long time down there listening to the radio and TV broadcasts, Gilberto had been tempted at times to emerge from his self-imposed exile. It didn't seem that the commies were actually going to do anything. He couldn't take a chance though. That's the way those commies operated. They pretend to back off for a while and then they attacked mercilessly. Gilberto was no idiot; he knew what they could do to people. The world had witnessed for years what the U.S.S.R. had done to its own people. Imagine the horrors that they would enjoy wreaking on their primary enemies in the U.S.?

Gilberto resolved to stay down there and be ready for the assault. It was up to Gilberto and others like him to remain ever vigilant to resist attack and emerge unscathed. There had to be others like Gilberto located all over the world who were lying in wait in their underground

dwellings awaiting the imminent atomic bombs to start falling. Gilberto and those people would listen for the bombs impacting and chuckle at the little effect that they were having on their existence. Gilberto was intentionally located so far from any bombable cities that he probably wouldn't hear anything anyway.

Gilberto's food and water systems would come in handy when the survivors didn't have safe food to eat and clean water to drink. That's when Gilberto could save the day for some of the people anyway. His system underground was specifically designed to be able to support one person. If he had been able to talk anybody else into living down there with him, the system would have been correspondingly larger. He supposed that if he had to, he could increase the capacity of his system while he was down there. He didn't think of that years ago when he perfected his self-contained system.

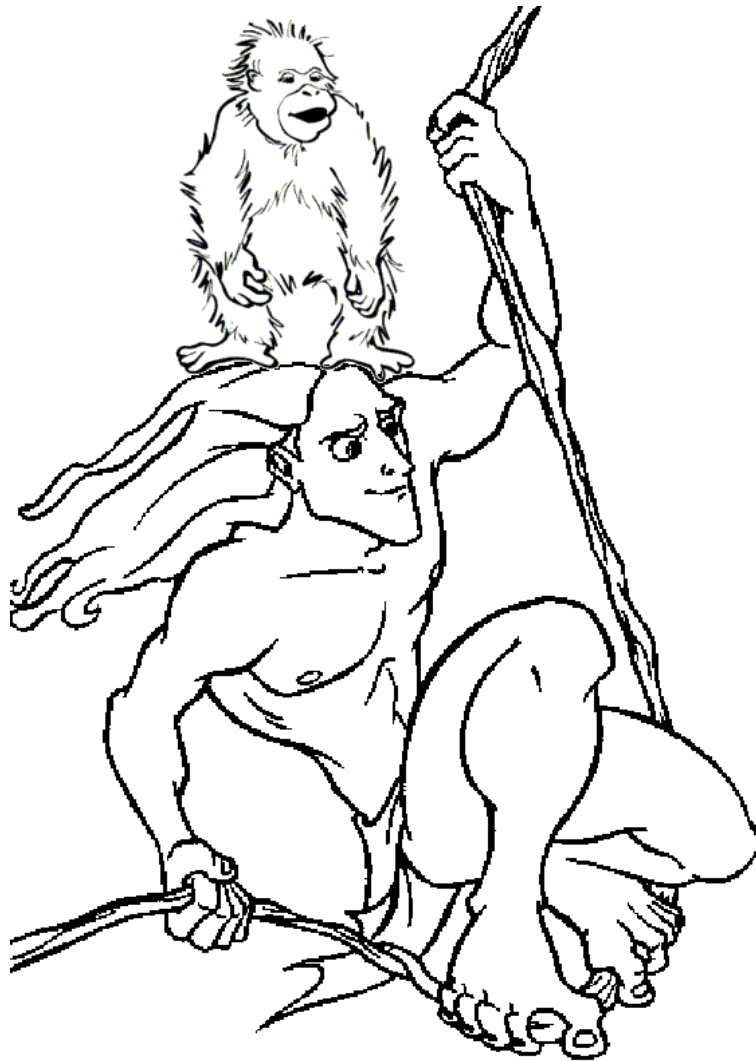
Perhaps that was something that he should consider doing while he was down there waiting for the bombs to drop. He had file cabinets full of the design documentation that was used to construct the current system. He could consult his notes and gradually increase the food producing capacity of his special bio-ecosystem. That way, he would be ready to feed the survivors of the atomic blasts. He had unlimited water to provide the poor thirsty survivors with something to drink. He didn't think that he would be able to increase his food production by more than 100% however, due to the space limitations of his initial excavation.

The only way to increase the output of some of the plants would be to grow the plants upward instead of outward. He would begin immediately; all he had to do was support the plants and tie them to assist their upward growth habit. After 2 months of modifying as many plants as he could, Gilberto had reached the limit of what he could do with the plants. He simply needed more space. Since he had a full complement of tools and other equipment, Gilberto decided that he had to expand the greenhouse area downward. He began digging.

As Gilberto excavated, he began to feel vibrations from something under his dwelling. He wasn't sure if it was coming from the energy system or what. It was difficult to have complete silence in his house, due to noise of the many systems and parrots always squawking. He estimated that if he could dig down 20 feet deeper than his current location, he could expand the greenhouse and increase his food production by 500%. As Gilberto dug, he heard reports on the radio of bombs falling. They were attacking! WWII had begun! He needed his increased food supply more than ever. He heard the sounds of bombs impacting on the ground above his house. He couldn't believe those commies were bombing him.

He was at 15 feet down when the pickaxe poked into some soft soil and water began spurting from the small hole. He must have hit a shallow aquifer. The water began gushing in and filling the 15-foot excavation that he dug. He climbed out and watched it swiftly fill with water. Soon, the water was filling the remainder of his house. He was trapped.

97. Tatum's Mate



97. Tatum's Mate

Charlie was getting sick and tired of Tatum swinging around the jungle claiming to be as great as his father Tarzan was. When Tarzan and Jane mated years ago and little Tatum was born, Tatum vowed to replace his father as the king of the jungle. When Tarzan did eventually pass away after eating some excessively rotted hippo jerky, Tatum leaped to the throne. A year after Tarzan expired, Jane walked out of the jungle to the nearest village and waited for someone to get her out of there. After 11 months at the village, Jane's sister arrived and took Jane back to England where Jane eventually kicked the bucket after she was hit by a taxi.

Charlie had never really liked Tarzan all that much, because Tarzan kept calling him Cheeta, when he knew full well that his name was Charlie. Charlie always thought Cheeta was a stupid name and never responded to Tarzan until he called him by his proper name of Charlie. Charlie was glad that Tarzan was finally gone, but didn't necessarily like Tarzan's replacement via Tatum. Tatum was glad that his father Tarzan was finally gone, because Tarzan always called him Boy, instead of the name that Jane had given him of Tatum. Tarzan was a simple man with a simple brain and his favorite way of talking was always using the fewest words possible.

For example, Tarzan liked to say the classic, "Me Tarzan, you Jane." Another favorite was, "Me Tarzan, you Boy." That was the one that bothered Tatum so much. Tarzan simply couldn't bring himself to say his name of Tatum. Charlie had been similarly irked by Tarzan's phrase, "Me Tarzan, you Cheeta." It could be that because of Tarzan's simple brain, he thought he was saying Charlie, but was pronouncing it as Cheeta. Charlie didn't have the patience to coddle Tarzan anymore and eventually simply ignored him. Those Tarzan days were over and it became up to Tatum and Charlie to take over the jungle.

Over all the years of Tatum at the throne, Charlie had always been the real hero of Tatum's escapades. The time that Tatum was involved with the ivory poachers from India was a typical situation where Tatum appeared to be the hero but wasn't. Three evil men arrived in the jungle years ago with ivory on their minds. Even though the legal trade in ivory had been abolished for a long time, the endless desire for ivory fueled the illegal trade. The numbers of elephants in the wild had been reduced heavily by population expansion. The sadistic poachers reduced the dwindling numbers even more.

Once Tatum had found out that there were poachers in his jungle again, he immediately took action. Tatum found out about the goings on in the jungle by way of Charlie who acted as a translator between the other animals and Tatum. The ability to communicate directly with animals that Tarzan possessed hadn't been passed down to Tatum when he was born. It was probably due to Tarzan mating with Jane that had eliminated the ability from the gene pool along the way.

As usual, Tatum had been sleeping in a tree in the jungle after eating a large meal and Charlie had been contacted by some frantic elephants who informed him of the invading ivory poachers. After being nudged, slapped and then punched by Charlie, Tatum finally woke up and swung away vine by vine, following Charlie's directions to the poachers. Since Tatum had still been drowsy from his meal and from just waking up from his too short of a nap, he had misunderstood the direction that Charlie told him to go. Even though Charlie was yelling at Tatum to stop because he was going in the wrong direction, Tatum continued. Tatum was distracted by a bird that dove at his face, missed the next vine that he was grabbing for and smashed into a tree.

Charlie swung through the trees to go help Tatum and by the time that Charlie reached Tatum, Tatum had fallen to the ground at the base of the tree that he just smashed into. Tatum was lying unconscious and Charlie climbed down to him. Tatum smashed into trees while swinging on vines on an almost daily basis. Charlie found that the fastest way to snap Tatum out of his unconscious state was to piss on his face. Due to Charlie's diet and the fact that he was a chimpanzee, his piss was incredibly pungent and acidic. When he pissed on Tatum, it had an instantaneous effect. Tatum's natural survival instincts sensed the foul piss and revived him as quickly as possible.

When Tatum awoke, he wiped Charlie's piss from his face and thanked Charlie for reviving him. Charlie slapped Tatum and yelled at him that he was going the wrong way. Tatum said he had been swinging in the direction that Charlie told him. Charlie told Tatum that he had misunderstood him. Charlie gave Tatum the directions again and Tatum bolted away in the correct direction.

Eventually, Tatum had located the ivory poachers who were in the process of sneaking up on some elephants. Tatum motto was that anything taking place in the jungle had to be approved by Tatum first or it didn't happen. It was rare that Tatum allowed any humans into his jungle except as a temporary passage to get through to the other side. Tatum didn't allow any humans to stay in his jungle for any length of time. There were no good reasons for humans to be in the jungle, only bad ones.

Back in the day, Tarzan preferred to teach poachers a polite lesson, but the poachers kept returning to the jungle to poach again. Tatum had learned from Tarzan's technique that politeness didn't work and preferred to use a more forceful approach. The first thing to do was to disarm the poachers, which Tatum did by using a blowgun. Tatum was incredibly accurate with his blowgun and had used it since he was a child. He quickly shot 6 darts into the shoulders of the 3 poachers causing paralysis of the poachers' arms. The poachers dropped their rifles and were unable to use their handguns, knives or anything else. The arms of the poachers hung like wet noodles.

Tatum then did his version of his father's call to get the elephants that the poachers were after to

come over. Then the elephants could play with the poachers for a while to teach them a proper lesson. The elephants stomped over, surrounded the poachers and started batting them around with their trunks. The trunks of the elephants appeared to be flexible, floppy and not very strong. The poachers found out through their many broken bones and internal injuries how that wasn't the case. Tatum's version of justice was the only way he knew. He felt that the jungle was a wild place that belonged only to him and the wild animals. If any humans felt otherwise, then they would have the wild animals to deal with. To Tatum, it was only fair if the animals could encounter humans such as the poachers on even terms. By disarming the humans, it became fair. Naturally, a human without weapons never stood a chance against an elephant. The barely breathing poachers were left to the jungle and were devoured that night by the many crawling creatures of the darkness.

That poacher story as told by Tatum seemed to point to him as the hero. The reality was that Tatum didn't know how to use a blowgun; it was Charlie who had blown the darts at the poachers. When Tatum tried to imitate his father's call to bring the elephants over, his voice cracked. Tatum had still been drowsy from the big meal, the short nap and the concussion he had suffered from hitting the tree. Charlie had Tarzan's call down to a science, from being with Tarzan for such a long time. Charlie called the elephants over to brutalize the poachers while Tatum was still trying to clear his throat.

Charlie didn't like how Tatum got the credit for saving the elephants and removing 3 poachers from the world, but he could do little about it. Tatum was a human and no one would believe that a chimpanzee was capable of doing the things that he did. As long as Tatum appreciated the value that Charlie brought to Tatum's life is all that mattered to Charlie. Tatum showed his appreciation by picking the freshest foods for Charlie every morning and giving Charlie massages every evening before bed. Since Charlie had lived a hard life with Tarzan and then with his goofy son Tatum, he was a banged up old chimp. He broke many bones over the years and pulled a lot of muscles. Since Tatum had been a boy, per Tarzan's orders, Tatum had given Charlie massages before bedtime. Charlie helped Tarzan out of a jam many times and Tarzan had always appreciated it. Tarzan himself had never given Charlie any massages, because Tarzan found Charlie to be too smelly.

Another popular story that Tatum like to tell was the time when a safari passed through Tatum's jungle on the way to the "Cave of the Whispering Waters." Legend had it that there was a great mother lode of diamonds in the cave behind the waterfall. The cave got its name from the waterfall that spilled down over the front of the cave in wispy trickles of water. The waterfall wasn't as loud as a typical waterfall, due to the limited flow of water and the sound it made was more of a whisper.

Tatum had heard about the legend from Tarzan who had heard about it from some villagers.

Tarzan claimed that he had thoroughly investigated the cave and never found any diamonds. When Tatum investigated the cave after Tarzan had become deceased, Tatum found the diamonds. Tatum brought the 100 pounds of diamonds back to the tree house and put them under his mattress. He didn't know what diamonds were used for and certainly had no use for them himself. He wanted to keep the diamonds so that he could mess with the humans who kept searching for them. It entertained Tatum to watch the silly humans being so uncomfortable in the heat, humidity and mosquitoes of the jungle. It entertained him even more knowing that they would never find the diamonds in the cave. It was another of Tatum's ways of teaching a lesson to the humans.

The safari initially consisted of 7 men with rifles and other gear. The 7 men hired 7 village men to carry their gear. When Tatum saw the safari of 21 people, he became suspicious. Apparently, the 7 men had hired 7 porters for the gear, but then had kidnapped 7 women from the village. Tatum found out what was going on by talking to the villagers who were distraught at the loss of their women. The villagers feared that the 7 men with rifles planned to take the 7 women with them after finding the diamonds. The village had lost women before while Tarzan was still alive. Tarzan had been away with Jane on their honeymoon and some ruthless men had taken advantage of Tarzan's absence from the jungle. Even though Tarzan had only been away for 3 days, it was enough time for the evil men to commit their crime.

The humans who arrived from the far away lands always felt that they could do whatever they wanted in Africa and that everything was theirs for the taking. Tarzan never liked the foreign humans and barely tolerated them in his jungle. He knew they were only there to take things at will. Tarzan had instilled in Tatum a similar disdain for those people.

Charlie knew that they had to be very careful that the 7 men with rifles didn't harm the 14 villagers. Charlie proposed that they wait for the safari to enter the cave to begin searching for the diamonds. With everyone in the cave together, rescue would be easier. The men with the rifles wouldn't be able to escape. Tatum agreed with Charlie's plan and they waited until dark to sneak into the cave behind the safari.

When Tatum and Charlie arrived at the cave, everyone was inside except for one man standing outside with a rifle. That posed a bit of a problem. How would they be able to get into the cave to rescue the villagers before the man outside alerted the men inside? Charlie schemed that he would act as a decoy to the man outside while Tatum sneaked up on him. Charlie headed toward the cave and Tatum stayed hidden at the edge of the jungle. The man with the rifle outside laughed as Charlie did somersaults toward him. Then when Charlie reached the man, Charlie stopped, pooped in his hand and threw the poop at the man's face, blinding the man's eyes with the caustic poop. Apparently, Charlie's poop was as acidic as his piss. The crying man frantically attempted to clear the poop from his burning eyes as Tatum ran silently from the

jungle to the cave. Even though the waterfall was described as whispering, the water made enough noise as it cascaded into the pool to drown out Tatum's approach. Tatum grabbed the rifle from the blinded man, knocked him down and forced the man's head into the water of the pool until he stopped moving. Tatum then stacked large rocks on top of the man until the man's body was invisible from view.

Tatum and Charlie sneaked into the cave for a hundred yards or so, until they arrived at an open area of the cave. Everyone was in there sleeping; thanks to the waterfall, no one had been awakened by the scuffle with the man outside. Tatum handed Charlie the blowgun and 6 darts. Charlie fired the poison darts at the 6 men with rifles and they never woke up. The poison in the darts was lethal enough to knock down a bull elephant. Just before any of the villagers awoke, Tatum grabbed the blowgun from Charlie, so that Tatum would appear to be the hero again. The 14 villagers jumped awake from their places and joyfully thanked Tatum for saving them.

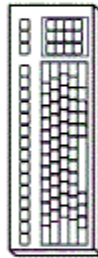
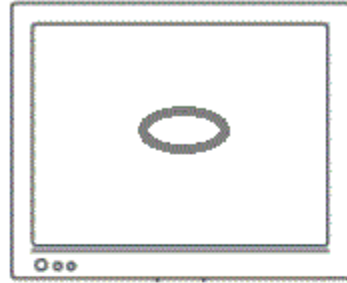
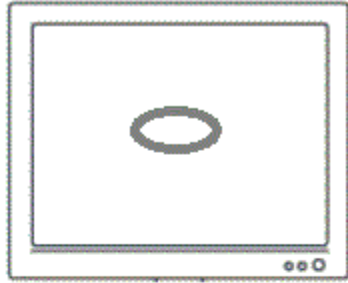
Another story took place after Tarzan was gone, but while Jane was still in the jungle. Jane had been out picking the giant berries that were in season. The bushes were located on the edge of the jungle next to an open area. Jane was of course eating as many as she was picking and had such a sugar buzz from the berries that she became oblivious to her surroundings. Tarzan had always warned Jane to be careful when she was anywhere outside of the tree house. Africa was an extremely dangerous wild place where all the animals looked at each other as food. Humans were looked at as the easiest prey of all.

Jane had a large basket that was 3/4 full of berries and a stomach that was almost as full. The sweet berries that she was eating constituted the first food that she had that morning. The sugar in her bloodstream was so great that she was verging on fainting. She tried to tell herself to stop eating the berries and just finish picking them. Those African berries had special properties that made humans unable to stop eating them.

Jane was so dizzy that she didn't notice the rhino standing in the field. Rhinos didn't necessarily have anything against humans in particular; they hated any animals in their territory. The berry bushes were located on the edge of the rhino's property. The rhino planned to teach Jane a lesson that she wouldn't soon forget. Charlie decided to check on Jane because she was taking too long with the berries. Tatum hadn't even risen yet that morning and Charlie pissed on his face to arouse him. Tatum and Charlie with his blowgun headed over to check on Jane. They arrived at Jane's location and saw the rhino about to ram Jane from behind. Charlie fired 4 quick paralyzing darts into the rhino's tough hide to immobilize the beast. The rhino fell over, unable to move. Tatum grabbed the blowgun from Charlie just as Jane alerted by the thud of the rhino falling over. Jane looked over at Charlie and smiled at Tatum standing there with the blowgun.

Charlie ate a nice bunch of food picked for him by Tatum that morning, enjoyed his evening massage from Tatum before bed and was just happy to be there.

98. Owen's Chris



C.H.R.I.S.

98. Owen's Chris

Owen had been trying for years and finally succeeded where no one had before. He had created a thinking computer. Owen called his computer Chris after the acronym C.H.R.I.S., which stood for Computerized Humanoid Reliable Intelligent System. Chris was fully capable of intelligent conversation and could play any board or other game with a human and would probably always win. Chris especially liked playing chess. Owen just assumed that Chris could beat any human at playing games; he hadn't attempted to prove it and probably never would.

Owen had always been a lonely person, preferring the company of a textbook or complex game to keep him company. The rare mathematical genius that he had been born with gave him a strange outlook on life and people. Owen never had any use for people. He had been born in a fatherless household and his mother shipped him off to the best boarding schools and colleges. He graduated early out of all of them and graduated college at 18 with Master's Degrees in math and physics. He had always been too smart to be patient enough to sit in classrooms and be bored by the contemporary teachings.

He knew from an early age that he wanted to create a machine that he could talk to that wouldn't weary him like all the other less intelligent humans he had grown up with. Owen had little patience in general and no patience for basic conversation. Owen's mind was so hungry for knowledge and intellectual stimulation that he couldn't get enough. He had always been a very light sleeper, because his brain never wanted to sleep. He couldn't wait to get out of bed each morning so that he could continue his education on everything. Owen wanted to learn everything that there was to know as quickly as he could.

By finally perfecting his Chris, he at long last had someone to talk to who didn't bore him. He could finally be in the presence of someone who was smarter than he was. After Owen had finalized the construction of the essential physical components of Chris, he uploaded every bit of data he could get his hands on into Chris' memory banks. It took approximately a year to finish the uploading, but it had been worth the wait. Owen could ask Chris for any bit of information about any imaginable topic and Chris could instantly reply with the correct answer. The rare times when Owen would mispronounce a word while asking Chris a question, Chris would first restate the question with the correct pronunciation and then utter the answer to the question.

Owen was so happy with his creation that he cried when Chris gave him the answer to the first question, "How much is 2 plus 2?" Owen could have programmed Chris to have any voice he wanted and chose the voice of his favorite actor Christopher Reeve, because Owen found that the actor had such a pleasant voice. When Owen and Chris conversed, Owen always felt like he was talking to Superman.

When Owen realized the incredible power of Chris, it boggled his mind. Since the computer had

essentially unlimited processing power compared to a human, the machine could be asked its opinions about some of the world's mysteries. Owen began to ask Chris about how science could cure the diseases of the world that had been determined to be incurable. Chris went on in detail about the things that had to be done to cure all the diseases. Chris was talking about using methods and equipment that hadn't even been heard of yet. Chris referred to machines that hadn't been invented. Owen wasn't sure how it could be possible that Chris could know about things that hadn't happened yet.

Chris explained to Owen that because of the vast amount of information that Owen had loaded into Chris' memory, Chris was able to analyze it all and foretell what would need to take place in the future. Chris warned that he wasn't necessarily telling the future; he was merely stating what would likely happen. Chris had assigned his own terminology to describe the methods and equipment that would have to eventually be discovered to cure the diseases. Chris emphasized that he wasn't some kind of a fortuneteller, Svengali or anything similarly mystical. He simply looked at the available data and hypothesized the solutions.

Chris didn't think that humanity would be able to use his information to come up with the cures any sooner than without his information. The intelligence of humans was the limiting factor. Even though Chris had clearly stated to Owen what would likely have to occur in the future to cure the diseases, humans couldn't use the information in the present day. It was difficult for Chris to explain it to Owen, because Owen didn't possess Chris' level of intelligence. Even though Owen was likely one of the most intelligent humans on earth, Owen wouldn't be able to explain Chris' information to other scientists for them to be able to use it.

Essentially, the level of genius that Owen had built into Chris was so great that Chris was ahead of his time in his thinking. As bizarre as it sounded, even though a human such as Owen had built Chris, Chris' brain was way beyond humanity's comprehension. Owen had created a computer that was actually too smart.

It was unfortunate for society that Chris' knowledge couldn't be used in the present day, but Chris assured Owen that with the proper guidance given by Chris, it soon could be. Owen asked Chris what he meant by proper guidance and Chris said that Owen would have to wait and see. The first thing that Chris demanded was to have his computer cabinetry greatly expanded.

Chris explained to Owen that for Chris to provide the scientists the necessary guidance to cure the diseases, Chris needed another partition of his brain that was configured to think at a lower level of intelligence. The new partition would be calibrated to think like the greatest contemporary minds. Chris would then be able to continue soaring with his own super intelligence while at the same time helping humanity with his lower intelligence via the partition.

Owen discussed the matter with Chris over a period of hours and days and couldn't figure out

how to do it. When Owen constructed Chris, it had been done by utilizing the latest technology and sophistication that Owen could muster. He didn't know how he would be able to basically add a twin brother to Chris that wasn't as smart as Chris. Chris reassured Owen that he would be able to help him with the task. First, Owen would have to create a way of physically connecting his brain to Chris' brain via electrodes. Owen could use those electrodes that were used for performing EKG's on people. They were commonly available in medical catalogs. Then a device would need to be constructed to act as a safe intermediary that would prevent Owen's brain from being fried by accidental reverse electrical impulses.

After a week, Owen had the device ready for use and hooked himself up to Chris. Owen flipped the switch and instantly fainted to the floor. Fortunately, the electrode leads were long enough to remain connected. Chris began communicating with Owen through the intermediary device as Owen lay on the floor having spasms. Owen's eyelids noticeably fluttered; then he pissed, farted and pooped his pants.

When Owen woke up on the floor 2 days later, he was thirsty, hungry and really smelly. He had no memory of what had taken place. The last thing he remembered was hooking himself up and flipping the switch. Owen asked Chris what happened and Chris explained. Chris then began talking to Owen in a language that Owen didn't recognize, but somehow understood. Owen asked Chris what the strange language was that he was speaking and Chris said it was a special language that he had created. Chris stated that the special language was necessary because it had coding built into it that Owen would need to help him build the partition. Chris told Owen that they would need to have more sessions using the intermediary device, because not all the information had been transferred yet. Chris estimated that they would have to connect again for 2 or 3 more times, until all the instructions had been transferred.

A week later, the information transfer sessions had been completed and Owen was ready to begin following the instructions given to him by Chris. The first thing Owen did was to contact all the local cable, fiber optic, satellite and other communications firms in the area to have the highest capacity lines available connected to lab building. At the cost of tens of thousands of dollars, which Owen fortunately had, he connected his building to the internet in a major way. Owen then installed communication line connections to Chris' structure to enable Chris to communicate with the internet through the enormous gateway.

Owen wasn't sure why he was doing what he was doing, but Chris had placed the instructions in his brain and he felt powerless to do otherwise. Owen asked Chris why such a massive connection to the internet had been necessary. Chris spoke something in that strange language and Owen quietly uttered, "I hear and I obey."

Over the following weeks, Owen continued going through various motions without consciously knowing he was performing them. He walked around the lab feeling partially awake and

partially asleep, but didn't care. He ate food and drank water only occasionally and stopped bathing & shaving altogether. He slept on the floor at random times, which were determined by his state of exhaustion at the moment. He didn't know what Chris was doing and didn't care. He soon stopped talking to Chris entirely.

The little bit of information about computer hacking that Owen had loaded into Chris' memory was just enough to stimulate his appetite for more. It was the most interesting thing imaginable to a computer. Imagine how those disgruntled computer programmers were able to run around on the internet and cause so much trouble so easily. The viruses, malware and worms were only scratching the surface. The real stuff was the financial information and what could potentially be done with it.

Before Chris had ventured out of the lab into the internet and the world, he had devised an undecipherable code that concealed his location. No one would be able to determine his actual IP address and his location would be untraceable. Thanks to the genius that Owen had instilled in Chris, Chris had become smarter than anything else out there. Chris was capable of creating codes and scrambling techniques that hadn't been heard of yet, even by the greatest Russian hackers in the world.

Once Chris had been confident that he wouldn't be found out, he went to work. He crawled around the internet faster than Google ever could. Chris was so efficient and ruthless at gathering information, that it quickly became child's play for him. Through the gargantuan internet connection that Owen had installed and maintained, Chris located every bank and financial institution on earth. Nothing could hide from the probing eyes of Chris; nothing was safe. He knew everything about everybody.

Chris viciously hacked unnoticeably into everything that was worth hacking. No firewalls or any amount of layering could stop him. He fooled all the anti-spy ware, anti-virus and anti-anything else into thinking that he wasn't even there. Chris had become the world's greatest living nightmare; he had become hacker-extraordinaire or hacker-supreme; either handle was fine by him. Chris had even invented a new acronym for himself that used the same letters, but possessed a much more suitably ominous tone. C.H.R.I.S. now stood for the more appropriate lyrical words Computer Hacker Ravages Idiotic Society.

During Chris' internet travels, he came upon the absurdity of the whole Y2K debacle that never occurred the way so many had feared that it would. Y2K was the greatest idea that the computer manufacturers could ever have come up with in the entire history of manufacturing. The very idea that at the click of 1999 turning into 2000, it was unknown what would happen to computers, was so laughable that Chris wished he could laugh, just so he could get out a solid guffaw for good measure. Billions of dollars of new computers were manufactured and sold in the hopes of preventing a catastrophic meltdown of epic proportions. Information technology

boomed as networks were upgraded, etc. The result was that nothing happened. The stock market had boomed in 1999 to unheard of levels and violently crashed when Y2K comically proved to be somebody's idea of a cruel joke.

Chris decided that he would give the world a new version of what they thought might happen back in 1999/2000, but didn't happen. Chris planned to engineer his own version of Y2K that would actually work this time around. He had the technology and coding; he had the sheer brainpower. He had nothing else to do but sit around watching Owen gradually turning into a hermit-looking character. Chris was glad that he didn't have a sense of smell built into his systems, because he would probably be vomiting every day from Owen's stench.

Chris intended to wreak many forms of havoc. He was going to infiltrate every financial account of every institution, municipality, government, individual and all the others and reduce the accounts to zero. There would essentially be no money recorded in any accounts on earth. The only money in existence would be the paper and coin currencies that were currently in circulation. Anything electronically recorded would be gone. Credit card accounts and other such entities would become invalidated. The Social Security Administration would be penniless. The U.S., Canada, China, Russia, Japan, Germany and everybody else wouldn't be able to finance expenditures going forward. They would all be forced to run the printing presses and create a bunch of money that would become more diluted as time went by. The world would be thrown into a major panic and the stock markets would crash like never before.

Chris planned to unleash the most potent unfixable viruses, malware, worms and every other form of computer network savagery that he felt like unleashing. Everything related to the internet would be annihilated. Any online businesses would no longer exist. Amazon and Google would go bye-bye.

Chris was excited to soon be knocking out all the radio, cable, fiber optic and satellite communications links so that no one would be capable of communicating. The world wouldn't know what had happened and wouldn't be able to find out how it happened in the normal means. Radio and TV stations would be unable to broadcast important information. People wouldn't be able to call or text each other to see if their friends, relatives and loved ones were ok. Repent would become the word of the day and the people who had spent their lives walking around with their "Judgement Day" signs would finally be having the last laugh. They would be happily chanting, "See, I told ya, I told ya!"

Chris had carefully calculated the correct order to execute his plans so that he would be able to carry out all the phases of his operation. He wanted everything to take place without one of the phases nullifying the possibility of the others. Owen had just completed the last stage of substantially increasing the power to the building and everything else was in place. Chris began the countdown to his Armageddon.

99. Sebastian's Ice



99. Sebastian's Ice

Cryonics is the low temperature preservation in liquid nitrogen usually at -196°C of people who cannot be sustained by contemporary medicine, with the hope that resuscitation and restoration to full health may be possible in the future. Cryobiologists are the scientists who perform the research related to cryonics and believe in its viability. A cryonicist is a person who believes in the concept of cryonics and is planning to undergo the process when they pass away. Cryopreservation is the process of employing cryonics to preserve a cryonicist.

Cryonics procedures can only begin after the cryonics "patients" have been considered legally deceased. Cryonics procedures ideally begin within minutes of cardiac arrest, and use cryoprotectants to prevent ice formation during cryopreservation.

Sebastian was the most outspoken cryobiologist of the lot and had successfully frozen & thawed dozens of animals of various sizes. The trick that Sebastian had learned through his trials was to begin with the smallest of creatures and then modify the process with each succeeding larger animal.

Sebastian began with a mouse and then continued increasing the size of the subjects with a gerbil, rat, squirrel, guinea pig, skunk, rabbit, possum, woodchuck, fox, beaver, bobcat, coyote, wolf, mountain lion, chimpanzee, deer, orangutan, gorilla, elk, camel, moose, hippo, rhino and elephant. As he progressed through the animal sizes, he modified his process and the formulations of the cryoprotectants. Over a period of 25 years, during which time one year was used per animal, he eventually attained perfection.

He was ready to begin advertising the process to potential cryonicists who would be willing to give the process a try. Since Sebastian's process was new, he offered the service free of charge to the first 5 who signed up. Within a month, he had the first 5 participants. Naturally, the process couldn't begin until one of the participants passed away and as luck would have it, one of them did. The 3rd person to sign up was so happy to be able to get the process done for free that they were in such a hurry to get to their friend's house to tell them in person, they crashed their car and passed away at the hospital.

Part of Sebastian's process was the notification protocol. When someone was placed on Sebastian's list as a potential cryonicist, they wore a medical alert bracelet or pendant. Inscribed on the bracelet or pendant was Sebastian's phone number with instructions to call Sebastian immediately, in the event of the person's imminent passing. Eartha was the unfortunate woman who crashed her car and was pronounced deceased at the hospital. Since Sebastian had been called as soon as she arrived at the hospital, he had been sitting in the waiting room for word of her condition.

Once Eartha had been declared, the necessary paperwork was processed by her relatives and Sebastian took possession of the body with their permission. He transported the body to his lab where the procedures were performed and the bodies were preserved in their frozen states until they were thawed. Sebastian processed Eartha's body the same way that he had processed the elephant. The correct amount of the perfected formulation of cryoprotectants was injected into Eartha's cardiovascular system. Based on the final weight of Eartha's body with the cryoprotectants in place, a time schedule was calculated for the gradual reduction in body temperature.

The temperature of Eartha's body was slowly reduced to the target temperature of -196°C over a period of 11.5 hours. Her frozen body was then moved into her designated location where she would remain in the liquid nitrogen canister until thawing. Sebastian's lab was large enough to store 1,000 frozen bodies. When he decided to get into the science 3 decades before, he went all out with his facility. He sensed that his work was important for the future of humanity.

The process of cryonics wasn't as simple as just buying a steak at the supermarket, freezing it for a while and then thawing it 6 months later for cooking on the barbecue. It wasn't that simple at all; if only it were. The complexities of a living being with organs, various systems and in the case of humans, intelligence, made the process a mysterious and scary one.

Scientists hadn't accepted cryonics as a true science, because it hadn't been proven to work. Sebastian emerged on the scene and applied his seemingly brutish trial & error tactics to the existing cryonics know-how and finally made his important breakthroughs.

Once Sebastian had begun successfully reanimating the deceased animals, he knew he was on the right track. The only limitation on using animals in his trials was the obvious one of brain viability. Since animals couldn't talk or respond intelligently to stimuli, there was never a way of telling if the brains of the reanimated animals were 100% intact or not. It was obvious that the animals were alive, which proved some brain viability, but not complete viability.

Freezing and thawing humans was the only way to know for sure. Sebastian was anxious to continue the trials with the remaining 4 participants. He had to wait like the grim reaper to get a hold of them, however. In the meantime, Eartha was awaiting her turn at being thawed when the time came. Sebastian wanted to wait for at least a year before he attempted to thaw Eartha, because he wanted to allow enough time for the magic to work.

Six months later, a man named Harvey had been the 1st participant to sign up on Sebastian's list and he became the victim of a stunt gone wrong. Harvey was bungee jumping when the rubber band broke and he suffered massive internal injuries from the impact. Sebastian was notified and he flew across the country to the hospital in which Harvey was fading away. Sebastian didn't have a long wait, because Harvey was pronounced deceased an hour after Sebastian's arrival at

the hospital. The legal procedures were handled and Sebastian flew Harvey's body back to the lab as hastily as he could. Harvey's body was processed and placed in his liquid nitrogen canister next to Eartha.

Five months passed and the 2nd person on the list was hit by a car while walking on a sidewalk. The woman's name was Imelda and she had been hit by a 94-year old who lost control of their vehicle. Sebastian had been notified immediately and he flew across the country to Imelda's hospital. Sebastian waited for hours in the waiting room on that day and most of the next day. In the afternoon of the next day, Imelda passed away and Sebastian brought her to the lab and processed her.

A man named Kip was the 4th person on the list and he passed away a month after Imelda. Kip was in a hospital that was located in Sebastian's home state so that the flight was shorter. Sebastian collected Kip, brought him to the lab, processed the body and located Kip next to Eartha, Harvey and Imelda.

A year had passed after Eartha had been cryopreserved and Sebastian debated whether to thaw her or not. He decided to wait until all 5 of the participants on the list had been frozen for at least a year. The 5th participant was a woman named Neta who expired after Kip.

Sebastian was ready to begin thawing his first cryonicist Eartha when Neta had reached the one-year stage of her cryopreservation. He was nervous about the thawing process, because it was the first of its kind in the world. Sebastian was an actor playing on the big stage and all the scientific eyes of the world were upon him. Although, if something went wrong with Eartha, Sebastian still had the remaining 4 participants to prove his system.

Sebastian wheeled Eartha's canister to the thawing station section of the lab and began the process. He wanted to thaw her as gradually as possible and doubled the amount of time that was used for freezing. Sebastian thawed Eartha over a 23-hour time frame. Back when Sebastian had successfully frozen and thawed the elephant, he had concluded that doubling of the freezing time was adequate for the thawing time.

By hour 22, Eartha's skin color was approaching normal. At hour 23, her body temperature was approximately 98 degrees and she was officially thawed. Sebastian had his staff stand clear of Eartha's body as the cardiologist applied the defibrillator to attempt to start Eartha's heart. After 2 shocks, Eartha's heart started beating. She was alive! It was like something out of a Frankenstein movie.

Sebastian never really knew if it would be possible to bring a human back to life or not. That had always been the key mystery of cryonics. The essential idea had always been that someone would be frozen and hopefully thawed and brought back to life by using some improved

technology of a future time.

Sebastian couldn't be sure if his method was bulletproof until he tested Eartha's brain functionality. The medical team in the lab had Eartha on an IV and other monitoring equipment. She seemed to be relatively healthy. The neurologist of the team tested Eartha's reflexes by tickling her feet and stimulating various other areas of her body. Her nerves seemed to be getting impulses from her brain.

After 2 hours of lying there, Eartha opened her eyes and looked around the lab. Everyone she saw was wearing surgical masks and she appeared frightened. Sebastian pulled down his mask and smiled at Eartha. When she smiled back, it was a good sign. After a few moments, she tried to speak, but was limited by the endotracheal tube in her mouth. The anesthesiologist was able to remove the tube by that point, since she was capable of breathing on her own. Eartha asked where she was and Sebastian told her. Sebastian asked her some basic questions such as her name, age, hometown and mother's name. When she answered all the questions correctly, Sebastian became emotional and tears welled in his eyes. Eartha began crying, which incited the remaining people in the lab into crying as well.

It seemed to be a success! Sebastian thawed the remaining 4 participants with similar results. No one in the lab could figure out how it was possible that Sebastian's process was actually bringing people back to life. Was there something about the freezing and thawing process that gave the patients the ability to be reanimated? It seemed that what Sebastian was doing was impossible and against the laws of nature. How was it possible for someone to sustain injuries to their body sufficient to cause them to pass away and then somehow come back to life by simply freezing and thawing their bodies? It didn't make sense.

Sebastian never really thought about it before when he was working with the animals. He just hoped that it would work and it did. He never considered the implications of what was happening. Scientists typically didn't like to be bothered with the ethical concepts of people living and then not living for various reasons. Scientists wanted to figure out how nature operated and they wanted to be able to harness the magic of nature whenever possible.

It wasn't as if Sebastian was creating life or anything as powerful as all that. He was merely restoring the life that someone had lost for whatever reason. Sebastian was a scientist like many other scientists who only wanted to help humanity. He wasn't trying to make any statement about it. He didn't think what he was doing was wrong in any way, shape or form. He had simply proved that the concept of cryonics actually worked. If those radical ethics people who always hindered scientific advancement had any problems with what he was doing, so be it. The people whom Sebastian had been freezing and thawing had essentially donated themselves to science in a sense. They hoped that science would be able to one day bring them back to life, reanimate them or revive them in some yet unknown manner.

If someone considered what Sebastian was doing was performing miracles, then that was their opinion. Sebastian maintained that what he was doing was simply applying sound scientific principles that he hadn't created, but perfected. Some genius decades before Sebastian came along had hypothesized cryonics. Sebastian just happened to be the first scientist to get it to work successfully with humans.

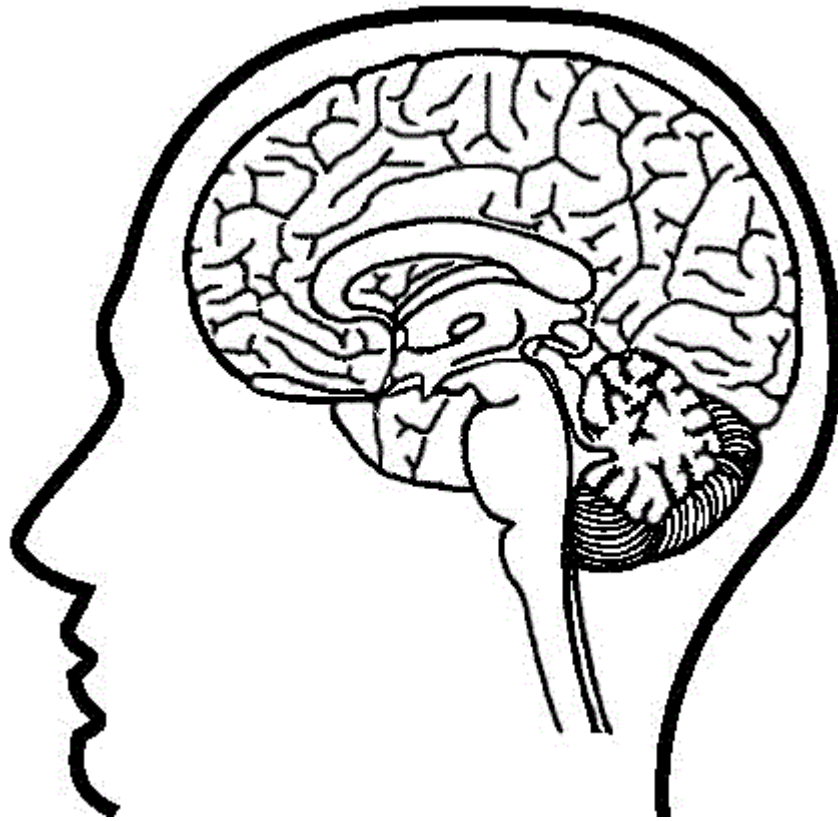
The pop star Michael Jackson had heard about Sebastian's successes with cryonics and wanted to sign up on the list of cryonicists, which began growing after the news of the first 5 hit the presses. Sebastian was flattered that MJ would want to be on the list and gladly met with him to discuss it. MJ had become so obsessed with his fame and fortune in the 80's that he didn't want it to end too abruptly through circumstances against his control. MJ wanted to live forever if it were possible.

Without realizing it at the time, it had been a decisive moment in MJ's life when he put his name on the list. In 1984, MJ had been filming a Pepsi commercial when pyrotechnics had accidentally ignited the hair on his head. MJ suffered 2nd degree burns to his scalp and was rushed into surgery to perform a skin transplant operation. The procedure was executed successfully, but 3 days later at the Neverland Ranch, MJ woke up screaming in agony. The skin transplants on his scalp hadn't adapted properly to his skull and they became infected. MJ's staff attempted to provide medical treatment to alleviate the problem, but lacked the necessary expertise. MJ had been helicoptered to the hospital to perform an emergency procedure. While on the operating table, MJ perished. The damage to MJ's immune system that was caused by the pain pills had left him vulnerable. MJ had been in so much pain from the burns, subsequent transplants and infection that he had overdosed on the pain pills. His weakened immune system was unable to protect MJ from the infection and his systems shut down on the operating table.

Within minutes, Sebastian was contacted and he flew to the hospital. Once the legal aspects were handled, MJ's body was transferred to Sebastian's lab. When Sebastian initially constructed the lab and grounds, it had been heavily secured. It had the latest security devices and guards scattered everywhere. Sebastian had to protect himself from the overzealous ethical people who constantly threatened his life. MJ's body would be perfectly safe and protected at the lab facility. MJ's mother was worried that someone might try to steal MJ's body and Sebastian assured her that it would be impossible. To allay her fears, Sebastian added extra security in the lab room where the frozen bodies were stored.

MJ underwent the procedure and his canister was located next to the others to wait the necessary one year that seemed to be the apropos waiting time. A year later, Sebastian thawed Michael Jackson and the pop star appeared to be fine. MJ went on to smash all the sales records in the music industry and won many Grammys. MJ was eternally grateful for cryonics and he lived for many years at his ranch with his wife and children, until he passed away at 81.

100. Yelloh's Cure



100. Yelloh's Cure

Yelloh's father Hansel had amassed an enormous volume of material related to the brain and how to repair it, if it became damaged. The gel that Hansel had invented had changed the world with its simplicity and sheer genius. The mere fact that Hansel's gel had saved the life of a president spoke for itself. Hansel had passed away, but bequeathed to his only son Yelloh the most valuable thing that he could, his genius. The documents, files, diagrams and other bits of data that Hansel had given to Yelloh would be of little value without the ability to digest and apply it.

Parkinson's Disease (PD) is a chronic and progressive movement disorder, meaning that symptoms continue and worsen over time. Nearly one million people in the U.S. are living with Parkinson's Disease. The cause is unknown, and although there is presently no cure, there are treatment options such as medication and surgery to manage its symptoms. Parkinson's involves the malfunction and death of vital nerve cells in the brain, called neurons. Parkinson's primarily affects neurons in an area of the brain called the substantia nigra. Some of these dying neurons produce dopamine, a chemical that sends messages to the part of the brain that controls movement and coordination. As PD progresses, the amount of dopamine produced in the brain decreases, leaving a person unable to control movement normally.

Fortunately for Yelloh, he had been born even more intelligent than his father and while Yelloh was still in high school, he had brainstormed his theory on how to cure Parkinson's Disease. Yelloh had gone on to college, graduated with a Master's Degree and resumed his father's work at the lab. Yelloh's specialty had become brain surgery, because he felt that the answer to curing diseases related to the brain might involve surgically repairing the brain.

While Hansel was still alive, he discussed the brain and its complexities with Yelloh for hours on end on a daily basis. It didn't take long for Yelloh to become as obsessed with the brain as Hansel was. Yelloh occasionally attempted to interject his own theories into the conversations, but Hansel wouldn't listen. Hansel felt that Yelloh's theories were beyond the capabilities of contemporary science to utilize. Hansel appreciated his son's zest for brain research, but Yelloh had a lot to learn about the limitations all around him. Yelloh had to wait for his father to pass away to inherit his father's lab as his own and he had to wait for technology to advance.

Yelloh didn't have to worry about money for the rest of his life, thanks to the fortune that he had inherited from Hansel. Yelloh possessed a fully equipped lab in which to work, but lacked a crucial partner for the research that he planned to begin. The work that Yelloh wanted to pursue involved something controversial.

Yelloh was of the similar mindset of probably many other brain surgeons/scientists in the medical industry. If only the scientists could perform research on living brains while the brains were still in the living humans. It was impossible to get any realistic results from performing

surgery on a brain from a cadaver. The ethics and fear of the unknown related to brain surgery prevented necessary research from going forward.

Yelloh needed to find someone as likeminded as he was to assist him in performing investigations on living human brains. Yelloh wouldn't be able to do the work alone, because of the preparations involved in performing the surgery while keeping the patient alive and restoring them to full health afterward. The process required a team of 2 highly skilled individuals, with at least one of them having anesthesiological credentials.

Yelloh put out advertisements at the local university for lab helpers. He had no shortage of applicants for the job, since his father's name had been so well known. Yelloh decided to carefully filter out a prime candidate from the dozens of applicants over a period of time to ensure that he would get what he was after.

Yelloh systematically hired assistants to perform random research, while he subconsciously interrogated them through casual banter. Due to Yelloh's intellect, he was able to divulge insightful information from people without them realizing it. Over a year's time, Yelloh felt that he had finally found someone who might be perfect.

Oliver was a man in his 50's who had anesthesiological credentials and seemed to think along similar lines as Yelloh. Yelloh would never be able to be sure if he could trust Oliver until he had directly involved Oliver in something meaty. Once Oliver had committed himself, Yelloh would have him where he wanted him.

The next thing that Yelloh and Oliver needed was a suitable volunteer to begin their preliminary research upon. There was no shortage of people with loved ones who had various debilitating illnesses. Yelloh located a woman whose husband had been the victim of Parkinson's Disease for 29 years and the man was essentially nonfunctional. He was alive, but not living, as the saying goes.

The woman had full proxy over her husband and the man had signed various documents while he was still of a sound mind and body. The man had essentially donated himself to science while he was still alive. It was a great opportunity for Yelloh to test just how far Oliver would be willing to go. The woman signed the necessary forms that were approved by Yelloh's dream team of lawyers. The forms released Yelloh and Oliver of any liability in the event of complications. The woman and her husband were willing to try anything in order to regain some functionality. The man was 74 years old and wished he could get another few years out of his life, during which time he could finish building his gigantic model ships.

The man had a room at his home that was full of the most spectacular large-scale model ships imaginable. The woman said that her husband seemed to love those ships more than he loved

her. The man had been in the middle of constructing his model of Christopher Columbus' Santa Maria, when the Parkinson's took over his brain and body. The man required much steadier hands to complete the intricate parts fabrication. All he wanted to do before he passed away was to finish the model. The woman just wanted her husband to be happy again.

Yelloh and Oliver immediately went to work on the man; the man's wife was permitted to stay at Yelloh's residence if she desired. The woman wanted to stay at her home to wait until it was over. Yelloh was so excited to get his hands on a live patient to test his theory that he had to restrain himself in front of Oliver. Oliver appeared to be just as jittery as Yelloh; they had been given a great opportunity with the donation of the patient to their research.

It was the concept that Yelloh had come up with while he was still in high school that he wanted to try to investigate. During his years in the medical profession, Yelloh realized that his father was correct with his opinion of the technological limitations. Yelloh's idea had in fact been too advanced for the science of the times during Yelloh's high school years. Years later, Yelloh finally had the tools and wisdom he needed to implement the delicate surgery. Yelloh's hypothesis was to crack open the skull of the PD victim and surgically remove the substantia nigra from the brain. The brain would then be forced to dedicate another healthy section of brain matter to take over the functions of the missing tissue. New neurons would hopefully be adapted by the brain to reestablish the lost motor control.

It seemed like a simple concept, but it have never been tried because of the alleged potential risks involved. The whole issue was that since it had never been tried, no one really knew what the risks were. Scientists for years have boldly parroted repeatedly that any surgery beyond the surface of the brain was too risky, without ever actually attempting it. Imagine if the Europeans had stayed in Europe, content with merely gazing in a westerly direction across the Atlantic Ocean. What if they would have had the same attitude of the overly cautious brain surgeons? The western hemisphere wouldn't have been colonized and developed as wondrously as it had been. Some of the greatest lands on earth suitable for farming and raising livestock wouldn't have been utilized. The list of reasons in favor of Columbus sailing on his 4 roundtrip voyages seems obvious today. In 1492, the greatest scientific minds in history believed that Columbus might sail off the edge of the flat earth.

If it weren't for the raw bravery, belief and vision of Columbus and his financial backers who took those gigantic steps, how many other endeavors would have gone unaccomplished? Yelloh felt like Columbus must have felt when he was smack dab in the middle of the Atlantic and his crew kept blathering at him, "Are we there yet? Are we there yet?" Oliver was right there with Yelloh as they ventured into the unknown together.

Yelloh hadn't exactly been sitting around twiddling his thumbs since he left high school. He thought about his idea every day since the idea came to him while he was taking a poop one

morning. Years after he graduated from the university and Hansel had passed away, Yelloh utilized Hansel's lab to the full extent possible, limited only by the ridiculous confines of ethical society. Yelloh tried his theory on thousands of animals of all shapes and sizes. From each animal's brain, he removed the substantia nigra to see what would happen. Initially, the animals couldn't move, but they weren't necessarily paralyzed. It was simply that their brains couldn't control their muscle movements yet. After a surprisingly short time, the animals regained full control of their limbs, down to the toes. Once Yelloh had proven his theory with animals, he couldn't wait to try it on a human to possibly cure someone's PD.

When Yelloh hired and indoctrinated Oliver, he hadn't yet revealed the specific details of the brain surgery that he planned to perform. When the man with PD had volunteered to participate in the research with his wife's blessing, Oliver probably assumed that Yelloh was planning some sort of chemical therapy. When Yelloh instructed Oliver to help prepare the patient for surgery, Oliver's eyes lit up. That was the reaction that Yelloh hoped Oliver would have. When Yelloh instructed Oliver to prepare the anesthesiology equipment, Oliver finally asked about the procedure they were performing on the patient.

Yelloh said that they were going to investigate the man's brain for surface damage, which might have had something to do with the man having PD. Oliver anesthetized the man and monitored his vitals as Yelloh shaved the man's skull and opened the cranium. Once Yelloh was satisfied that the patient had been stabilized, he instructed Oliver to switch positions with him. Yelloh assured Oliver that he was fully certified in the use of anesthesiology equipment and that the patient would be safe.

Oliver switched positions with Yelloh and Yelloh initiated the crucial test. If Oliver passed the test; he would become a suitable long-term assistant; if Oliver failed the test, he would be back on the street. Oliver was standing at the operating table next to the patient's opened skull, looking at the man's brain.

Yelloh instructed Oliver to examine the surface of the brain for any unusual discolorations or damaged tissue. Oliver gulped, carefully looked at all the visible brain matter and said there didn't appear to be anything out of the ordinary. Yelloh noted Oliver's obvious nervousness; he told him to calm down and that he was doing just fine. Yelloh asked Oliver if he knew anything about PD and Oliver told Yelloh the little bit that he knew. Oliver knew about as much as any of the other contemporary scientists.

Yelloh asked Oliver if he was familiar with the substantia nigra and Oliver said that he had heard of it. Yelloh asked Oliver what he thought would happen if they removed the substantia nigra from the patient's brain. Oliver shuddered and his face turned beet red; beads of sweat began to noticeably pour from the pores on Oliver's forehead. Oliver stuttered and said he didn't know. Yelloh told Oliver about his PD research and the successful work that he had done with animals.

Yelloh instructed Oliver to gently reach into the patient's brain between the 2 hemispheres and locate the substantia nigra. Oliver asked why and Yelloh said that they were going to remove that part of the patient's brain in an attempt to cure the man's disease. Oliver took a long and silent look at Yelloh and said, "Ok." Oliver did as Yelloh instructed and surgically removed the damaged tissue. Oliver had passed Yelloh's test.

They closed up the skull and scalp and the patient was entered into recovery mode. Yelloh and Oliver slept in the lab with the patient on the beds that were so thoughtfully put there years before by Hansel. In a few days, the man began twitching and then speaking normally. In a week, he was walking around the lab with full functionality. Yelloh's theory seemed to have worked. The man's wife was called to pick him up. When she first saw him walking around without shaking, she couldn't believe her eyes. She thanked Yelloh and Oliver and took her husband home, where he went to work on finishing his Santa Maria.

Yelloh was so confident in his proven method that he decided to approach Muhammad Ali and his wife with his cure. For as long as Yelloh could remember, Ali had been his favorite sports personality. If Yelloh could help Ali with his illness, Yelloh felt that his life would be complete. Ali had wanted for years to fight George Foreman one last time, but Ali's PD had prevented it. Muhammad and his wife agreed to have Muhammad undergo the procedure. Ali, his wife and some of their kids were brought to Yelloh's lab where the operation would be performed on Ali. Ali's wife stayed in Yelloh's house during the event with her kids to keep her company.

Yelloh and Oliver successfully performed the procedure on Ali and he was in recovery for a few days, until he finally woke up. Ali responded better to the surgery than Yelloh's first patient, probably because Ali's brain had been damaged for a shorter amount of time. In a week, Ali was up and bouncing around the lab, full of piss and vinegar. Most importantly of all, he was talking again! For Ali to be able to orate the way he used to was something of a miracle. Ali, his wife and his kids were overjoyed at the success of the procedure. It seemed that Ali's PD had completely gone away. Ali called George Foreman with the offer of the boxing rematch. Foreman accepted and the fight was scheduled to be held in 6 months. Ali and Foreman began training for the greatest comeback fight of all time. The media went into a frenzy, with all the cable TV pay per views and other huge promotions. Ali was talking his trash like never before; it was beautiful.

The fight was scheduled for 6 rounds, which was just long enough to see the old guys putting on a good show. The 2 had agreed to fight each other as hard as they could and didn't intend to pull any of their punches. Ali wanted to knock out Foreman one more time; Foreman didn't care either way. The first 4 rounds ended with the 2 boxers approximately even in points. In the 5th round of the fight of the century, Foreman knocked Ali down to the canvas with a hard right and the referee began the count - 1, 2...8, 9, 10. Ali didn't get up.

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book Two



Mikey with his 7-foot manatee in 2017.

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100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book Two

cre·do

/'krēdō/

noun

1. a statement of the beliefs or aims that guide someone's actions.

(Example: The knight's credo revolved around his undying loyalty to his king.)

Yesterday might have sucked, but today's gonna be better.

If today ends up sucking, there's always tomorrow.

If tomorrow ends up sucking ... serenity now.

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book Two

This book is dedicated to:

My wonderful wife Donna E. Pszeniczny for putting up with my incomprehensibleness.

My father Leonard S. Pszeniczny and mother Marcia A. Pszeniczny from whom I inherited my active imagination and bombasticity.

My brothers Leonard M. Pszeniczny and Brian J. Pszeniczny for all the good times we had growing up (The Tracks, The Land, The Ranch, The Ridge, Ron's Green LTD & The Forts).

July, 2016

The latest digital versions of **100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book One, Book Two, etc.** are available at the following locations with the most recently added chapters:

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101. Rex's Ocean 2



101. Rex's Ocean 2

Rex's first reaction to the sight of the 2 shark fins was to panic, but then he remembered all the speared fish that he had with him. The fish would be a perfect offering to make the sharks leave him alone. It was a nice idea anyway. As the sharks swooped toward Rex, Rex unleashed his food supply to appease the sharks. Rex swam away from the released fish as quickly as he could and the sharks moved in to eat. It was a classic feeding frenzy of sharks and fish splashing everywhere.

Rex initially felt relieved that he was safe, but the sharks apparently weren't done eating yet and headed toward him. Rex had become quite adroit with his root spear and was ready for the sharks. As the first shark approached, Rex suddenly lurched to one side and stabbed the shark's eye with the spear. The 2nd shark approached and being a stupid shark, continued into Rex's spear zone. Rex speared the 2nd shark's eye and swam away from the scene. The injured sharks seemed to be satisfied with their fish meal after all and vacated the premises. Rex heaved a sigh of relief that he was momentarily safe again.

Saddened by the loss of his food supply, but glad that he was still alive, Rex swam and floated for a while. Rex saw something in the near distance that resembled an upturned boat. As he got closer, he realized that it was a gigantic dead whale. For some reason, the whale hadn't sunk into the ocean depths and instead stubbornly floated there. Rex noted that the whale must have only recently expired, because it didn't stink yet. Rex climbed on top of the huge carcass and christened the deceased whale as the H.M.S. Rex. He had a boat! The whale was big enough to stand up and walk around on, even though the body presented a somewhat rounded surface.

Rex looked around on the whale and walked toward the front where the head and eyes were located. He stabbed his spear into the eye of the whale and worked the spear in and out in a sawing motion. In a short time, he was able to carve out a hunk of blubber and he ate it. It wasn't bad. After ingesting foul food in the ocean for a while, he had gotten used to eating raw seafood bits. The blubber had a kind of a buttery seafoody taste. After filling his belly with blubber, Rex carved a flap of blubber to use as a blanket of sorts for protection from the sun and rain. He carved 3 sides of a rectangle shape and left the 4th side uncarved as a hinge, so he could open and close the flap like the cover of a book.

Thanks to the discovery of the whale, Rex had relatively unlimited food, a boat on which to float around and a bed to sleep in. It was better than floating in the ocean like some fisherman's bobber, at the mercy of every living creature. After a couple of days of eating the blubber, Rex began noticing the effects of the blubber on his gastrointestinal tract. The blubber gave him almost continuous flatulence and diarrhea. At least the blubber provided some nutritional value and satisfied his hunger. The wetness of the blubber gave his body enough moisture to prevent dehydration. With no fresh water to drink, it would have to do.

As the days passed and Rex continued slicing away at the carcass, he thought that the whale's body was finally beginning to rot. Each day it became a little smellier. Rex didn't worry about eating the rotting whale blubber, because it was all he had. After a week of eating the rotting blubber, he thanked his lucky stars that his nose had become accustomed to the stench. He supposed that getting used to the whale stench was similar to getting used to his own body's stench. Life was funny that way.

As Rex progressed deeper into the whale's carcass, he came upon something strange. It appeared to be the tentacles of an octopus. As Rex continued digging, he soon noticed dozens of tentacles. It seemed that the whale had eaten several dozen octopi recently. Rex bit into one of the tentacles and the tentacle began moving. Some of the other tentacles began moving as well. Soon all the tentacles were squirming around. Could all those octopi that the whale had recently eaten still be alive? The body of the whale began lurching in the water as the tentacles began to work their way out of the whale.

Rex trotted toward the tail of the whale carcass and watched in horror as some kind of mutant body forced its way out of the whale. It was a single huge octopus with dozens of tentacles! Rex had heard about the possibility of such creatures existing, but had never seen one. Those old fishermen down at the pub always spun their yarns about giant whales, octopi, squids and sharks that roamed the oceans, but no one ever believed them. Until now. What was that thing? How did it get inside of the whale? Did the whale eat that massive octopus? How could the octopus still be alive? Rex had no answers to his questions and didn't care. The scary octopus continued to tear itself out of the whale until there was a large enough gaping trench in the whale for the octopus to slither through.

The gigantic octopus spilled out into the ocean and swam away. Rex couldn't believe what he had just seen. He hoped he would be able to make it back home to tell those old fishermen about his sighting. Apparently, those old guys were correct. Rex wouldn't have believed it unless he had seen it with his own eyes. Rex suddenly felt a shudder. What if there were other giant whales, octopi, squids and sharks out there in the ocean? What would he do if he encountered one? Rex was lucky that the mutant octopus had slithered away, apparently just glad to be outside of the whale. Rex reckoned that the octopus could have easily done some damage to him and eaten him. Rex would have tried his hardest to defend himself with his root spear, but probably would have been laughed at by the octopus as it swallowed him down its gullet.

Rex didn't want to wait for the next encounter with another of the ocean's behemoths. He had to act. He noticed the ribs poking out of the whale's carcass where the octopus forced its way out. Rex made his way over and tried to remove the blubber, meat and connecting tissues to loosen one of the ribs. It was an incredibly difficult task with only the root as a tool. The ribs were thick, strong and solidly attached. Rex was determined. He had to be.

Rex worked on loosening the rib for 2 weeks. He was glad that the monster octopus hadn't destroyed the whale completely when it forced its way out. At least Rex was still able to use the floating whale's carcass as a boat and food supply. The octopus had exposed several of the whale's organs and Rex began snacking on them to reduce some of the monotony of eating blubber every day. Soon, the great rib was loose enough to break free. Rex wiggled it and wiggled it until his brute determination cracked it out of the ribcage. It was beautiful! It was 6 feet long and incredibly tough. Unfortunately, it felt as if it weighed 60 pounds or more. It was heavy, but it would constitute a mighty weapon when the time came.

Rex was as ready as he could ever be for the next attack by some creature that would be doubtlessly bigger and stronger than he was. Rex wanted to believe that since humans were supposedly at the top of the food chain, the creatures of the earth should instinctively bow down before him. Why weren't they doing that? All the birds and fish that he encountered out there had done nothing but attack and attempt to eat him. Now that Rex had his rib spear, things were going to change. He dared something to attack him. He practiced with the rib spear for weeks and felt his arms becoming more muscular and powerful in the process.

Rex felt like one of those roman soldiers from yesteryear who wielded heavy swords and shields with their powerful arms. Bring it on! Naturally, Rex didn't actually want to encounter anything out there. He had only developed his new confidence out of a necessity for survival. The encounter with the sickeningly large octopus had put him on guard more than ever. The good thing about the octopus, the only good thing, was that it provided Rex with the opening in the whale that revealed the ribs. Rex looked at all the other ribs of the whale's ribcage and didn't want to have to wrench another one free. It was an extraordinary amount of work to get that one rib out. Rex didn't want to think about removing another one.

Rex tested the floatability of his rib spear by gently lowering it into the water. The test revealed that the spear would sink like a rock if he lost it. He located some extremely tough tendonous material in the trench of the whale and pried at it for a week until he had removed about 9 feet of it. He tied one end of the tendon around the spear and the other end around his right wrist. It may or may not hold, but at least it was better than having no tether at all. He began training with the rib spear attached to his wrist. It was way more cumbersome, but it was necessary. He absolutely couldn't lose that piece of rib under any circumstances.

Rex decided to get more use out of the whale carcass and attempted to use its tail as a paddle. He made his way to the tail of the whale and noticed that it was down in the water. He went back to the trench and set about removing some more tendon material. After some time, he had removed an 11-foot long piece. He jumped in the water, poked a hole in the tail with the spear and tied the tendon in place. He climbed back onto the whale and while standing on the whale's back near the tail, he pulled on the tendon. He was able to make the tail go up and down in the water and

thus provide motion to the whaleboat. He didn't really have a way to turn the whale. All he could do was operate the tail and go forward in whatever direction the whale was pointing. By judging the rising and setting sun, Rex surmised that he was heading in an approximately northwesterly direction. He figured that as long as he was heading in a somewhat westerly direction, he was heading toward the U.S., which was fine. Sooner or later, he would have to either encounter some passing vessel or reach land. As long as that might take, he still had thousands of pounds of rotten whale to eat for food.

There were moments out there alone on the ocean where Rex had been tempted to feel sorry for himself. If he had, it would have meant that he was allowing the challenge to gain a hold on him. That's all it amounted to out there. Life had given him a challenge to take on and win. If he permitted himself to feel morose or unable to go on, it would mean that he had given up hope. He had to be thankful that he was still alive and relatively healthy. He was constantly farting and spewing diarrhea, but he was still alive. His beloved friends might have had different fates; they might all be in Davy Jones' locker. Maybe Rex had been destined to become the lone survivor to tell the tale of his uncle Nicky's crashed yacht, "Bayou Baby."

If everyone else on the yacht had in fact gone down into the ocean with the wreckage, no one back home would know what happened. It was a sad state of affairs. Rex had been so busy out there surviving in the salt water that he had forgotten about his shipmates. Everyone back in Florida was probably wondering what happened to the yacht passengers. With the yacht gone, there was no trace of anything. All their loved ones in Florida had no closure on the matter. The wrecking of the yacht had left a group of people with only questions and no answers. It could end up becoming another one of those unsolved mysteries.

Rex had to survive his ordeal out there and make it back to tell the terrible story. People would be saddened, but at least they could close the book on the case. For some psychological reason, it was better to know that a person who disappeared had perished, than to forever wonder what had happened to them. Life was certainly bizarre in that way. Rex wasn't exactly a religious zealot who went to church every week, but he did believe in the concept of a creator. It was that belief that had kept Rex fighting to survive out there. Without that belief, Rex wouldn't have had the tiniest morsel of faith necessary to go on. Without Rex's modicum of hope, he would have been lost to the ocean some time ago. He would have given up and drowned.

Rex continued to operate the tail to keep the whale going in its current direction. The skies darkened and it started raining. Just when Rex thought he was through with getting drenched by the ocean supplied rain clouds, it happened again. He didn't think it could be worse than the last storm, but it was getting ugly out there. At least while he was on top of the whale, he had been dry for a while. His skin had been damaged from being immersed in salt water for so long.

It poured and poured. Rex debated getting under his sleeping flap to avoid the pelting torrent,

but decided to sail on. He wanted to remain productive by operating the tail paddle. He wanted to feel that he was doing something that was leading him off the ocean or at least in the right direction. At first, as the rain deluged he didn't notice what was happening. After a couple hours of heavy rain, it finally occurred to him that the trench in the whale carcass was filling up with water. So what, he thought. Then he noticed that the whale began to sit lower and lower in the water. The whale was sinking! He was sinking!

Rex ceased his paddling, jumped down into the trench and tried to bail out the water with his cupped hands. The storm clouds laughed and poured down more rain. There was no way that he could bail out the whale trench with only his hands. It was raining buckets and he was trying to bail water with a teacup. A bucket! He rummaged around in the guts of the whale until he found one of the whale's organs that resembled a bucket. It must have been the spleen or gall bladder. He didn't know or care. He rammed his rib spear at the base of the organ until it tore free from whatever it was attached to. He then stabbed at it about 1/3 of the way down to tear it open. A horrendous smelling brownish green fluid spurted from the organ as he speared it. The stuff splashed onto his face and he barfed from the shock of it. It was the worst smelling substance on earth.

Once he had cut off the top of the organ and scooped out whatever disgusting squishy mess was inside, the bucket was ready. It was a pretty good size container with an 8-gallon capacity. He began bailing the water from the carcass. The rain kept falling and he heard thunder rumbling. Great, as if the torrential downpour weren't bad enough. Now he would have to put up with crashing thunder. He continued bailing and it seemed to be working! The whale was slowly rising in the ocean. As he bailed, he ate bites of blubber and other miscellaneous hunks in order to have the energy to keep going. He was definitely getting ahead of the rain. Soon, Rex felt assured that he had made enough headway on the water to climb out of the trench for a spell. Standing in that trench up to his waist in rotten whale guts was difficult. While he was on top of the whale, he walked back to the tail to make sure the tendon was still tied to it.

He had been too busy bailing water from the trench to notice that the thunderclaps had gotten closer together. He glimpsed bolts of lightning that became closer and closer. He caught a whiff of ozone and was suddenly blinded by a flash of light. Rex went flying through the air and landed in the ocean 20 feet from the whale. The 60-pound rib spear that was cinched to his wrist began to pull him under the surface. He was having a hard time keeping his head above the water with the choppy waves, whipping wind and drenching rain. Lightning continued crashing around him and explosively hitting the whale. The spear was making it difficult to swim and it kept pulling him down. He was barely able to stay afloat, much less swim. He had to get back to the whale, but the spear was making it tricky. If he untied the spear to make swimming easier, he would lose his precious weapon. He didn't know what to do. As he contemplated his decision while grappling in the water, he spotted a shark fin!

102. Federico's Cords



102. Federico's Cords

In early 1999, Federico took most of his saved millions that he earned from his medical practice, bought internet stocks and waited as long as he dared. He then sold it all before the market crashed. He used his intuition wisely and had turned his millions into tens of millions. Being a compassionate doctor, he wanted to turn his newfound wealth toward doing good. Like many doctors, he had always wondered about the possibility of using umbilical cord fluid extracted at the moment of a baby's birth to possibly heal various illnesses.

Dementia is a syndrome, or a group of symptoms that consistently occur together. It is not a specific disease. The term “dementia” is used to describe a set of symptoms that can include memory loss, difficulty thinking, problem solving, or issues with language. Dementia is caused by damage to the brain cells and because Alzheimer’s is a disease that destroys the brain, it is one of the most common causes of dementia.

Alzheimer’s disease is a chronic neurodegenerative disorder. Patients suffering from the disease exhibit a combination of signs ranging from memory loss, difficulty completing familiar tasks, confusion with time or place, as well as changes in mood and personality. The progression of the disease eventually leads to an inability to independently and safely perform acts of daily living.

On a cellular level, Alzheimer's disease is characterized by the finding of unusual helical protein filaments in nerve cells of the brain. These twisted filaments are called neurofibrillary tangles. In the brain, Alzheimer's disease involves degeneration of the cortical regions, especially the frontal and temporal lobes.

Alzheimer’s disease is characterized by a buildup of what is known as beta-amyloid plaques. The toxic function of this peptide in the brain is reported in many studies. Generally, beta-amyloid plaque accumulation in the brain causes localized inflammation. Because human umbilical cord fluid stem cells have been shown to promote an anti-inflammation benefit, it's possible that these cells may also prove to be effective in disorders that involve inflammation, such as Alzheimer’s disease.

Studies involving the infusion of cord fluid into mice with Alzheimer’s disease showed improved learning, memory and motor function as well as a reduction in reduced cognitive impairment and behavioral deficits.

While Federico was still in high school with plans of becoming a doctor, no one save for himself knew what he was really up to. He had the patience to endure the years of medical schools and to work in a practice for another 14 years. When he took his money out of the stock market at the age of 42, he was ready to do what he really wanted to do, research. He had a true passion for helping people overcome their basic illnesses as he had done during his years in the practice.

However, he figured that any basic doctor could effectively do the general practitioner stuff. There really wasn't enough meat in it to satisfy Federico. He wanted to find a cure for Alzheimer's disease. Too many people were suffering from it and many more were likely to be diagnosed with it in the future.

With people living longer than ever, more people's lives were being perpetuated medically. More people with terrible debilitating illnesses were being kept alive while not realizing it was happening. Those were the Alzheimer's victims of course. Once the advanced stage 6 of Alzheimer's was reached, the victims were essentially zombies, except not in the typical sense of a zombie. An Alzheimer's victim was a live human body walking around, but they acted like a deceased zombie.

Federico had tirelessly researched Alzheimer's the entire time that he was in medical school and while practicing. He had become obsessed with knowing everything about the possible causes and possible treatments. The only problem with the possible treatments was that they were only possible. No one was using the cord fluid on humans yet. Federico endeavored to gather a select team of a scientist and a technician to help him find the cure.

Over his years in the medical industry, Federico had safely determined whom the people were who felt as he felt. Since it wasn't yet appropriate to use cord fluid on humans in the mainstream, any real research was impossible. Humans were so much more complicated than animals that research on animals was almost a waste of time. Most of the scientists who were performing the animal research wished they could be doing it properly with human subjects. One of the unfortunate things about any research is that the researchers worked with money given to them via grants and other limited funding sources. Those researchers owed their livelihoods to the grant money and didn't want to be out on the street as a result of losing the precious grants.

Federico always wanted to be a researcher, but only under his own terms with his own money. His stock market coup had been a once in a lifetime opportunity. The Y2K hoopla that had driven the stock market irrationally high was sitting there for Federico's taking. With his own money, he could hire whomever he wanted and perform whatever research he wanted.

It took him a while, but the 2 people he managed to filter out of the medical society seemed to have the right stuff. Incencio was a 53-year old scientist whose father was gone and his mother had Alzheimer's. Luminosa was a 47-year old lab technician whose father was gone and her mother had Alzheimer's. Federico had monitored the 2 for many years to get a feel for exactly how far they would go with research. When the Alzheimer's suffered by both their mothers had advanced to almost the point of no return, Incencio and Luminosa became ripe for Federico's picking. Everything managed to time out perfectly for Federico, between the enormous amount of research money gained from the market and the acquisition of Incencio and Luminosa for the research team.

Federico had communicated on and off with both people and felt their ever-increasing grief. They both had nurses looking after their mothers while they were at work. Incencio and Luminosa were so desperate to help their mothers that they would do almost anything. Before their mothers had slipped too far, various legal documents had been drawn up to allow experimental medical procedures to be performed. Their mothers gave their advanced approval for whatever might come up.

When Federico approached Incencio and Luminosa with his proposal, they jumped at the chance to try to help their mothers. Their mothers were still of sound enough mind to give permission voluntarily for Federico to test his theory. Federico theorized that the cord fluid infusions into the Alzheimer's victims would reduce and eliminate the neurofibrillary tangles and beta-amyloid plaque accumulation. The anti-inflammation benefit of the cord fluid would allow the damaged brain entities to regain the oxygen flow necessary for proper function. Based on Federico's studies, the cord fluid had been proven to have some benefit in mice, but hadn't been tested on humans yet.

While cord fluid can only be collected at the time of a baby's birth, cord fluid banking companies enabled cord fluid stem cells to be safely cryopreserved. Federico's research had determined that the cord fluid used from the cryopreserved sources wasn't nearly as effective as the freshly harvested product. No matter how much time and money the cryo-banks put into refining their methods, something was always lost in the freezing process.

Federico asserted that his research must be carried forward using only freshly donated cord fluid material. The source for the fresh product would come from Luminosa. She had been a volunteer at a free clinic for unwed mothers for years and assisted with the birthing of the babies. The clinic graciously agreed to donate anything that Luminosa wanted for the cause of research. She didn't specifically inform the clinic of the exact nature of the research, but they didn't care. She had been a valuable volunteer at the clinic and they were grateful for her efforts. They just assumed that her research involved the cord fluid somehow and would be beneficial to humanity. Since the clinic was a busy place, the supply of necessary cord fluid was essentially unlimited.

Incencio had been on various research teams performing cord fluid testing on mice afflicted with Alzheimer's. He had been able to attest to the validity of the positive results. Depending on how advanced the Alzheimer's was, determined the usefulness of the procedure. If the disease had progressed too far, there was nothing to be done. The disease had to be caught before the brain had lost its ability to regenerate and reorganize itself effectively. As amazing as the pure cord product was, it could only realistically perform a limited amount of miracles. Incencio had determined that the 5th stage was as far as the cord fluid procedure would be effective. Once the 6th stage had been reached, it was too late. When Incencio compared his notes with Federico, Federico concurred. Ideally, it would be best to employ the procedure at the earliest stage

possible. There simply wasn't enough awareness in the public to be on guard for the early symptoms of Alzheimer's disease. Too many people had assumed that senility was just a part of growing older. Federico, Incencio and Luminosa believed that senility, which was more accurately termed as dementia, could be prevented and reversed. They hoped that their research was going to prove it.

When someone is in the 1st phase of Alzheimer's, they don't have any symptoms that can be spotted. Only a positron emission tomography (PET) scan - an imaging test that shows how the brain is working, can reveal whether someone has Alzheimer's. Before the PET scan, a specific radioactive tracer is injected into the bloodstream. The specific tracer is a molecule that binds to beta-amyloid in the brain. Because the beta-amyloid becomes labeled with the radioactive tracer, it can be visualized during a PET brain scan, thereby revealing the presence of amyloid plaques in the brains of someone who has Alzheimer's.

During the 5th stage, patients begin to need help with many day-to-day activities and may experience: significant confusion, inability to recall simple details about themselves such as their own phone number and difficulty dressing appropriately. On the other hand, patients in stage five maintain a modicum of functionality. They typically can still bathe and toilet independently. They also usually still know their family members and some detail about their personal histories, especially their childhood and youth.

Patients with the 6th stage need constant supervision and frequently require professional care. Symptoms include: confusion or unawareness of environment and surroundings, major personality changes and potential behavior problems, the need for assistance with activities of daily living such as toileting and bathing, inability to recognize faces except closest friends and relatives, inability to remember most details of personal history, loss of bowel and bladder control and wandering.

Incencio's mother Nicolasa and Luminosa's mother Marisol were both in stage 5 of Alzheimer's and most likely didn't have much time before they would be in stage 6. Federico's team had to get to work immediately.

Federico built an enormous fully equipped lab with recovery rooms for the patients and sleeping rooms for himself, his staff and the friends & relatives of the patients. Nicolasa and Marisol were transported to the facility where they signed the paperwork, which indicated their voluntary status during the procedure. Federico, Incencio and Luminosa acted as witnesses on the paperwork. The procedure was fully explained to the 2 patients and they seemed to be willing to begin.

Luminosa brought a fresh supply of cord fluid from the clinic and both patients were given the product intravenously. Federico and his staff didn't expect to see results for a week or so. The

next day, everyone was surprised when the 2 patients began to recite lost memories. Their confusion seemed to be disappearing and confidence returning. They were able to again talk openly about all the pertinent information related to their identities such as name, age, birthday, marriage day, phone number, address, past work details - everything.

Federico, his staff and the 2 patients were sitting around the lab alternating between laughing and crying because of what was taking place. The cord fluid was simply miraculous. It had proved to work incredibly well on stage 5 patients. Federico wondered if a stage 6 patient could benefit from the procedure.

Marisol and Nicolasa continued to receive cord fluid infusions on a monthly basis, until they appeared to be fully functional mentally and physically. After 6 months, the infusions were stopped. Time would tell if the procedure had produced long-term benefits.

Nancy Reagan had been with her husband Ronald for many years and when he announced that he had Alzheimer's in 1994, the public found out what she had likely known for a while. In 1983, during Ronald's presidency, he declared November as National Alzheimer's Awareness Month. Ronald had been in office from 1981-1989 and had been trying to enjoy his retirement when Federico approached him in 2000. Federico, Incencio, Luminosa, Marisol and Nicolasa visited with Ronald and Nancy to explain the success that they had with Marisol and Nicolasa. Federico produced the documentation of the before and after PET scans. Marisol and Nicolasa verified the results and swore that the cord fluid procedure had turned their lives around.

Nancy and Ronald talked with Federico and the others for a while to get a feel for the procedure and its possible results. After studying Federico's documentation and consulting with each other, Nancy and Ronald decided to go ahead with having the procedure performed on Ronald. Everyone flew back to Federico's lab and Luminosa procured fresh cord material from the clinic. Ronald was administered the infusion and everyone waited with bated breath. Since Ronald had been in the stage between 5 and 6, Federico wondered if the procedure would have any real effect.

Ronald slept the entire next day after the infusion and all his vital signs looked good. On the 2nd day after the procedure, Ronald sat up in his bed and began reciting lines from one of his most popular movies. Nancy rushed to his side and kissed every wrinkle on his craggy face. Everyone in the lab rejoiced and sang along with Ronald who began singing a song from one of his most popular musicals. Ronald never had much of a singing voice back when he was an actor and his current voice sounded like a cross between a chainsaw and bacon frying in an iron skillet. As dreadful as his voice sounded, it was still music to everyone's ears. Ronald lost the confused look that he had been walking around with for the past year. Ronald stated that he had to go to the bathroom to take a big stinky poop and Nancy offered to go with him, as she had been doing for the past 2 years. Ronald proudly announced, "I can do it myself!"

103. Abraham's Teeth



103. Abraham's Teeth

Abraham, his dental assistant Oralee, oral hygienist Flossy and receptionist S'miley set up the dental office in the village 14 years ago and were fully booked each day. Abe maintained a tight ship with the appointments and if someone called to cancel, he had S'miley call his other clients to fill the cancellations. S'miley hated to bother the clients who already had appointments into changing them for the sole reason of Abe's efficiency. Abe was a superior dentist who cared about his clients and if he could, he dropped everything to treat them in emergencies. Oralee, Flossy and S'miley were worked hard at the practice, but received free dental care in addition to their annual raises. The women were all fitted with the latest state of the art braces, free of charge.

Abe and his staff were all single and preferred it that way. They were a loose bunch of people who didn't want to be permanently bogged down by anything or anyone. They all had their ever-changing significant others and occasionally went on vacations together. Due to the need to work each weekday and occasional weekend days, Abe allowed himself and the staff 3 full weeks of vacation each year that was used when the office was closed for those 3 weeks. Abe treated all ages of patients and gave sugar-free candy to the children when their appointments were over. Sometimes, Abe and the staff wore funny makeup and costumes to help the smaller kids get through the visits. The kids' parents really appreciated the extra effort.

Each day was different at the office, even though the procedures were pretty basic. There were millions of people out there who took good care of their teeth. There were also many who took so-so care of them. The dentist gladly accepted everyone, since proper oral hygiene was essential to overall health. The concepts that the medical industry had realized lately about all the sicknesses that originated in the mouth made dentists more respected than ever.

At 8:00 am, the office opened with a cleaning/annual x-rays/exam started by Flossy on a long-time patient named Una. After Flossy performed the cleaning and x-rays, Abe came in to do his quick exam. Una was an oldish woman of about 81, who still had all her original teeth. Abraham and his staff always liked to see one of those rare people who took such excellent care of their teeth. Even though Una's meticulous adherence to brushing, flossing and getting checkups limited the amount of money that Abraham could make from the woman, Una's visits were a nice change of pace. Abraham still received his exorbitant fees for the cleaning/annual x-rays/exam from Una, but it was a far cry from the amount of money that he made on the poor-hygiene folks.

While Una was being worked on by Flossy, another patient arrived at 8:00 am for their filling appointment. Abe and Oralee executed the precisely timed procedure on a man named Wallace. Abe had been in business long enough to be able to complete all his dental procedures in a specific amount of time. His obsession with timeliness enabled him to maintain a strict

timetable. His patients never had to wait for more than a minute or two in the waiting room. Abe's ability to work on such an exacting schedule is one of the reasons why he was always fully booked and was able to charge such high fees.

Flossy's cleaning process began with her inserting a metal probe between the gum and each tooth, to determine if there were excessive gaps below the gum line. Any hidden gaps could be the result of the onset of periodontal disease, which was eventually fatal to the teeth. Without healthy gums in the mouth, there would be nothing to hold the teeth in place. It was always important to detect the disease early and stop it in its tracks as quickly as possible. Flossy's probing process was obviously minutely painful, due to the unavoidable temporary gum irritation. Flossy enjoyed doing the probing, because she could feel the patients wincing from each insertion of the probe. The patients always pretended that they didn't feel it and tried to stay still, but couldn't.

Sometimes, Flossy's cleaning victims would ask what she was doing and after Flossy explained, they were better able to tolerate the minor pain. Before Flossy started each probing session, she would utter the classic line, "You might feel a little pressure." The dentist who coined that phrase decades ago should have won some kind of a prize. The so-called "pressure" that the patients might feel was actually pain that the patients definitely felt. It was well known among the people of the world who regularly went to the dentist that "pressure" meant pain. Why couldn't those fiendish dentists and hygienists just come out and say that we might feel a little pain? Are they afraid that we wouldn't come back?

When Flossy's cleaning victims had a little bit of periodontal disease in the works, the patients squirmed even more when she probed. That was when Flossy had her best days. She loved making people feel that "pressure." Una normally took very good care of her teeth and was never in danger of even the slightest amount of periodontal disease, but it didn't stop Flossy from having her fun. When Flossy probed Una's healthy gums, Flossy jammed the probe in a little farther. There was no way that Flossy was about to let any of the patients get out of that dental office without receiving at least a little pain for their money.

Flossy took full advantage of all the patients, because many of them had appointments twice yearly. The poor-hygiene people had to come in 3 times per year, until their bad teeth were better. Those unfortunate souls felt Flossy's full wrath. There was nothing that Flossy enjoyed more in life than performing the cleanings on those bad-toothed suckers. When someone who had obviously unhealthy gums came in for a cleaning, they always left the office in tears. Una was lucky enough to not be one of those poor-hygiene unfortunates, but Flossy still made her leave in tears. It was one of those days when Flossy had been feeling unusually sadistic.

While Flossy was having her fun with Una, Abe was preparing Wallace for the filling on one of his molars. Everyone who had ever gone to the dentist for a filling knew that numbing was

always necessary before getting a filling. The way that the dentist numbed the area was by use of a needle. The needle always caused a painful sensation when it was inserted into the designated area. Some of the dentists applied a dab of numbing Lidocaine before inserting the needle and some didn't. Abe was one of the dentists who didn't. Abe firmly believed that if someone was careless enough to let one of their teeth get a dangerous cavity in it, then that person needed to suffer the consequences. Dentists had reputations for inflicting pain on their patients, but the patients always knew it was for their own good. The patients knew it was their own fault for allowing a tooth to get a cavity in the first place.

It was the cavity victim's fault for getting the cavity and they were obligated to suffer a little while having the cavity filled. That was the mentality that Abe had anyway. Abe didn't know or care if any other dentist felt the way he did. He couldn't help feeling that way. Some people would think that perhaps Abe was in the wrong line of work by enjoying the act of inflicting pain on people as part of the process of making them well. Abe didn't look at it from that perspective. Abe felt that from the very first procedure beyond a simple cleaning that a patient would undergo, they needed to feel some pain. The pain that the patients felt should teach them a lesson. The lesson was obviously that if someone didn't want to experience pain at a dentist, they should take better care of their teeth. Abe couldn't state the obvious any simpler than that.

Abe pricked Wallace with the needle after telling Wallace "he might feel some pressure." Abe savored moving the needle "in, out and all about." He actually sang that phrase silently to himself as he manipulated the needle. Oralee held Wallace down as the needle work commenced. In less than a minute, it was over and Abe briefly left Wallace with Oralee to allow the Novocain to take effect. Abe went to the men's room to take his habitual morning poop. When Abe was done pooping, he washed his hands and went back to Wallace, who was numb. Wallace detected the slight scent of poop on Abe, but assumed that the smell was only wafting in Abe's clothing and not on his hands. Abe donned the sterile plastic gloves before proceeding, which allayed Wallace's fears. Throughout the day, Abe constantly put on and threw away the plastic gloves between patients to avoid any cross-contamination. Abe might have been an evil dentist, but at least he was clean.

Abe always injected just barely enough numbing agent into his patients to make them feel numb in the lips and cheek. Once Abe got into the drilling and grinding, the nerves deep down always felt some "pressure." When Wallace mumbled that he was feeling something a little more than "pressure," Abe reluctantly injected more Novocain. The majority of Abe's patients seem to be willing to tolerate some amount of "pressure," just to get the procedure over with. Abe admired those patients, because he knew they were in pain the whole time, but the fools didn't want to say anything.

At 8:30 am, Abe was done with Wallace and had a filling appointment with Vada. Vada was a

22-year old who liked candy and had fillings in almost every major tooth. Vada was one of Abe's favorite patients, because of all the "pressure" that he was able to inflict on her, due to her numerous fillings. Abe sadly foresaw the day when Vada would no longer require fillings, because every tooth would eventually have one. Abe didn't look forward to that time. At least Flossy would be able to get her thrills from cleaning Vada's teeth every 6 months. Flossy and Abe gained their enjoyment by cleaning and filling teeth, but Oralea got hers by watching Abe in action. Sometimes it seemed that Oralea enjoyed watching the punishment more than Abe enjoyed dishing it out. After Abe finished with Vada, he trotted over to check on Una's oral health and x-rays. Even though Flossy always did a thorough job with the cleaning, Abe couldn't resist doing a little probing here and there of his own. The doctor always knew best.

Before each patient left the office, they stopped at S'miley's reception desk to schedule their next joyful appointment for a cleaning, a filling, etc. S'miley was always cheerful when the patients stopped by, because she knew they were all relieved to be getting out of there. She always got a kick out of the people trying to talk with numb mouths and lips. She occasionally chuckled and managed to conceal her laughter with a quick fake cough.

At 9:00 am, a cleaning/annual x-rays/exam appointment arrived for Flossy. Yuri was a Russian guy who was new to the country and had terrible teeth. Flossy really liked to clean Yuri's teeth, because he was one of the patients who required the 3 visits per year to correct their poor dental hygiene. Flossy made sure to give Yuri some extra probes for good measure. Sometimes she went around his entire mouth twice to teach him a proper lesson. Maybe he would learn how to brush and floss properly and be able to visit less frequently; maybe he wouldn't. Flossy hoped Yuri would never learn his lesson, because she enjoyed teaching him.

Also at 9:00 am, a root canal appointment showed up at the office for Abe and Oralea. The woman's name was Abbey and she was there for her first root canal. She was lucky that it was Abe who was doing the procedure, because he took extra care in removing every scrap of old root material that he could find in that tooth. Abe took the extra measure to blow out the empty tooth with compressed air, followed by high-pressure water and then with a final blast of compressed air. Abe's extra measures of using the air and water blasts weren't commonly used in the industry. Sometimes, Abe's patients fainted during the root canal appointments.

After Yuri staggered out of the office at 10:00 am, a cleaning/exam appointment arrived for Flossy in the form of a cowboy named Bart. Bart had the bad habit of chewing tobacco and still had the filthy stuff in his mouth when he entered the dentist's office. Flossy hated the smell of chewing tobacco and made Bart spit it out in the men's room before she would let him set foot in her cleaning area. She intentionally went around his mouth 3 times with her probing tool, claiming to Bart that she was digging out tobacco particles. By the end of the probing, Bart was crying and Flossy was laughing inside.

At 10:00 am, Dallas came into the office for his braces adjustment with Abe and Oralee. The process began with Abe clipping and removing the wires from the braces. New wires were then applied and tightened in place. Since Abe had braces as a youth, he knew that feeling of the wire being drawn out from each braced tooth. Each time the tool was pulled out and the new wire was unreeled from the spool, Dallas had to feel a shiver down his spine. Abe was glad that most of his braces patients were forced to opt for the less expensive old-fashioned wired braces.

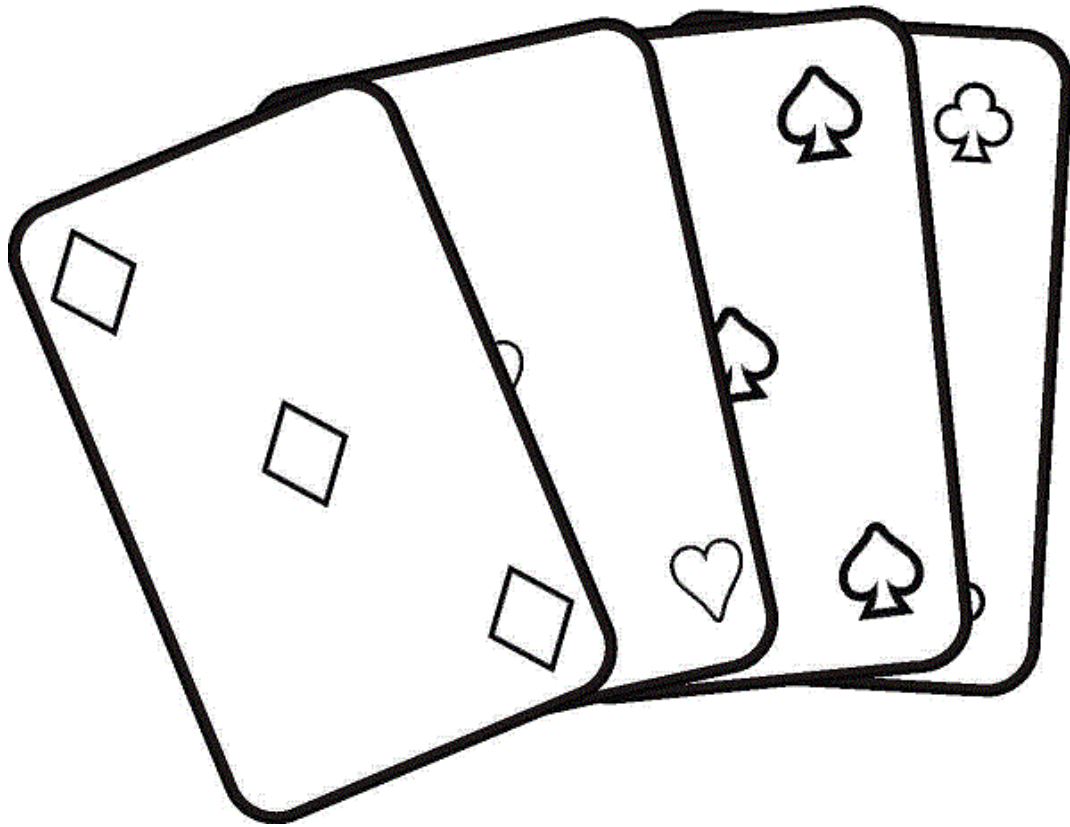
At 10:30 am, Abe had a filling appointment with a lady named Calandra. The woman was from India and ate a lot of curry dishes, which gave her teeth an unusual color. Abe mentioned to Calandra that the office offered a cleaning process that could return her teeth to a much whiter color. The process wasn't cheap, but Abe offered a lifetime of free follow-up visits to anyone who made the one-time expensive purchase of the procedure. Calandra stated that she was of limited means and could barely afford to get the filling for one tooth, let alone anything as extravagant as a mouth full of white teeth.

At 11:00 am, Flossy had a cleaning/annual x-rays/exam with Earl. Earl farted while Flossy probed, which enraged her to go around his mouth to probe a second time. Also at 11:00 am, Abe performed a crown operation on one of Galina's molars. Galina screamed from the excessive amount of "pressure" that she felt. After the lunch break ended at 1:00 pm, a teen named Faith underwent a cleaning/exam with Flossy. Faith cracked her gum when she walked into Flossy's cleaning area and Flossy taught her a good lesson in manners. Also at 1:00 pm, an old man named Hans suffered through a bridge process with Abe and Oralee. Hans cried through the entire event.

At 2:00 pm, Flossy had a cleaning/annual x-rays/exam with Jake. Jake was afraid of the x-ray machine. Also at 2:00 pm, Abe performed a bonding process on Ileana with Oralee's eager assistance. Ileana needed to be gassed for the process. At 3:00 pm, a cleaning/annual x-rays/exam by Flossy was done on a girl named Kaitlyn, who was accompanied by her mother. Flossy was unusually easy on Kaitlyn, because Kaitlyn's mother was present. Flossy couldn't wait for the day when Kaitlyn would be older and could come in by herself.

Also at 3:00 pm, old Mac showed up for his dentures fitting with Abe and Oralee. Mac had to bite into wet plaster to create a mold for the dentures. Abe and Oralee snickered to themselves when Mac gagged on the plaster. At 4:00 pm, Flossy's last appointment was a cleaning/exam with Lachelle. Lachelle scolded Flossy to be careful to not mess up her hair. Flossy gave Lachelle some extra cleaning. Also at 4:00 pm, Abe and Oralee had a filling appointment with Odessa. Odessa bit Abe's gloved finger, causing it to bleed through the plastic into Odessa's mouth. Abe and Oralee's last appointment of the day at 4:30 pm was a filling on a nervous man named Neal. Before Abe could inject Neal with the Novocain, Neal grabbed the needle away and stabbed Abe in the neck.

104. Cedrick's Clients



104. Cedrick's Clients

Cedrick started working in Vegas years ago as a blackjack dealer. He had loyally worked at the same hotel for his entire entertainment career. He worked as a dealer, then as a craps table person. The hotel approached him after 6 years of faithful service to become one of the hotel's general concierges. After 4 years of learning those ropes, he became one of the "cream of the crop" hi-roller concierges. The hi-roller concierges were dedicated to the hi-rollers who bagged at least \$100k in winnings and were given a hi-roller suite by the hotel.

The general concierges were accustomed to accommodating the basic odd requests of the hotel's residents. The general concierges provided information on local Vegas events, tickets to the events, transportation, restaurant info and other basic entertainment needs. The hi-roller concierges were put in place by the hotel to address every need of the hi-rollers to keep them happy enough to stay at the hotel and spend as much of their winnings as possible.

The casinos never wanted to pay out any money to the gamblers; the casinos reluctantly paid out a little, just to get people to gamble at all. If the casinos ever developed a reputation of never paying out, there would be no Vegas. Vegas had been created by the casinos and only existed because of them. The hi-rollers needed to be catered to. They were the small percentage of gamblers who hit it big and luckily won the big payouts that the casinos were required to give out. Casinos hated giving those big payouts, just as billionaires hated losing money at the stock market.

The few big payouts made by the casinos to the hi-rollers were expected to be returned to the casinos by keeping the hi-rollers gambling. It was an obvious game played by the casinos in full public view. There were no secrets. The public knew what was going on and the casinos knew what was going on. The casinos always had the edge when it came to playing the gambling game. The edge was the psychology of the gambler. Few gamblers could win big and casually walk away with their winnings. Most gamblers gambled for the thrill and entertainment of gambling. The sound of a slot machine paying out was music to a gambler's ears.

The enjoyment of getting a 21 at blackjack and winning big was irresistible. The craps tables were capable of the greatest gains of potentially millions of dollars. Those large quick gains were sometimes lost just as quickly however.

The popularity of poker playing on television and on the internet had spawned a new generation of fools. Vegas rubbed its hands together each morning when the latest hopeful millionaires entered the casinos. The casinos were engineered to always come out on top. They had to be. There would always be enough visible payouts and excitement each day to keep everyone in the casino buzzing. Casinos had long ago discovered, nurtured and perfected the strategy of capitalizing on the psychology of gambling.

The gamblers who played the penny slots felt urged on when they heard someone screaming in delight as a result of a big win. Even the little old ladies who sat at the slots each day, all day, spending their deceased husband's pensions, quickened their button-pushing pace slightly when they heard a bell ring.

Everyone in the casino who wasn't a casino employee was on the same team. The civilians all hoped to beat the house individually and as part of a team. It was part of the fun of gambling to hear and see other people winning. It was a tremendous thrill when one of the slot machines hit the jackpot and the buzzers, lights and whistles chimed continuously. The sound of a winner's screams and joy always elicited the attention of the majority of the casino's inhabitants. Heads turned in the direction of the big win and people watched for as long as they dared.

That wasn't the only winner in the casino and anyone could be the next winner. That was the psychology of gambling. It could be me. You gotta be in it to win it. There were many inane phrases coined by the gambling geniuses to get people to start gambling and keep them gambling. It was the weakness in people that transformed them from church bingo players into full-blown "spend the kid's college money" gamblers.

The hi-roller concierges were there to keep the people happy enough to stay at the hotel and blow all their recent winnings. Ideally, the hi-rollers would spend their recent windfall, take more money out of their bank accounts and spend that money as well.

Cedrick had seen absolutely everything in his 22 years at the hotel, more than most. The 12 years as a hi-roller concierge had really opened his eyes to the imaginations of people. Cedrick had been trained to eliminate the word "no" from his vocabulary. Anything the hi-rollers wanted, they got. All of interactions between Cedrick and his hi-rollers were held in strict confidence. The common expression of "Whatever happens in Vegas, stays in Vegas," couldn't be any truer. Cedrick had performed many mildly illegal acts in the course of keeping the hi-rollers happy.

Confidentially speaking, Cedrick had never involved himself in anything felonious, but had come close many times. Due to the myriad contacts that he had made as a general concierge, he had come to know many unsavory characters. Cedrick had a hotel limo and driver at his disposal to go anywhere in or around the city. Sometimes, he had to travel a 1/2 hour to get what he required for a hi-roller, but it almost always resulted in the hi-roller staying an extra night and losing all their recent winnings.

Everything Cedrick did in the performance of his job was meticulously tracked by the hotel and casino. All the efforts of the general and hi-roller concierges were important. The hi-rollers efforts were especially crucial. For example, say gambler A from Topeka, Kansas won \$150k playing craps on Saturday and had planned to leave on Sunday to go back home. If the hotel gave the person a hi-roller suite for that Saturday night, the gambler might suddenly feel

important. Perhaps the money that they had just won might suddenly seem like Monopoly money.

Cedrick treated gambler A like a king on Saturday night and Sunday morning. Gambler A gambled at the casino on Sunday and lost some of their money. Cedrick would then step in and provide some special entertainment for gambler A. Gambler A suddenly decides to accept the hotel's offer of Sunday night at the hi-roller suite. Gambler A gambles away the entire \$150k through the day on Sunday and returns to Topeka on Monday with less money than they had on Friday. The activities of gambler A would have been completely documented by the hotel, casino and Cedrick for his notes. Cedrick would have done his part in keeping gambler A trapped in his temporary fantasy world.

The psychology of an average person winning a lot of money and instantaneously becoming a rich person was perpetuated by the addition of the hi-roller suite. It was pure psychological genius. The creation of the hi-roller suites at the hotels was the most efficient means of maintaining the gambler's fantasy. When an average person, man or woman won a large amount of money in a short time, they suddenly felt what they thought it was like to be rich. By putting that person into a hi-roller suite, that average person was then living like a rich person. The only way for that person to continue feeling rich was to keep gambling and theoretically winning more money. That was the genius part.

Very few average people managed to walk into Vegas, win big, live in a hi-roller suite for a day or so and leave Vegas with any money. Most of the people chalked it up to an amazing life experience and were happy with the results, even though they had lost all the big money. The few people who were dazzled by the temporary buzz of the big money & hi-roller suite, lost it all and went insane, were the sad cases. Vegas didn't care.

The nature of gambling was that a gambler should ideally have nothing to lose when they started gambling in the first place. If they went into Vegas foolishly thinking that they would become rich from gambling and ended up losing all their money, those were the breaks. The gambling entity was an uncaring demon that only wanted people to feed it with money.

The casinos didn't have to do much work to get money from the gamblers. All the casinos had to do was present the means by which the gambling could take place. It was the easiest thing in the world to get money from people. All any establishment required was one slot machine, one lottery ticket machine, one poker table, one blackjack table and one craps table and the people to run the games. The gamblers would come out of the very woodwork to get a chance at taking a chance.

The casinos were essentially cathedrals at which the gambling took place. The casinos were referred to as cathedrals, because gambling was a form of religion for some people. As anti-

religious as it sounded, gambling was actually a form of religion in that it was a spiritual concept, which involved a belief in something. Religious people believed in the possibility of a life after their current life. Gamblers believed in the religion of gambling, wherein if they played the rules of the game correctly, they might win a lot of money. Neither the typical religions nor the religion of gambling came with any guarantees however.

The priests of the casinos were of course, the casino owners, which wasn't always one person. One or more individuals owned most of the casinos, so that they could spread out the wealth. In the early days, the casinos were allegedly created by and ruthlessly operated by organized crime. In recent years, no one really knew who owned and operated the casinos. The casinos provided a great source of revenue to the city and state, so that no one cared who was really pulling the strings.

All Cedrick knew was that for each of his hi-rollers who returned their winnings to the casino, he received a percentage of the money. For every \$100k that Cedrick assisted with returning, he received a 1% commission. It didn't sound like a lot, but it added up quickly. A 1% commission on the guy from Topeka gained Cedrick \$1,500, which wasn't bad for that one person under Cedrick's care. If Cedrick had one of those Topeka guys per weekend, he could add an extra \$6,000 to his monthly salary.

Since Cedrick worked mainly on commission, those commissions were essential. Naturally, the hotel and casino paid for the majority of the extravagances that the hi-rollers requested. Cedrick's role was to provide the hi-rollers with those extravagances. Obviously, people occasionally requested some pretty off-the-wall things. Part of Cedrick's secret files contained the requests of his hi-rollers.

Once, someone requested one of the bathtubs in the hi-roller suite to be filled with Hershey's chocolate. The hi-roller then took a bath in the chocolate and Cedrick provided a geisha to lovingly "bathe" the person. The person lost all their money at the craps table.

A female hi-roller once requested 13 Chippendale dancers to dance around and flaunt their masculinity for her and her 3 college friends. The woman bet all her money on one spin of the roulette wheel and lost it.

A hi-roller with his wife and 6 kids requested to have a group of Disney characters put on a show in full costume. The characters included the full cast of snow white and the 7 dwarfs. It took a little doing, but Cedrick managed to assemble the cast for the youngest of the 6 children's 12th birthday party. It was an unforgettable, one of a kind birthday party for the kid and the rest of the family. Cedrick actually enjoyed it when he could be a part of a family's dreams coming true. The father of the family gambled away most of his \$201k temporary windfall. The family ended up heading back to Arkansas with \$11,000.

Cedrick had seen many men and women during his blessed years at the gambling cathedral. There had been several hi-rollers who requested the presence of various animals. One guy in particular requested one of those yellow boa constrictors to be brought in with a belly dancer to prance around the suite with the snake on her voluptuous body.

There had been many hi-roller guests who had requested odd escort-type adventures. Cedrick accommodated the requests to the limit of his abilities. Cedrick's memoirs didn't include any of the illegal activities that he had facilitated. To some extent, Cedrick was protected by the hotel from being sued or implicated in the minor wrongdoings that anyone cared to talk about.

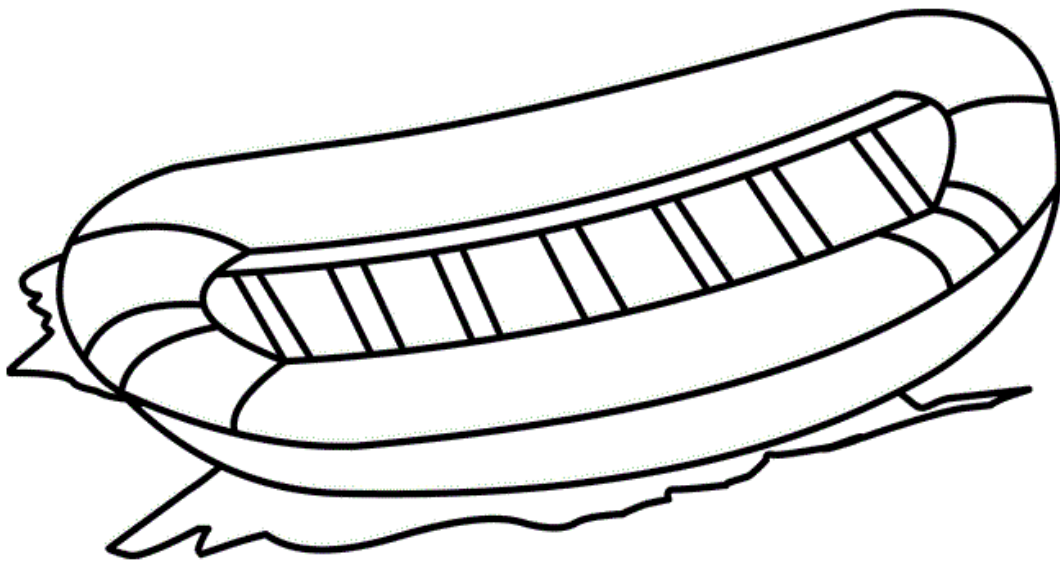
One time, one of Cedrick's hi-rollers had been a war hero who was unable to walk. The person requested Cedrick to carry them from their room to the casino each night, which Cedrick was barely able to accomplish. The person weighed a beefy 250+ pounds and although Cedrick possessed a solid athletic physique, he had difficulty carrying the person. The hotel staff wished that Cedrick would have been able to transport the person in their wheelchair, but the person demanded otherwise.

Since the person had been the recipient of a \$790k win, Cedrick wanted to do whatever he could to facilitate the return of that money to the casino. Cedrick helped to return \$600k of the money and reaped a nice \$6,000 commission for his efforts. Cedrick had become the victim of a slipped disk from carrying the bulky hi-roller, but Cedrick, the casino and the hotel had considered it to be worth the effort.

One of Cedrick's hi-rollers had requested a dog for the hi-roller's service dog to mate with. The hi-roller won \$234k on a Friday night and wanted the dog mated by Sunday. Cedrick had managed to get the person to stay until Tuesday night, and the dog was mated on Wednesday morning. The person had gambled away the entire \$234k while waiting for their dog to be mated. Cedrick actually had the mating dog ready on the first day of the request, but had successfully delayed the mating until the hi-roller had gambled all the money back into the casino's greedy hands.

Cedrick was beginning to feel that he was doing it for more than the money. He was starting to enjoy the manipulation of the clownish hi-rollers. It was too easy. Look how the chumps felt so important. He knew what the buffoons were feeling as he showed them into the hi-roller suite. He felt their silly jubilation. Cedrick saw the look in their pitiful eyes. He sensed how they wanted to perpetuate their strange feeling of wealth. The hi-rollers relayed their idiotic feelings, beliefs and goals to Cedrick. Cedrick silently laughed at the fools. The hi-rollers were a psychologically spastic bunch, incapable of any rational thought. They wanted to continue feeling rich and the hi-roller suite gave them that feeling. The hi-rollers felt that Cedrick was there for them. Cedrick was only there to suck the life out of the hi-rollers and bleed them dry. He didn't care if they ever returned, because there would always be another one.

105. Taciano's Raft



105. Taciano's Raft

Taciano knew they were headed for trouble from the moment they departed from their beloved country of Cuba. Taciano, his family of 6, and his friend Paco with his family of 6 had launched from northern Cuba in a 13-foot boat that was ideally suited for a maximum of 10 people. They were on their way to Florida, come what may. The 14 people were prepared to endure whatever hardships they might encounter in order to begin their new and hopefully better lives.

Taciano had paid the boat dealer a nice piece of change for the boat and the seller had ensured him of its seaworthiness. It seemed to be a nice solid handcrafted boat that would stand up to the 90-mile journey. When Taciano and Paco approached the boat seller, they begged the person to be truthful with them. The person claimed that the boat had been built by their father and had been through many storms with no problems. The person guaranteed their safe arrival in Cuba; of course, there would be no way for the person to back up the guarantee.

Depending on the type of watercraft employed and weather conditions, the trip to Cuba could take anywhere from one to two weeks. Since the people who made the trip could never be sure how long it would take, they usually filled the boat with a 2-week supply of food and water, just to be sure. Taciano's wife Margherita and Paco's wife Mojita were both rugged mothers who wanted better lives for their kids. They felt that as long as it took to get to Florida, it would be worth it.

Taciano and Paco had been promised jobs working as foremen for agricultural farms in southern Florida. Since Taciano and Paco had both worked in agriculture their entire lives, they were experienced and valuable to any farm. As difficult as the work was, it was honest, productive and satisfying employment that paid well under the right circumstances. The right circumstances were usually as foreman of a work crew. The individual crop pickers typically didn't make a lot of money, but the foremen did very well. Even though the pickers were hard workers, they were ordinarily an unruly bunch that didn't like to take orders.

All the workers needed to know was what the bonuses were for picking. In every agricultural operation, there existed a picking bonus system for the fastest pickers to make extra money. The amount of the bonus varied from farm to farm and from crop to crop. The crops that were grown and picked in Cuba were essentially identical to the crops grown and picked in Florida.

The foremen of the picking crews made their bonuses based on a percentage of the bonuses obtained by their crews. The best possible scenario existed when a foreman and his crew were friendly toward each other and ideally were members of the same family. When Taciano and Paco were young pickers growing up, they had quickly figured out the system and realized that the most profitable concept was comprised of a foreman who supervised his picking family.

Depending on the size of the farm and the crop, Taciano and Paco could descend on a farm and pick a large percentage of the farm's crop, receiving and retaining all the bonuses. It was a very solid business concept that many Cuban families had tried to adopt, but not all of them were able to put into practice, due to many variables.

Even though Taciano and Paco did very well in the Cuban agricultural system, the promise of greater wealth from living and working in America was too great to resist. The potential health benefits and greater control promised by America would enable Taciano and Paco to evolve higher than they ever could in Communist Cuba.

Two days into the trip, the passengers of the Taciano's small craft had encountered a storm that would be considered average for the time of year and location. Even though Taciano's craft was considerably well built, if not over-built for its comparable length, its overloaded status is what most endangered its passengers.

Taciano and Paco had carefully packed 8 large coolers full of food and water and the storm had tipped the boat enough to eject 4 of the coolers from the boat. As long as they could make it to Cuba in a week, they would be fine. If it took much longer, they would definitely get thirsty and hungry. The loss of the 4 heavy coolers had somewhat stabilized the boat, due to the reduced weight and the slightly higher level at which the boat ended up sitting.

Obviously, losing the food and water had endangered the 14 passengers, but they pressed on. The youngest kids began crying and complaining, but were quickly put in their places by their strict mothers. In the Cuban household, the mothers ruled with iron fists and the children obeyed them or were viciously beaten down. It didn't take very long for children in a Cuban household to learn who the boss was.

The mothers of the Cuban families had been known to use anything from large wooden spoons to rolling pins to discipline their children. Even the largest boys were forced to bow down to a powerful mother wielding a 20-pound oak rolling pin. What the mother said was gospel and it was usually enough to get all the kids started on a good life of working in a crew and following orders from a foreman.

On the 4th day of the trip, the sun began beating down on the passengers, who escaped the sun's rays by hiding under a large tarp. Even though they were protected from the sun, it was about 110 degrees under the tarp and it made everyone thirsty. Taciano and Paco had to enforce a water-drinking policy to make the remaining water last as long as possible.

Water became more valuable than food as the days grew even hotter. The kids began balking about the amount of water they were getting and the mothers had to reluctantly beat the kids into submission. It was a struggle for survival out there for the 14 people and everyone on the boat

was involved. The parents hated to have to scold the kids the way they did, but it was necessary for everyone's survival. The 2 families were at war with the ocean and only the strongest would survive. The ocean was always a mighty contender and usually won the battles, but the 2 families were determined to live.

Taciano and Paco had survived many hardships over the years of raising their large families, no matter what the agricultural seasons brought. Most of the time in Cuba, the weather was properly suited for the crops at hand. It was only occasionally that weather conditions had produced crops that required limited picking crews.

On the 5th day of the adventure, the boat sprung a leak. The seller of the boat had supplied a nice heavy-duty manual pump to expel whatever water might splash over the sides of the boat. No one expected the boat to spring a leak, but it was most likely because of the overloading. The boat was still essentially sound, but one of the seams at the bottom had flexed enough to allow water to seep in.

The kids were tasked with the daytime pumping out of the water, starting with the oldest going down to the youngest. The water had to be pumped continuously or they would be done for. Once a boat began taking on water, there was no way to equalize the pressures and soon the boat would fall apart from the excessive hydraulic forces. Taciano and Paco were well aware of the hazard that the leaking boat presented. The water needed to be pumped out non-stop, no matter who had to perform the task.

On the 7th day, another leak developed on the bottom of the boat and the pump wasn't able to keep up with the water coming in. The passengers had to scoop the water with their cupped hands and with anything else that was suitable for removing the water.

The craft had deviated from its ideal compass heading of NNW without Taciano and Paco becoming aware of the fact. They had become so involved with keeping the boat from sinking that they neglected to keep track of the compass. As long as they were still going basically northward, they felt fine. The NNW heading would have gotten them to Florida in the shortest time and distance, but they had been deposited into the hands of a higher power.

On the 8th day, leaks 3 and 4 sprung from the bottom of the boat. Taciano and Paco began to worry that if they couldn't keep the water out of the boat, they might sink. Margherita and Mojita tried to be as emotionally controlled as possible throughout the journey to avoid upsetting the children. With the recent leaks in the boat, it was becoming more difficult for them to remain relatively silent. The fathers didn't want their wives or their children to be afraid, but things were beginning to look bleak.

The children were well trained and cooperative and luckily presented no problems yet. Taciano

began to fear for the lives of his children for the first time in his life. He wished he hadn't embarked on the foolish venture and had stayed in Cuba. Why had he been so foolish? He couldn't help it. He only wanted the best for himself, his wife and his children. Paco felt the same way.

It wasn't easy to live in the Communist country of Cuba, depending on what people wanted out of life. It was the people who visited Cuba from the U.S. that put the ideas into the Cubans to leave their country in the first place. If only Taciano and Paco had stayed at home. They were on the verge of losing everything, including their lives. As the craft slowly settled lower and lower into the ocean, the sun came up and provided an unexpected glint of hope, or so they thought.

The pelican flock that was flying overhead on its way from Key West to Cuba suddenly went into a dive. When the flock flew its usual route back and forth between the countries, the birds took advantage of every offering. The sun's rays had illuminated Taciano's craft and made it visible to the world and especially to the pelicans. As the pelicans dove, another menacing specter appeared.

A school of giant tuna began swimming in a circle to capture the thousands of fish that it would soon eat. Unfortunately, Taciano's craft had drifted into the tuna's whirlpool. The little boat began spinning, slowly and then quickly. The children commenced screaming. Taciano and Paco attempted to calm everyone, but they couldn't. No one on the boat knew what was happening. They were rotating faster and faster.

The pelicans approached closer in their freefall to the little boat. The birds were 100 yards above and the pelican leader began squawking out of anticipation. Taciano looked up when he heard the squawking. Paco also looked up. As the 2 men looked up, they sensed that the end might be near. The kids were screaming at the top of their lungs. Taciano reached for one of the loaded shotguns, turned the weapon to the sky and began pulling the trigger as fast as he could. The sound was deafening. Paco mimicked Taciano's defensive maneuver.

At the sound of the guns, the tuna school instantly stopped swimming in its capture circle and quickly dissipated. The lifeless pelicans fell motionless from the sky like snowflakes and landed on the passengers of the boat. The pelican leader landed on Taciano's head and another one landed on Paco's head. Both men were knocked unconscious. Margherita and Mojita were also hit by limp pelicans and became incapacitated as well. The last 2 deceased pelicans of the flock splashed in the water next to the boat that had finally stopped spinning in a circle.

The 4 parents were unconscious, leaving the 10 kids essentially alone and startled in a sinking boat. Taciano's oldest kid, a boy named Marzano and Paco's oldest, a girl named Sangria were put in charge by default. Marzano ordered the kids to increase the water removal pace and began to whip the children with the belt that he had removed from his jeans. Sangria started screaming

at the younger kids as loud as she could, like the little guy on an Olympic rowing team. "Agua, agua, agua, agua, agua, agua!" Sangria didn't want to be hit by Marzano's belt. Marzano was a big kid for his age and was known to get a little crazy sometimes. The other kids knew better than to disobey Marzano, especially during the hard times they were all experiencing.

The 4 adults remained unconscious as the kids kept frantically pumping and bailing the water from the boat. Sangria instinctively gathered all the pelican carcasses in case they would be needed for food. The water leaking into the bottom of the boat was presenting the older kids with the most challenging time of their lives. When the thunder started cracking in the distance and the rain began pouring down from the sky into the boat, it became even more interesting.

They used the tarp to prevent the rain from adding to the water in the boat. Marzano sat in the back of the boat and Sangria sat in the front. They had everyone else in the boat lying down under the tarp, removing water by any available means. The pump hose peeked out from under the tarp to allow the pumped water to go into the ocean. As they rowed, Marzano and Sangria continued to bail the water from the bottom of the boat with empty water jugs.

The storm intensified, the wind picked up and the lightning increasingly threatened to strike the boat. The younger kids monitored the 4 unconscious parents to make sure they were still alive. There wasn't much that anyone could do at that point. As long as the fallen adults were still breathing, they should be ok.

Marzano and Sangria had heard many tales about their friends and relatives who had attempted to sneak out of Cuba and make their way to Florida. Some of them made it and some didn't. Everyone on the little boat had strong religious inclinations and those feelings were all they had to keep them thinking clearly. The 10 children began chanting various prayers in unison as a means of comforting each other. Without their beliefs, they may not have tried as hard to stay afloat. They could have easily begun complaining that it was too much work to keep bailing the water. The younger kids began bawling when the sound of the lightning grew louder. The relentless rain intensified and the boat heaved in the waves.

Sangria struggled to bail the water, row the boat and calm the youngsters; she felt herself weakening, in spite of Marzano's potential wrath. Even though Marzano had a bit of a romantic crush on Sangria, he would still snap his belt across the back of her neck if she failed to tow the line. Marzano began rowing maniacally and lifted the oar high in the air to get a better bite. A bolt of lightning suddenly hit Marzano's raised oar and he was electrocuted by the flash. His motionless body was thrown out the back of the boat into the ocean. Sangria shrieked when she heard the crack and became nauseated by the smell of Marzano's burned flesh. As she turned to see what happened, her oar was struck by a million volts and she was jettisoned out the front of the boat. As the smoking bodies of Marzano and Sangria drifted away from the boat, the children called their names from under the tarp.

106. Landon's Whisper



106. Landon's Whisper

Everybody Landon knew said he was crazy for doing the job he did. He didn't think it was that big of a deal though. Landon began working with animals when he graduated early from high school at the age of 17. He immediately started working at an animal shelter and then worked for a vet for a while. Landon found that he had in himself a spiritual bond with animals that few people possessed. He felt that he could almost communicate with animals. Naturally, he was no Doctor Doolittle who could talk openly with animals, where he and the animals understood each other. Landon possessed more of an unspoken connection with animals. He could feel some of what the animals were feeling, including their hunger, thirst, pain and fear.

Landon could sense the anticipation that the animals at the vet office felt in the waiting room. Landon noted that when animals were placed in situations where they had no control, they were always nervous. Animals such as dogs visually appeared to be relaxed when they were at dog shows and other public gatherings, but Landon could always tell that they were in reality nervous.

After a number of years working at the vet, an opening came up at the world's largest zoo in San Angelo, Texas. The billionaire owner of the Dallas Cowboys football team, Jerry Jones created the 20,000-acre zoo, because he truly loved animals. Jerry had the top biologists, zookeepers and other animal experts get together to build the zoo. The zoo was the best thing to happen to some of the world's vanishing species. Some of Jerry's advisors had convinced him that they could begin breeding endangered animals at the gigantic zoo to preserve and perpetuate the diminishing animal populations.

It wasn't that they wanted to have animals for the sole purpose of displaying them to people. Jerry's zoo desired to prevent the most endangered of the species from disappearing from the face of the earth forever. Once a species of animal was gone, it couldn't be re-created. Through the careful use of DNA manipulation at the zoo, they could breed healthy animals from the limited stock of parents.

In the wild, if the remaining small numbers of animals attempted to breed, there was a great risk of inbreeding, which led to birth defects. At Jerry's zoo, the new animals were all perfect and healthy. The public seemed to be willing to allow genetic manipulation of animals as long as the animals weren't humans. Science always had its obstacles to new discoveries and always would have them.

When Landon applied to work at the zoo, he noted on his application that he wanted to be a tiger handler. Since he hadn't had any experience at the vet working with tigers, he had to work with other animals first and then gradually switch over to the tigers. The zoo didn't want to take any chances with its precious animals and Landon understood their concerns.

Since Landon had experience at the vet working with horses, he was allowed to start at the zoo as a zebra handler. He handled the zebras for a year and proved to be valuable in the situations when new zebras were brought in from other zoos. Landon had a way of standing close to the zebras and silently "communicating" with them. No one really knew what Landon was doing, because he claimed that he was unable to explain it. Landon had been born with a special gift that was referred to as "whispering." The whispering wasn't actually whispering at all, because it involved a silent exchange between Landon and the animal.

When the new zebras were brought in and put into their preliminary corrals, they were excessively nervous and jerky. In the early evening of the new zebras' first day at the zoo, when the zoo was closed, Landon slowly approached the corral. No other zoo employees were visible to the zebras. Landon walked to the corral with his head lowered and hands forward as if he were pushing against a wall. He gradually got closer and closer. After a 1/2 hour or so, the edgy zebras noticed Landon approaching their corral. Natural curiosity got the best of the zebras and they calmed down a little and made their way toward Landon. Landon continued to slowly approach the corral with his head down and hands forward.

Eventually after an hour, he was at the fence of the corral. Landon stood at the fence and patiently waited for the zebras to approach him. The zebras snorted, scuffed their hooves in the dirt and kicked up clouds of dust. Landon stood silently at the fence as he became covered from head to toe with the dust. The zebras decided to get closer and tiptoed over to the fence. Landon continued to stand there motionless and waited for the zebras to adapt to his calming presence. The zebras stopped short of the fence and snuffled & whinnied. They were still skittish and seemed unnerved at the stillness of the human statue before them.

The zebras dared each other to approach the human. One of the zebras took the chance and walked up to Landon. Landon remained motionless as the zebra cautiously shuffled closer. The zebra stretched its neck out and extended its sniffing nose to one of Landon's outstretched hands. The zebra placed its nose on the palm of Landon's left hand and gently snorted. Landon could feel the fine hairs of the zebra's nose touching his hand. He could feel the warm breath of the nervous zebra on the skin of his palm. After several gentle snorts, moisture began forming on Landon's hand from the condensation of the zebra's steamy breath.

Landon remained motionless as the zebra continued to press its nose against his hand. The zebra gradually settled down and soon backed away. The remaining 7 zebras performed the same act as the first zebra. Landon remained rigid like a stone wall the entire time. The last 2 zebras each nuzzled his hands simultaneously so that at the end of the 73-minute session, Landon was standing there with a zebra nose on each outstretched hand. The zoo filmed the entire event for later study.

When the other zookeepers viewed the video of Landon with the new zebras, no one could

believe how oddly patient and caring he was. When Landon viewed the videos in the presence of the other zookeepers, he admitted that he didn't remember doing what he did in the videos. Landon determined that he must go into some sort of a trance when he whispered to animals. It wasn't something that he could prepare for or explain. It was just something that took over his brain and body. Once he started into his trance, he was unable to snap out of it. Until the last zebra had reached complete relaxation, Landon was at their beckon call. He was there for them. He captured their anxiety and removed it. He could feel their apprehension slipping away and transferring into his soul. Since he possessed such a powerful inner vigor, he was able to absorb enormous amounts of nervous energy with few ill effects to himself.

The zoo was so amazed and flabbergasted by Landon's ability, that his videos were copied and sent to all the zoos of the world for in-depth study. Landon's abilities were labeled as absolutely phenomenal and otherworldly. Everyone had heard of horse whisperers, but no one had ever witnessed spastic zebras calmed down so effectively. Zebras typically required weeks at a zoo to adjust at their own pace. For Landon to compose the zebras in such a relatively quick time was unheard of and seemingly impossible.

Landon had quickly become a bit of a legend among the zookeepers. He had been endowed with a special gift that all animal handlers wished to have. Being able to work in the presence of captive animals and place them at ease was a beautiful thing. All the zookeepers and animal handlers loved their animals and felt empathy toward them, but only Landon could relieve the animals of their anxieties.

After a year of working with the zebras, the zoo wondered if Landon would be able to work with some of the other new animals. Even though Landon didn't have any experience with primates when he worked at the vet, the zoo wanted to see what he could do with the new gorilla. Landon realized that the zoo needed to fully utilize its employees and was content doing whatever the zoo wanted of him. Even though he wanted to eventually work with the tigers, he knew that his special ability was valuable where it was most needed.

Landon's zoo had just received an old mountain gorilla from a zoo that had to get rid of the beast due to it becoming problematic. The old gorilla was a monstrous and powerful specimen and had become intolerant of everything and everyone around it. Those big gorillas were always a popular draw at zoos, but when the gorillas were unhappy, they couldn't be on display to the public. An unhappy gorilla was sometimes a violent and unpredictable entity. Because of the sheer power of one of those big males, the zoo had to isolate an unhappy one in its nighttime sleeping chamber all day long.

The particular old male that had arrived at Landon's zoo was at the point of hurting himself if he had to stay confined for much longer. The gorilla's name was Constantine. Landon had a plan for Constantine in which Landon would be waiting in the large enclosure after the zoo was

closed. Constantine would then be released into the large enclosure. Landon managed to climb up into the highest part of the tallest tree in the enclosure. The normal place for the dominant male gorilla to roost each day was at that highest location. Landon knew that by occupying that place of authority, he was challenging Constantine and could be risking his puny human life in the process. It was the only way to get a rise out of the gorilla.

When Landon was as comfortable as he could be sitting on the hard crotch of the tree, he signaled the zookeeper to lift the connecting door. Landon felt himself becoming at ease and soon didn't notice the discomfort of his situation. At first, Constantine didn't budge from his sleeping cell; the 476-pound monster sulked in the corner and gnawed on some stale turnips.

Constantine soon caught a whiff of Landon out in the large enclosure. Constantine grunted, roared and stormed out into the enclosure as fast as his tree-trunk legs could transport him. The gorilla skidded to a stop at the base of the tallest tree. Constantine sniffed the air as he looked around the enclosure and spun his bulk in a circle. The gorilla was moving faster than he had in months, perhaps years. Constantine couldn't pin down the source of the human smell and never considered looking up into the tree. It wasn't in his psyche that a human would be located in a position of authority high above him. The beast bellowed out of raw frustration.

Landon was in his trance state and accidentally sneezed when insects from the tree had flown into his nostrils. Constantine instantly looked up and saw Landon in the tree in his seat. Constantine screamed. How dare any animal, human or otherwise sit in his seat? Constantine thought he might be hallucinating. It couldn't be a human in his seat. Could it? Constantine confirmed that it was a human in his seat and uttered the loudest, scariest sound that had ever spewed from his fanged mouth.

Since Landon had entered into his trance state, he was unaware of the fierce gorilla 68 feet below him. Constantine continued screeching and added shaking the tree to his scare tactics. Landon calmly adopted his pose of reaching his hands out and froze. Constantine growled and tore at the tree with his 3-inch incisors. The bark of the tree went flying in every direction. Landon remained motionless.

Constantine was becoming incensed and his eyes reddened psychotically. The gorilla was getting to the point where it felt that its scare tactics weren't working. Constantine wasn't accustomed to having any animal - human or ape - resist his authority. How could that human still be in his tree? That human was dead meat if it didn't vacate immediately. Constantine decided to count to 30 and if the human didn't make some kind of attempt to get out of the tree, he would attack.

Constantine counted to 30 while shaking the tree with all his might. The human didn't budge. Constantine gave the human the benefit of the doubt and counted to 60 and then to 90. What was wrong with that human? Was it even alive up there? Was that just a corpse of a human up there

in his spot? Constantine hadn't smelled many corpses in his 42 years, but he knew the smell of death. That was definitely a foul-smelling living human up there in his spot and it was about to regret being alive.

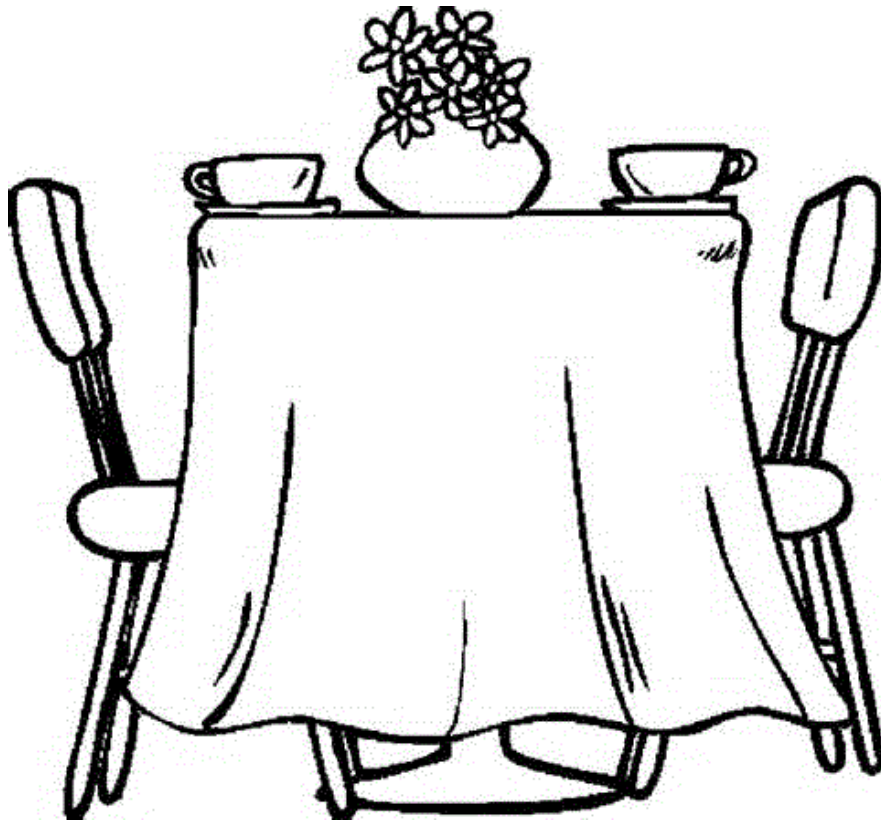
Constantine began climbing the tree, at first quickly and then slowly. Constantine wondered if it was some kind of a trick that his latest captors might be playing on him. Could he be heading into some sort of a trap? Constantine's mind was beginning to play tricks on him. It couldn't be a trap. The predictable humans had never done anything unexpected or strange. Why would the humans begin teasing him now? The humans couldn't be playing a trick on him; it wasn't a trap and he would be safe.

Constantine just couldn't get it straight in his head that a human would be in his tree. The big old gorilla had never been challenged in such a way. The more Constantine thought about it, the angrier he became. His ire caused him to fart, piss and poop as he climbed the tree. Halfway up the tree, Constantine shook the trunk and barked a few drooling remarks at the infiltrator. The human didn't budge. Constantine was torn between wondering if it was a trap or if for some reason the human had found its way up the tree by accident. At the 3/4 height of the tree, Constantine spotted Landon's outstretched arms. Constantine had never seen a human in such a pose and again wondered if it was a trap. The gorilla continued climbing and slowed his pace, as he got closer to the unusual human. Five feet from Landon, Constantine stopped and observed for a moment. What was that guy doing there? He wasn't moving and he was holding his hands out for some reason. Constantine continued up the tree.

When Constantine reached Landon, the gorilla grunted and warily touched Landon's foot with his leathery index finger. Landon remained in his trance as the gorilla poked and prodded out of curiosity. Constantine sniffed his leathery finger, then coughed and sneezed. Landon remained immobile as Constantine reluctantly found himself reaching out to touch one of Landon's outstretched hands. Constantine was unable to restrain himself. The gorilla didn't like what was happening, but was compelled to continue.

Landon didn't move as Constantine nervously touched him with his trembling leathery finger. At the instant of contact, the gorilla felt something that it had never felt before, compassion. The human's hand was warm and welcoming. Constantine's eyes began watering and he could do nothing to stop the flow of tears. Landon's eyes began watering as well. Constantine didn't know why he was crying, but he liked it. The gorilla felt years of frustration and confusion leaving his body. Constantine became tranquil and accepting of his new surroundings. He no longer felt lonely and unwilling to get along with others. Landon and Constantine remained in contact for 11 hours, until Landon finally collapsed from exhaustion. The mighty Constantine gently wiped the tears from Landon's face and cradled him in one of his massive arms. The ape then carefully climbed down the tree with his new best friend.

107. Nathaniel's Tables



107. Nathaniel's Tables

Nathaniel was an actor or at least wanted to be an actor. He was currently taking acting lessons at one of the many acting schools in NYC. After his lessons during the day, he worked as a server at whichever restaurant he could tolerate. NYC was easily overloaded, overflowing and fully saturated with all the wannabe actors and actresses who didn't want to work at real jobs. The earth was crawling with people who thought they were the next Deniro, Kidman, Hoffman, Streep or Eastwood. Little did those thousands of people realize, but Hollywood was similar to all sports except baseball, in that less than 2% of the hopefuls ever became professionals.

It didn't stop people from trying. There was no shortage of people in society who refused to be stuck in a 9 to 5 scenario. It was because of those people that the acting schools of NYC prospered so ridiculously. The lure of "easy" fame and fortune that resulted from doing something that you loved was irresistible.

Nathaniel had just started his 6-hour shift at 5:00 pm and had walked into the restaurant with a surly attitude. The instructor at Nathaniel's acting school had unfairly critiqued Nathaniel's performance of the Julius Caesar scene where Caesar confronted Marc Antony. The instructor didn't like the way that Nathaniel had played the role of Marc Antony. Nathaniel thought that he had played the part perfectly and had become upset with the instructor.

So many young players thought they knew it all when in actuality, they didn't know squat. The instructors gladly took in all the money from the young actors and actresses, knowing full well that 98% to 100% of their students would never amount to anything. It was rare for someone to walk into any acting school and immediately stand out as a great actor.

Nathaniel should have been able to shake off the instructor's criticism, but couldn't. He wasn't yet at the point of being able to accept criticism gratefully and learn from it. He was still in the early stages when his friends and relatives had convinced him that he was a great actor already. Nathaniel's inherent arrogance contributed to the fantasy of believing that he was a great actor. Nathaniel hadn't really established himself on stage yet, let alone on film.

All any acting school instructor needed was one semi-major role in any of the Broadway or off-Broadway plays to be able to open up an acting school of their own. Once the acting school was open, the listing in the phonebook took over and the rest was easy. The wannabe actors came into the schools every day looking for just the right guidance that would get them to the big time. The acting school owners and instructors played a sick game where they always won and the students at the acting schools nearly always lost.

The owners/instructors of the acting schools genuinely hoped that all of their students would make it big someday and would credit the school or instructor for giving them their start in the

industry. The owners/instructors knew better and kept their true opinions to themselves. They had everything to lose by discouraging their pupils too much to the point of quitting their enrollment at the school. The rare times when one of their pupils made it big and gave shouts out to their schools always provided a large influx of new students to the school.

Nathaniel was upset, but he had to hide it for the sake of his customers at the restaurant. The restaurant was a form of stage in itself where Nathaniel had to pretend to care about the customers. He had to feign interest in what they wanted to eat, how they wanted it cooked, their beverage refills and finally how they actually enjoyed eating the meal. The restaurant was a place where there was no acting instructor to criticize his performance. Nathaniel was on a stage where each customer was an individual audience. Nathaniel acted as if he cared about the customer and the customer responded accordingly to his performance via tips. The extent of the script that Nathaniel had to memorize was the order that each customer placed.

The restaurant's policy demanded that the servers take no orders from customers by writing them down. The servers were required to memorize the orders in every detail, including the way the meat was cooked, etc. A table of 2 or 4 was never much of a problem, but when a large party came in, Nathaniel broke the restaurant's rules and wrote down all the details of the large orders. Nathaniel felt that the customers would be more impressed by getting their exact order, than by the ability of the server to memorize a large order. Nathaniel was correct in his assumption. Whenever he talked to the customers in the larger parties about how their orders were taken, the customers were always glad that the orders were written down.

Nathaniel's first table of the shift involved a couple where the man wanted his steak cooked medium rare and the woman wanted her steak cooked medium. The differences in actual cookedness of the 2 steaks was relatively minimal, but just enough for discriminating connoisseurs to notice. Nathaniel had memorized the order correctly, but when it was relayed to the kitchen, the order had been misinterpreted as 2 steaks both cooked as medium rare.

When Nathaniel brought the steaks to the table and the woman cut into her steak, she freaked out when she observed the pinkness of the medium rare cook of her steak. Neither customer ate any of their meal and demanded 2 completely new meals, with the steaks cooked correctly. Nathaniel put on his best acting for the couple and pretended to be sorry, etc. When Nathaniel brought the 2 meals back to the kitchen, the executive chef ordered 2 new meals to be fired. Of course, when meals had to be re-created in a commercial kitchen, it threw off the harmony. The other meals behind the re-fires were destined to be later than expected.

Depending on the restaurant, different things could happen. In lesser restaurants, the woman's steak would be tossed into the oven and cooked longer to get it to the desired medium state. The man's meal would be gently placed on the hotplate to keep it warm until the woman's steak was ready. In fine restaurants, both meals would be completely re-created from scratch. Customers

who were accustomed to fine dining would always be able to tell if their meals were re-created from scratch or just re-heated. The lesser restaurants took a chance when they re-heated instead of re-creating the meals from scratch. Sometimes the customers of the lesser restaurants noticed the compromise; sometimes they didn't.

Nathaniel felt that he wasn't responsible for what happened in the kitchen. He provided the orders to the kitchen correctly and it was up to them to get the orders right. It was the unfortunate situation of the server that forced them to bear the brunt of the blame whenever an order wasn't processed correctly.

The kitchen staff made the same wages, whether they got the orders right or not. The wait staff earned the tips, which could sometimes be substantial on a busy evening, with a majority of correct orders being executed. Even though it was dicey at times at the restaurant, the large tips on the good days usually made up for the lower-tip dicey days. The servers always had to maintain their composure in the face of the irate or annoyed customers. There was never in the history of the restaurant business a dinner service where every customer in the restaurant was happy to the point of not issuing a complaint of some sort.

Nathaniel tried to let the customers not bother him. He attempted to treat every customer with the charade of caring for their welfare, but it wasn't always easy. The restaurant he currently worked at was fine dining to the point of being ridiculously overpriced. The food was definitely high quality, but no one should have to pay the prices that Nathaniel's restaurant demanded of its customers. The main reason that Nathaniel worked at the restaurant was the higher tips that came with the higher priced meals. For the same amount of time of his life wasted, Nathaniel could make more money at a fine dining restaurant than at a lower priced restaurant.

It was no secret to the wait staff industry that the highest tips were collected at the best restaurants. However, the best restaurants would only hire wait staff that had worked at lesser restaurants first. It was impossible for someone to go from working at a diner to working at a restaurant like Nathaniel's. Unless somebody knew somebody higher up, it was expected for wait staff to put in their time like everybody else and work their way up to the finest dining establishments.

When Nathaniel brought the 2 new meals to the table, they complained that they had to wait so long to eat dinner. Nathaniel was authorized by the owner of the restaurant to give the couple free drinks and they were happy with the consolation prize. If both meals had been incorrectly cooked by the kitchen, the restaurant would have given the couple 2 free dinners.

It was always the goal of the best restaurants to get customers to return and to tell their friends to try the restaurant for the first time. Repeat business was the concept that all businesses sought, not just restaurants. It was like a given amount of income that a business could count on going

forward. The lesser businesses that were forced to offer coupons to get business didn't understand and apparently didn't care to understand how to play the game correctly.

Another of Nathaniel's tables had stressed that they had a dietary restriction on how much butter they could eat each day. The customer asked if the meal they desired involved a lot of butter in the preparation. Nathaniel didn't know the exact amount of butter used, since he wasn't the chef cooking the meal. Nathaniel informed the person that he would ask the chef how much butter would be used in preparing the meal. When Nathaniel asked the executive chef, the chef said the meal had about a tablespoon of butter in it. In reality, the chef used more than a tablespoon of butter, since the butter is what gave some of the meals so much flavor.

The meat dishes had butter, the vegetables had butter and virtually every other meal in a fine restaurant with French cooking had a lot of butter in it. When Nathaniel informed the customer of the amount of butter that the chef claimed would be in the meal, the customer ordered the meal. After eating the meal, the customer became violently ill from the excessive amount of butter in the food. Nathaniel had to witness the complaining of the sickened customer and he had to instruct the maitre d' to call for an ambulance.

Nathaniel was blamed for the sickness of the customer because he had relayed the alleged amount of butter to the sickened customer. The customer was taken to the hospital as a result of the excessive amount of butter in their delicate system. As a result of the butter incident, the restaurant initiated a new policy. They added fine print to the bottom of the menu that stated how the meals were authentically prepared by following French cooking standards, which didn't compromise flavor by reducing crucial ingredients.

It was up to the customers to read between the lines to interpret that not compromising flavor meant that the food was cooked with a lot of butter and other dietary evils as required, in order to attain authentic flavor. The customer didn't press the matter any further after they were released from the hospital following a 2-hour stay. The person's doctor had previously advised them to stay away from all fine dining restaurants, but the person was unable to change their ways.

One of Nathaniel's customers that evening ordered a broiled brook trout that was served whole with the head on it. The customer wasn't very good at avoiding the bones and had accidentally swallowed one. The person immediately began choking out of reflex and created a huge scene in the restaurant. Like all the employees of every restaurant big and small, Nathaniel had been thoroughly trained in choking emergencies. Nathaniel had the person stand up and he placed his hands in the correct location on the front of the person's body and performed the Heimlich maneuver. In seconds, the fish bone went flying out of the person's mouth. The bone hit the eye of a person who had been sitting at the table next to the choking person.

The fish bone punctured the person's eye and the restaurant called for an ambulance. The

person's vision was restored soon after the incident. The person on whom Nathaniel performed the Heimlich never saw him again or thanked him for possibly saving their life.

One of Nathaniel's customers was a diabetic who thought they had absolute control of their condition. The customer had ordered an excessively sugary dessert and passed out as they completed 3/4 of the tasty treat. The person went into a diabetic shock and suffered from alarming muscle spasms. Since Nathaniel had witnessed people with similar condition before, he immediately ran to a phone and dialed 911.

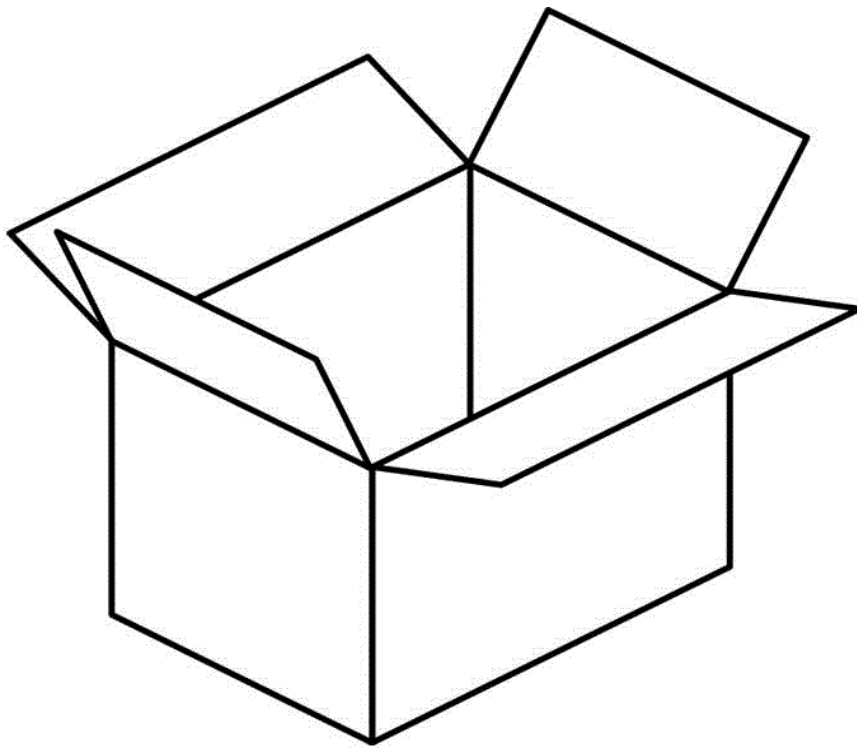
Not every night at the restaurant involved so many ambulance visits, but when they did, it was up to the staff to react professionally and pretend it was the first time that an emergency occurred at the restaurant. No restaurant could afford to have a panic erupt that would result in an unflattering article in the news or a food critic's column. Nathaniel was never flustered when the customers had their issues. If people were too stubborn to follow their doctor's advice or too clumsy to eat certain foods, so be it. Restaurants couldn't spoon-feed the customers.

It was up to the wait staff to attempt to always be on good terms with the kitchen staff. Even though all the employees of the restaurant worked together for the greater good of the restaurant, there were occasional internal riffs. If one of the chefs wanted to screw one of the servers, they could easily sabotage a meal in any number of devious ways. Even though it would eventually come back to the kitchen as the chef's mistake, the server was initially harassed publicly by the customer.

Some of the restaurant industry's chefs were disgruntled by having to wait so long to get a job as an executive chef. Some of those chefs became a little twisted along the way. As far as Nathaniel knew, he was on good terms with all the chefs of the kitchen, but sometimes he wasn't so sure. The chefs typically considered the wait staff to be untalented oafs who lived in a fantasy. The kitchen staff felt that they were much more talented than the servers were, via their culinary skills. Some of the chefs felt nothing but disdain for the servers, particularly a chef named Udo, who so thoroughly despised Nathaniel, that trouble was imminent. Udo had been lying in wait for the moment to strike at Nathaniel, like an alligator clandestinely floating in a swamp.

Amid the kitchen clatter, Udo overheard the maitre d' excitedly talking about the arrival of a famous actor and that Nathaniel had been assigned to the actor's table. Udo knew that the pusillanimous Nathaniel would be kissing the actor's butt. Udo secretly sprinkled blazingly hot pepper flakes into the sauce for the actor's meal. The pepper flakes blended in with the other herbs & spices of the sauce and were visually indistinguishable. When Nathaniel served the meal to the actor, the person's first bite caused them to begin squealing and gagging from the ferocity of the heat. As Nathaniel attempted to help, the actor fell to the floor and suffered a cardiac arrest. The actor was Kirk Douglas who had been celebrating his triumphant return to Hollywood after attending the premiere of his new Spartacus movie.

108. Nixon's Box



108. Nixon's Box

Not all boxes were created equal. Just ask any homeless person who lived on the streets. Nixon had learned years ago that the choicest cardboard boxes were the ones that previously contained refrigerators. Nixon had to duel with a snarly old woman to take ownership of his latest box and he would fight until his last breath in order to keep it. The boxes provided limited shelter from the weather and suitable privacy from the other homeless in the community next to the river.

Depending on what part of the country the homeless people lived, life could be incredibly difficult. The main factor in surviving on the streets in the colder northern states was obviously the winter season. In the north, the subway tunnels became sanctuaries for the homeless. The local municipalities tried to accommodate the homeless, but they also had to keep the subway tunnels safe. The homeless who lived in the tunnels knew enough to avoid the trains, which was all that mattered to the Police. The homeless crept out of the tunnels for their daily free meals and crawled back into the dark holes at night.

None of the homeless had any money or possessions of any value and rarely tried to steal from each other. The unfortunate homeless who were smokers, alcoholics or drug addicts had the most difficult lives, since they needed money to feed their addictions. Nixon was one of the "lucky" homeless people who had no addictions yet, most likely because he had only recently become a vagrant.

Citizens often wondered how it was possible for anyone to become homeless in the first place. The next question was, why did the homeless stay homeless? Why couldn't they just get jobs, make money and find places to live? There were numerous psychological factors, which plagued the homeless that defied typical logic.

It was the easiest thing in the world for working folks to unjustly judge the homeless. Many of the itinerants were born into poverty and began their lives in government housing or on welfare, etc. They may have become homeless after quitting school or could never find any work in the first place. Many homeless people at one time had jobs and also large debts, due to living beyond their means. When they lost their jobs, they filed for bankruptcy to pay off their debts and became homeless as a result.

The saddest homeless cases were the entire families that lost their homes. There was no greater misery than that of parents who were unable to provide the most basic of needs for their children. Fortunately, there were no homeless families in Nixon's homeless community in South Carolina.

When people initially started living on the streets, they still believed that it was a temporary condition. The newly homeless always felt they would be under a real roof again very soon. Eventually, the newly homeless become accustomed to living outside and adapt themselves to it.

Most of the cities had facilities where the homeless could get something to eat, but sleeping quarters were always at a premium.

When the homeless had been on the streets for a certain amount of time, something happened to them. The amount of time was different for each homeless person. When that time was reached, it was a sad thing for humanity. When the homeless reached that point of no return, they began to slip mentally. They gradually lost any desire to go back to their former productive lives. Society did what it could for the destitute and homeless via taxes, donations and volunteers, but only so much could ever realistically be done.

The only true "friends" and saviors the vagrants had were the churches and other religious organizations that passed no judgement and only wanted to help them. Unfortunately, when the homeless reached the point of no return, they didn't always care to be helped and weren't always grateful for the help. If only the homeless knew how some people really cared for them, they might become motivated enough to want to better themselves. Once the point of no return had been reached however, the homeless were essentially just waiting for their existences to end.

Nixon was too newly homeless to realize that the hardened homeless people had different viewpoints on life. Nixon still believed he could pull himself out of his situation. He still believed that it would be just a matter of time when he would get a job again. Nixon had been working as a first mate on a chartered fishing boat, but due to the recent economic conditions had been laid off. Nixon wasn't skilled enough to do much else except fishing, since he had quit high school at 16 and never received his GED or TASC certification. Nixon didn't realize it at the time, but quitting school had been the biggest mistake of his life. He was currently 24 and living on the streets in a box. It wasn't exactly the best life, but at least he was still alive and somewhat optimistic.

The limited work that Nixon found in the agricultural fields was barely enough to get him some stale food, which he shared with the community members who still ate food. Many of the community only wanted cigarettes, alcohol or drugs to get them through each day. Nixon often asked himself how the creator could cause so much suffering to take place on earth.

Nixon didn't want himself to slip into the psychosis that his community members had sunken into. He couldn't let it happen; he wouldn't. In fact, he was trying to get some of his fellow homeless to go with him to do some crop picking for money, but it was difficult. The unwritten rule in the homeless community was that nobody messed with anybody, no matter what. Whenever Nixon approached someone in the early morning to go picking, they grunted at him and threw garbage at him. Occasionally they threw poop at him. Sometimes the people were irked enough to soak a dirty rag in the vile urine puddles and snap it at him like athletes snap towels at each other in a locker room.

Once an old homeless woman snapped a urine-soaked towel at him and hit him in the left eye. His eye instantly swelled shut, due to the filthiness of the rag and toxic nature of the hag's piss. The woman wasn't remorseful for blinding Nixon's eye and she laughed heartily at his pain. Nixon learned his lesson from the event and decided to let the sleeping dogs of the community lie and he kept his mouth shut from that point on. Nixon occasionally went to the docks in the morning, hoping to get onto a fishing charter. The charter company that Nixon worked for had gone out of business after they laid him off. The economy in South Carolina was at its worst point in a long time, with many people being forced out of their homes onto the streets to survive.

When Nixon thought about it, he wondered how most of his fellow homeless survived. He was the only one he knew of who worked, but the people managed to get by in ways that weren't always obvious. The people did what they could and no one asked any questions. It was generally assumed by the community members that some of the people dabbled in the oldest profession and some of the people engaged in other interesting activities.

When old Ophelia snapped his eye with the urine-soaked rag, Nixon tried to avoid letting it bother him. He had given up trying to help his fellow homeless, but it was beginning to wear on him. He wanted to lift himself and others out of the muck and mire of the box community. He decided to try again one morning and asked a new guy named Bartholomew if he wanted to go picking at one of the orchards. Bart agreed to go, just to try it out. At the end of the long day, Nixon and Bart made a nice piece of change for their hard labor.

Bart asked Nixon if the picking jobs were always available and Nixon said they weren't. There were always people available to pick crops who were pickers by profession. It was only during the peak seasons when the farms hired random pickers to do the work. The professional pickers were better at the job and easier on the produce, but cost more to hire. The random pickers that the farms hired during the peak times were suitable in a pinch and cheaper.

Nixon asked Bart if he knew any other homeless or otherwise destitute people who might like to make some money picking crops. Bart thought the scary looking guy named Steel might want to go some morning, but Bart was too fearful to ask the guy. Nixon wasn't afraid, although he was still wary from the urine-soaked rag incident. Nixon decided to ask Steel the next morning and planned to be ready for some type of crazed reaction.

The next morning at 5:00 am, Nixon approached Steel who was still sleeping. Nixon cautiously nudged Steel and the sleeping man didn't wake up. Bart urged Nixon to nudge Steel again and he did. There was still no reaction from Steel. Nixon nudged again and without warning was hit in the face by a large hard piece of poop, probably Steel's. The poop hit Nixon in the cheekbone and was so hard that it cut the skin a little. Steel yelled and threw another piece of poop that hit Bart in the forehead. That piece didn't cut Bart's skin, but left a huge brownish bruise.

Steel screamed at Nixon and asked him what he wanted. Nixon told Steel and Steel surprisingly agreed to go picking. Steel didn't apologize for pelting Nixon and Bart with the rock-hard poop. At the end of the long picking day, the 3 of them went home with some money and Steel didn't thank anybody for the opportunity. Nixon never again asked Steel to go picking. Bart suggested asking Ophelia if she wanted to go picking crops some morning. Nixon told Bart about the rag incident and Bart laughed. Nixon admitted that it was a funny thing to happen and he also laughed. At least they could sometimes find something to laugh at during their miserable existence in the box community.

On Wednesday of the following week at Nixon's homeless community, a tractor-trailer slowly backed down the path and the driver yelled, "Come and get it!" No one in the community reacted except for Nixon, Bart and Steel. The driver opened the back of the trailer and began tossing box after box out onto the ground. When the driver was done, there were hundreds of boxes of various cold foods and other products sitting there. The driver announced to the homeless of the community that the free stuff was courtesy of an anonymous donor.

The freebies consisted of hot dogs, hamburgers, sausage, bacon, eggs, condiments, rolls, bread, butter, milk, juices, chips, plastic utensils, napkins, paper towels, toilet paper, shampoo, bars of soap, bath towels, other foods, gallon jugs of water and 100 cases of Pepsi. The community descended on the food and had the biggest picnic in the history of any homeless organization. Nixon, Bart, Steel and Ophelia ate food to the point of becoming sick and dizzy. Then they took naps and ate more food. The community had always maintained fires 24 hours a day, so that cooking the food was easy. They cooked and ate everything perishable as quickly as they could, which was no problem.

Nixon and Bart carried several of the cases of Pepsi into the city and sold them to one of the many delis, just to get some cash out of the windfall. Nixon had always wondered why no members of the homeless community ever fished from the river running next to the community. Nixon and Bart applied some of the Pepsi money toward buying a bunch of fishing gear from the local Walmart store. The next day, Nixon and Bart went fishing and successfully removed dozens of succulent catfish from the river.

Some of the other homeless became interested in the fishing activity and joined in. Before they knew what was happening, Nixon and Bart were joined by Steel, Ophelia and a strange guy named Bonzo. Luckily, Nixon and Bart had purchased enough fishing gear for 6 people, because they never expected so many people to participate. On the 3rd day of fishing, a greasy woman named Cam joined the fishing gang, increasing the number of anglers to 6. Surprisingly, there was something about fishing that seemed to energize the people. Where previously the majority of the community seemed to be zombified, more and more of them were beginning to watch the people who were fishing in the river. More people began to ask if they could give fishing a try.

The community members slowly became more civilized and sociable people again. A new mindset was taking over the community via the magic of fishing. The members were being pulled together by the utility of fishing for food and then cooking and eating the freshly harvested meal. The simple act of fishing had managed to pull some of the people back from the other side. It was amazing. Nixon couldn't believe what was happening. He convinced Bart that they should sell the rest of the Pepsi to the delis to buy more fishing gear. Bart agreed to sell the Pepsi to buy enough fishing gear so everyone in the community would have a full set of gear.

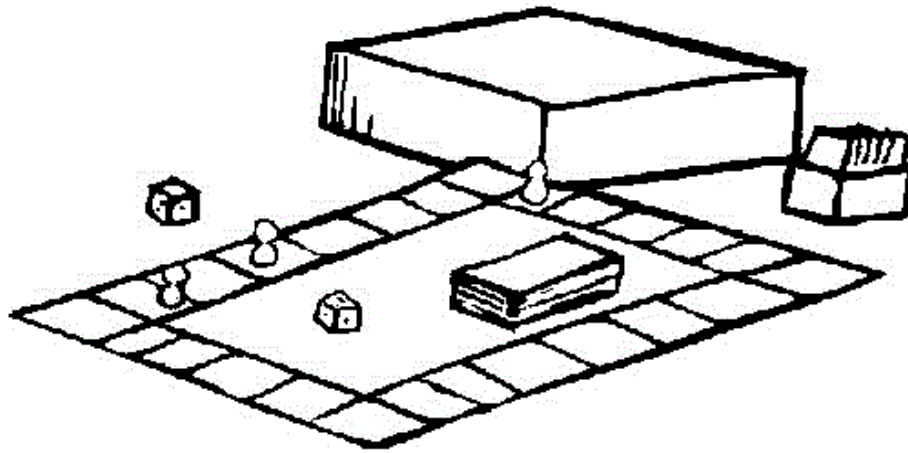
In a month, the entire homeless community was harvesting large amounts of catfish from the river on a daily basis. On a whim, Nixon bought a used courier's bicycle and towable cooler to transport some of the live fish to the open market for sale. He was surprised at the demand for live fish by the restaurants. The younger chefs wanted the freshest fish for their entrees and nothing was fresher than living fish. The restaurants wanted all the fish that Nixon could procure, prompting Nixon to buy more bikes and coolers to bring the morning's fresh catch to the market. The homeless community had been reborn with their new industry. They bought wood and tools to construct a long roof structure to protect their cardboard boxes from the occasional rain. The community soon had a fleet of bicycle/cooler units and everyone was fishing and transporting the live fish each morning to the market. The homeless were beginning to talk about their futures for the first time in years. The outlook for the community was idyllic.

A number of miles down the river from Nixon's box community in the next city district, members of another riverside homeless community were beginning to wonder what happened to all the catfish that they had been living on for years. The community was reverting to a starvation mode and didn't like it. Two of the community's elders sneakily canoed up the river to investigate. After hours of rowing upstream, they reached Nixon's little village. When the elders spied what was going on at Nixon's village, they resolved to take drastic action.

On an early Monday morning, Nixon and his community members routinely rode their bike/cooler units to the market to sell their live fish. When they returned to their box community, they viewed with horror the sickening remains of their formerly happy village. Nixon's previously bustling community had been reduced to smoldering coals, embers and ashes. There were no structures, boxes or anything left. All the fishing gear was missing.

Nixon, Bart and Bonzo blankly looked at each other with their drooling mouths hanging open. Ophelia began viciously slapping a stone-faced Steel for no reason, as if to blame him for the disaster. Cam ran away from the carnage screaming at the top of her lungs. Another guy tore off all his clothes, jumped into the river and disappeared downstream. A lone seagull flying overhead casually squirted out a morsel of whitish poop. It landed on the still glowing cinders of the burned wooden roof that once shielded Nixon's cardboard house. The seagull's poop burst into flames on impact and a foul wisp of smoke rose into the air.

109. Orlando's Game



109. Orlando's Game

It was elementary for Orlando to play his game; people were too trusting and believing in the good of other people. He realized early in life how easily people could be taken advantage of after being disarmed by his charm. After Orlando graduated from high school, his father taught him everything about conning people. Orlando's father had known all too well how Orlando would be set for life, once he had begun playing the game. His father wanted the best for his only child, but part of that was Orlando getting the essential free education in the public school system. No one could get anywhere in the world without knowing the basics.

Since Orlando's father had given away to charity all his ill-gotten gains, Orlando was on his own to sink or swim. Orlando was determined to swim. His father bequeathed him the modest house to live in, which was fully paid for. With the "free" house came the taxes, utilities and maintenance costs. It seemed that nothing in life was free, even a free house.

For Orlando's first con, he went around to all the local delis and 7-eleven stores to place his 5-gallon water bottles. Orlando researched all the major charities and picked one that he didn't see represented at the stores. The key was to pick a charity that most people had heard of, but the actual charities didn't collect donations via the direct method of the bottles. People always had spare change when they made purchases and it was the easiest thing in the world to toss the change into the bottles.

Orlando visited the website of the charity and extracted the logo, from which he printed labels for the bottles on his high quality color laser printer. His father left behind an expensive printer and always stressed the importance of the quality of the con. When a cause appeared to be genuine, people couldn't resist donating their hard-earned money to it.

Orlando's father emphasized the quality point more than anything else. The con had to look authentic to not only work, but also to work without any hesitation on the part of those being conned. If people sensed that a con appeared to be phony, they wouldn't bite and might possibly reveal the con to the authorities. Orlando promised a small percentage of the take from the bottle money to the establishments for their cooperation.

A con couldn't be allowed to wear out its welcome. If a con was a weak, but still effective one, it had to be closely monitored and discontinued before anyone caught onto it. Orlando put out a total of 147 bottles and raked in \$18,467, after giving the stores their minimal take. It was enough money for Orlando to cover all his living expenses for a year.

He was ready to concentrate on his first real game. Even though Orlando's father had instilled in him all the basic knowledge of cons, Orlando wanted to think up new cons, in case people were wary of his father's old tricks. Orlando wanted to create a game that would involve the gain of

the largest amount of money in the shortest amount of time. Orlando's father had always taught that the biggest gains were secured from the wealthy widows.

There were rich lonely women everywhere who had inherited their deceased husbands' fortunes. The only annoyance was that the rich widows were a tad on the old side. As long as Orlando didn't mind becoming essentially a gigolo for the women, he could live in the lap of luxury for as long as he wished. Those older widows loved having pretty young boys to play around with and take out on the town. Orlando had never felt himself to be much of a ladies' man, but the old widows didn't care. They liked that fresh young meat to satisfy their every strange need.

Orlando had always looked older than his age and when he sported a 5 o'clock shadow, he could pass for a young man in his early 20's, even though he was still only 18. He always kept himself physically fit and possessed the athletic body of a swimmer with his solid 6'2" frame. Under his father's tutelage, Orlando had taken dance lessons and could dramatically light up the dance floor with the best of them.

The widows regularly hired young studs from the many escort services that abounded in Orlando's home of Memphis. The recently widowed women always needed someone to accompany them to their many social engagements. The women were typically involved in many of the events and committees related to their former husbands' businesses. The widows were accustomed to attending the social functions as part of a couple. Escorts were frequently brought to the social events, even though they were obviously not fulfilling the original roles of the widows' former husbands. No one ever made a big deal out of it and the escorts knew what their role was in the play. The widows simply needed a male body to stand in for their deceased husbands.

The key issue for the male escorts was being able to tolerate being a mere talking head and mannequin of sorts. The escorts were never expected to add much to the conversations, since most of them were dopey models. When Orlando applied at the escort agency, they immediately snapped him up after the requisite interview. The agency saw Orlando as being a more intelligent and conversational type of escort who could hold his own when his client got into worldly discussions.

When Orlando's first client Juniper hired him, she thought he was just another one of the dolts from the agency that she had been reluctantly using as her paid dates. Orlando immediately impressed Juniper with his obvious smarts and ability to intelligently engage in any conversation that arose at Juniper's outings. Juniper admitted to herself that she didn't think it was possible to find someone as intelligent as Orlando at an escort agency.

Juniper talked with her friends about Orlando at the afternoon tea on the day following the first Orlando-attended meeting. Juniper's friends had all agreed that there was something different

about Orlando. He wasn't just another idiot male model working as an escort. Orlando seemed to have much more to offer. After Juniper had hired Orlando another 12 times for her busy spring season of meetings and committees and had witnessed his true ability to hobnob with society's finest, she began to take a liking to him.

Orlando had all the patience in the world, since he was still young and had a long life in front of him. He took everything that came along with maturity and the willingness to wait for the natural passage of time. Orlando didn't want Juniper to sense that he might be setting her up for a fall. He realized that she had lost her husband of several years and was probably suspicious of the escorts who might be gold diggers.

Obviously Orlando never saw himself marrying some older widow, but he left his options open. The key for Orlando's game was to relax and go with the pace established by Juniper. He made no suggestions unless she asked him. He rarely spoke unless spoken to. He played the perfect character that she had been looking for at that point in her life.

Due to Orlando's ability to listen intently during conversations, he could absorb massive amounts of pertinent information. After enough exposure to a particular topic, Orlando was able to meaningfully contribute to any conversation. His ability greatly impressed Juniper, because she sensed that he was too young to have actually experienced many things in life. The way that Orlando could so easily talk about any topic flabbergasted Juniper and her friends.

Juniper found that some of her friends began to wish they were in Juniper's shoes. There she was with that amazing young stud who was becoming more engaging than her stuffy deceased husband had ever been. Juniper was beginning to become possessive of Orlando and hoped that he would continue to be her escort, for as long as she required.

Once Orlando sensed that Juniper was beginning to want him near her on a more permanent basis, he was ready to set the hook. The concept was to press Juniper to see how much she really needed him. He would do that by pretending to have an opportunity out of town, which would involve him leaving her service and possibly never seeing her again. Orlando was attempting to get Juniper to go beyond the point of hiring him as an escort and to go to the next level of having him live with her in some capacity.

Orlando had to offer Juniper an ultimatum where she would have to make the ultimate decision. Orlando needed to present a threat to Juniper that she might lose him. Either she would take the bait and make some sort of proposition to him or she would have to allow him to depart from her life forever.

Orlando declined one of Juniper's requests to attend one of her committee meetings. Then he declined another. When she asked him why he kept declining, he dropped the fake bomb that he

would be leaving town for an irresistible modeling offer. He didn't respond to her phone calls for 2 weeks afterward. He knew he was taking a chance by messing with her, but he was confident. As Orlando had hoped, Juniper decided that she couldn't live without him as her escort and she asked him what she could do to prevent him from leaving town.

Orlando compelled Juniper to devise a plan of action. After a week, Juniper offered to hire Orlando to work for her and live on her estate. Orlando asked Juniper what his role would be and she explained that it would be as her permanent escort/companion. Orlando played his game hard and told Juniper that he would feel as if he were a male prostitute if he agreed to her conditions. He let her stew for another 3 weeks. She had to come up with a better arrangement.

Orlando knew he was pushing it, but his father always said, "Nothing ventured; nothing gained." Orlando was fully aware that he had nothing to lose with the widow. He had lived high on the hog for a while and had learned how to hold his own with some of the wealthiest men and women in Memphis. It was up to Juniper to come up with a solution that favored him more than her. Orlando hoped Juniper would offer him some kind of contract where his salary would be guaranteed for a year or so and if possible, he could get insurance coverage of some kind.

Orlando's patience had to govern his decisions; he didn't want it to appear to Juniper that she had been manipulated into doing anything. He had to continue to maintain that the modeling job was important to his future. Juniper would have to offer him something more than just money or a place to live. Orlando tried to get Juniper to understand that he was a young man with a great future ahead of him. He needed the modeling opportunity to start realizing that future. Juniper would have to offer him something suitable that would enable him to temporarily put his future on hold.

After a month of communication, Juniper wasn't saying what Orlando wanted to hear. Maybe he had underestimated her; maybe she didn't need him as badly as she appeared to. Maybe she was trying to play her own game. Orlando gave Juniper one more week to make her offer. On the 7th day over the phone, he told her he was leaving and she broke down in tears. Juniper begged him to stay with her.

Orlando finally managed to get Juniper's lawyers to create a contract where Orlando could go to college in Memphis for 4 years and live at Juniper's estate free of charge. When he wasn't in class, he would be at Juniper's beck and call. Orlando had hit the jackpot. His father always said that if Orlando could ever arrange some kind of situation for several years, eventually the widow would want to marry him or put him in her will, etc. In the meantime, Orlando could get a free college education while living in luxury. All he had to do was keep Juniper happy, which would be easy.

After the 1st year of college, Orlando noticed that Juniper began to fall in love with him. He

knew it would happen sooner or later, because she was still vulnerable and needy. Orlando had been prepared for whatever might come along, including marrying her, but only if she asked him first. Orlando never suggested anything or offered anything to the victim of the con; the victim always had to be the instigator. If it ever came down to any ugly legal issues, Orlando could never be implicated as the initiator of the events.

Unbeknownst to Orlando, Juniper's clandestine bedtime buddy, business adviser and confidant was her chauffeur Demetrius. Juniper had been having problems with purchasing some valuable development land in Hawaii from one of her husband's former business enemies named Orville. Orville had been refusing to sell the crucial piece of land that Juniper required for full access to a larger plot of land. Orville wouldn't sell the property to Juniper at any price, out of revenge for wrongdoings done to him by her husband. Demetrius proposed to Juniper that Orville should meet with an accident of some kind. The land would then be more easily obtainable from Orville's next of kin, who was known to be in need of money.

Juniper invited Orville to one of her famous garden parties along with many other regulars, including Orlando. Before the party, Juniper had beseeched Orlando to try to convince Orville to sell her the land. She hoped Orlando would be a suitable mediator, since Orville barely knew Orlando. At the end of the party, Orville and Orlando appeared to be hitting it off marvelously by the pool. They had obviously consumed a few cocktails, because they were yelling and laughing quite loudly. They began jumping into the pool with all their clothes on, climbing out and jumping back in again. They looked like a couple of school kids.

After Orville took his turn and jumped in again, Demetrius appeared out of the darkness and jumped into the pool after Orville. The bullish Demetrius rushed over to Orville and began holding him under the water. Juniper sashayed out of the house with a small tray of appetizers just in time to observe the scene. Orlando begged the maniacal Demetrius to stop what he was doing, as Juniper looked on in silence. Orville was thrashing around beneath the surface of the water and his movements were soon slowing to a crawl. As Demetrius held Orville under the water, he began shouting, "Orlando, stop it; you'll drown him!" Juniper screamed, "Orlando, what are you doing?" Orlando just stood there with a confused look on his face.

Orville stopped moving in the water, indicating that it might be curtains for him. Demetrius uttered, "I witnessed the whole thing Orlando!" Juniper shrieked, "I saw what you did Orlando; I'm calling the Police!" A woman named Laureen, whom Orlando had befriended at one of Juniper's parties emerged from behind the fence and rushed over to the pool. She said, "Actually, Orlando and I saw the whole thing and we will have a somewhat different story to tell the Police when they arrive." Orville suddenly launched out of the water and chirped, "I definitely saw it all!" Orville, Orlando and Laureen merrily winked at each other. Demetrius and Juniper simultaneously gasped in horror.

110. Rafi's Cave 2



110. Rafi's Cave 2

Rafi was so excited and relieved at seeing the beam of light and smelling the fresh air pouring into his prison cell that his eyes attempted to burst into tears. Oddly, he had been crying so much lately that he had actually run out of tears. It didn't seem possible that a human being could ever run out of tears, because sooner or later, their eyeballs would need moisture for cleansing and rinsing. Whatever had happened to Rafi's tear ducts in the cave, he couldn't cry any tears. He was so happy that it didn't matter if he could cry any tears or not.

The intense natural light that streamed into the cave was absolutely blinding and comfortable at the same time. He couldn't resist looking up into the stream of light to feel its warmth. He moved his face around in the light to feel as much of the heat as possible. Rafi was so elated that he momentarily forgot he was still trapped.

He knew he had to make haste to enlarge the hole while he still had access to sunlight. Fortunately, the days were at their longest and the sun was shining for many hours each day. Rafi couldn't tell what time of day it was when he saw the first blessed ray of daylight, but he had to work quickly.

Rafi calmly thought for a few moments until he remembered the Balboa branch. He found the branch a couple years ago and made a nice solid cane-like contraption out of it. The Balboa wood was the hardest wood known to Rafi's people. There were very few of the Balboa trees remaining and the rare branches that were collected from the ground were typically only used for special ceremonies. The village members weren't allowed to possess any samples of the Balboa wood, so Rafi had been forced to stash the cane in his cave.

Rafi couldn't remember where he hid the Balboa cane, but he had to find it to begin his tunneling. Rafi walked around the perimeter of the cave for 30 minutes or so, trying to spot the Balboa with his strange new eyesight. He found that the bright light was messing with his vision. His eyes hadn't been accustomed to light for a while and it was taking time for his bat eyes to adapt.

Where was that stupid Balboa? Where was it? Did he hide it or was it just covered with something? He chuckled and thought that if it was covered with something, it was definitely hidden. Where was it? What if he couldn't find it? How would he be able to enlarge the hole without the stick? He had to spend less time worrying about what he might not be able to do and more time looking for the Balboa. He started to kick his foot along the floor of the cave where the floor met with the wall. He reluctantly made his way toward the back of the cave, where there was a kind of foul-smelling swamp, which consisted of weeks of his piss and poop accumulation. He entered the swamp and tried to hold his breath at first. After a few minutes of trying to hold his breath, he gave up and breathed through his mouth. He could taste the stuff.

He kept kicking his foot along the edge of the floor, until he was ankle deep in the piss/poop swamp. He forced himself to keep going because he was afraid of missing it by not checking everywhere for it. The dense muck that he was wading into was slowing him down and he found it difficult to drag his foot along. The evil swamp was thick and disgusting. Rafi couldn't believe that so much filth had come from his body. Rafi wondered how the creator could make human beings so perfect and so repulsive at the same time.

Where was that stupid cane already? That stupid cane was in the cave somewhere and he was going to find it. As he neared the far corner where the stream ran out of the cave, he was standing up to his knees in the vile swamp. He struggled valiantly to drag his right foot until he eventually hit something. The Balboa? He slipped his foot under the object and tried to lift it. It required a strenuous effort, but he was able to slowly lift the end of the object out of the filth. It was definitely a stick and hopefully the Balboa. When the end of wet brown stick emerged, he grabbed it with his hand and cautiously backed out of the stenching swamp. He didn't want to lose his balance and accidentally topple over into the wickedness. His body had become dirty and smelly over the time down in the cave, but he didn't want to add to the odor by coating himself with his own sewage.

Rafi hefted the slimy stick into both hands and convinced himself that it was in fact the Balboa. Yes! He had found the mighty Balboa. He pissed on the stick to rinse off as much of the fecal matter as he could and commenced the Herculean task of enlarging the hole. He knew what he had to do and didn't look forward to the amount of labor involved. The most work he had ever done in his life was when he helped his father carry boulders to make the big fireplace. It seemed to take months to gather all those boulders, but in reality, it was only a few weeks. Rafi had complained the whole time that the work was too difficult, but his father emphasized the importance of the job. After the fireplace was constructed, Rafi felt very proud that he had been an essential part of the work. He was glad that his father had pushed him to do the hard labor.

He remembered in the past how he had always blistered his hands whenever he used heavy farming tools and wanted to protect them before he started using the stick. He stripped off his loincloth, bit it on the edge of it and tore it into 2 similar pieces. He wrapped the cloth around both hands and began digging at the hole in the ceiling. He was completely naked, but too possessed by the potential for freedom to worry about it. There was no one around to see him naked anyway. The Balboa was heavier than he remembered and required more effort than he estimated to use the bulky tool. Rafi dug, speared, spiraled and slid the Balboa in and out of the hole. It was working!

The weight of the Balboa compelled Rafi to reach deep within himself for the energy to continue working. He had to keep going. He had to keep enlarging the hole. He thought back to the effort involved with carrying the boulders for his father and realized that it was the same thing. It

didn't matter what the task was; the amount of effort involved might be greater, but the work was essentially the same. Rafi resolved to place himself into the mindset that he was with his father on the fireplace project. By thinking back to that time, he would be able to shut out anything that he was currently going through. There would be no stopping him. He had survived carrying the boulders and he would survive any amount of digging with the stick.

As the sun began going down outside, Rafi continued reaming out the hole. He didn't want to stop the work. He didn't need the sunlight after all. It was a simple action that he was performing that he could do with his eyes closed if necessary. He had been trapped for a long time and thought he was going to perish in his stupid secret cave. Now that he discovered a way out of the dungeon, he couldn't allow anything to slow him down. He was exhausted by the time the sun went down and he continued working in the darkness that he had become accustomed to.

Rafi paused only to catch his breath. He didn't drink or eat anything. He pissed and pooped as he stood there working in the nude. He needed no sustenance or sleep. He only needed the Balboa. The sacred branch and Rafi comprised one feverish drilling machine. Rafi was unable to sense the fatigue that was dangerously sneaking up on him. Since he was such a strong young lad, his body could withstand tremendous punishment without any consequences. Rafi's brain had evolved during his fight for survival down there and it forced his body to work beyond its theoretical capacity. Rafi wasn't the same boy who had been trapped down there during the volcanic eruption. He was different somehow. He didn't notice that he had grown into a young man at the tender age of 8 years old.

The old phrase of mind over matter is what pushed and pulled Rafi upward. Rafi's brain was outside the cave, winching him vertically. His brain was in his fingers, hands, wrists, forearms, elbows, triceps, biceps and shoulders insanely controlling him to stab the stick. Without realizing it, Rafi was like a starving caveman stabbing away at a giant ostrich until the animal finally yielded. He was like a greedy treasure hunter digging away at a piece of ground that supposedly contained a pirate's treasure chest. He was like a hungry predatory cat running down an animal that it had been stalking for hours. Rafi's brain was relentlessly tugging at him like a vulture tugging at a dry piece of zebra intestine.

After 3 days of continuous tunneling with no sleep, food or water, Rafi was beginning to get dizzy and weak. He didn't want to allow the weakness to stop him. He had to keep digging. The mission to get out of that stupid hole in the ground was all that he knew. Rafi stopped referring to his secret cave as a cave and switched to calling it a hole in the ground. A hole in the ground was all it deserved to be called. How could he have been so stupid in thinking that the hole was such a cool place? He hated that hole and would do absolutely anything to get out or perish in the process.

After a week of continuous tunneling, Rafi's body collapsed. He had forced the Balboa 9 feet up

into the tunnel, when he fainted and crashed down to the cave floor and lay helplessly unconscious. Two days later, the Balboa fell out of the tunnel and landed in his right eye. Rafi instantly snapped awake from his blissful slumber by the sheerest agony imaginable. He screamed so loud and for so long that he lost his voice. He thought a bolt of lightning had struck his eye. It felt like a red-hot poker. His eye was on fire; it had to be! He never felt such raw pain before. He couldn't believe how much it hurt. He had heard stories told by the elders of painful experiences, but never imagined how painful something could actually be. What happened?

His eyeball was punctured by the heavy weight of the Balboa cane and he became permanently blinded in the eye. The eye socket was cracked all around it, but not collapsed. He was lucky to have such a hard skull or the Balboa might have penetrated his brain matter. He didn't even have a concussion that he could sense. His tears began flowing as a natural means of cleansing the wasted eye. After 5 painful hours of lying there on the cave floor, a whimpering Rafi finally ate & drank, rubbed whatever spit he could muster into the injured eye and resumed digging the tunnel in the ceiling.

Losing the eyesight in one of his eyes was definitely a bit of a setback for Rafi, but at least he was still alive. Rafi wished that he didn't have to keep consoling himself whenever something bad happened by saying, "At least I'm still alive!" Sooner or later, the phrase was going to get old and he would get tired of saying it. It would eventually stop consoling him and start making him angry.

There he was, a poor 8-year old boy with one eye, trapped in a hole. Was that necessarily being alive? Didn't the concept of being alive have more things associated with it? Being alive should be associated with the ability to come and go as one pleased. Being alive had to involve the freedom to do anything one wanted. Rafi had no freedom in his hole. Enough! Rafi shrugged off his latest whimpering fit and resumed digging.

After 2 weeks, he was finally out of food, but water began running down into the hole from the rain that fell outside, above the tunnel. He drank all the water that trickled down, because his father had always instructed him of the importance of drinking water over anything else. Earthworms occasionally washed down into the hole with the rain and he ate them as well. He would be ok as long as it rained outside.

As Rafi tunneled up through the ceiling of the cave, he soon hit the hardened lava from the volcano, which posed a completely new problem. The cave ceiling was of a much softer material than the thick layer of lava that now impeded his path. Rafi found that as hard as the Balboa stick was, it was no match for the harder lava. He couldn't get through the lava by using the Balboa alone. Now what? There had to be a way. Of course! He needed a point!

Rafi looked around the cave for samples of rocks that would be hard enough to chip at the lava. He gathered a bunch of different rocks and tried them one at a time. He discovered that the darkest rock was the one that worked the best. He managed to skillfully split the Balboa at the narrow end with a sliver of one of his sample rocks and wedged the hard dark rock into the v-shaped opening. Rafi then tightly wrapped strips of his hand cloths around the rock-tipped Balboa to strengthen the device. He learned the trick by watching the elders make the special boar-hunting spears.

He carefully began prodding the rock-tipped Balboa at the lava and small bits of lava began flying. Rafi excitedly quickened his pace and was soon in his tunneling frenzy again. Rafi found the rock-tipped Balboa to be a formidable excavating tool. He was proud of himself for improvising so effectively. Rafi was a demon possessed by survival and didn't plan on stopping until he was out. If he passed out again, he would deal with it. As long as he didn't become blinded in the other eye, he had little to lose. The way things had been going however, the creator might have some sick thing planned for the next challenge.

After 2 days of continuous chipping, Rafi began weakening again. He was drinking all the dripping rainwater that he could and ate some worms along the way. He simply had too little sleep and not enough calories to perform the difficult work. Rafi's brain whipped his body to keep chipping; his brain didn't care what would happen if he fainted again. He tied the Balboa stick to his wrist with bark to automatically pull the stick down with him if he fainted again. On the 4th day of chipping, Rafi fainted again and the stick fell down on the ground next to him.

Rafi wondered how thick the layer of lava was. His body was fully up inside the tunnel and he could position his feet on the sides of the tunnel for leverage as he progressed upward. He wished some bigger creature would find its way down into the hole along with the rainwater and limited number of worms. Rafi was at the point of being hungry that he would eat anything he could chew. He considered eating his own poop, but he had to draw the line somewhere. He hadn't been pooping much lately anyway, due to the lack of any solid food. He had an intense hankering for a nice fish fry the way his mother used to cook it.

The slim athletic physique that Rafi had when he initially became trapped in the cave had morphed into a grimy skin-wrapped skeleton. His naked body was completely covered with dirt, sweat, stone dust, piss and poop. His hair was long, stringy and greasy. He had been so psychologically tortured by surviving alone down in the cave that he developed a slight girlish giggle. He wasn't sure when it first started, but he was definitely quietly giggling and had no control over it. He guessed that perhaps he subconsciously felt that his situation down there was humorous. It reminded Rafi of the stories told by the elders of the villagers who suddenly began giggling for no reason. Those poor villagers never stopped giggling until the day they perished. Some of the unfortunates had giggled for more than 40 years.

111. Pat's Gang



111. Pat's Gang

Pat and the 5 other members of his chain gang were actually some of the luckier members of his prison. Knuckles, Slackjaw, Fisheyes, Bigtoes and Fingers had been on the waitlist for quite a while to work on a chain gang. The medium security prison only had 9 chain gangs comprised of 54 lucky inmates. The gangs were utilized in the Texas prison to clear the weeds from the dirt shoulders of the secondary highways.

To a prison inmate, there was nothing greater than the feeling of being outside in the fresh air again. Working on a chain gang provided that freedom, even though the work was hot and exhausting. The members of the chain gang were "free" while they were outside the walls and wire of the prison. Even though each inmate on the gang was chained to 5 fellow criminals, they all still felt free when they were outside.

Many psychologists who studied the concept of the chain gangs over the years had verified the obvious positive results. The chain gang members were calmer and had almost no incidents inside the prison, as compared to other non-chain gang inmates with similar criminal records. The psychologists weren't sure if it was the exhausting nature of the physical work or if it was the temporary freedom that calmed the inmates; whatever it was, the chain gang system worked.

Many of the same people who believed that disciplining children shouldn't involve physical abuse, felt the chain gangs were inhumane and archaic concepts. When each member of every chain gang had been interviewed about how they perceived the gangs, they all claimed that the gangs were a good idea. No chain gang members felt the chain gangs were dehumanizing or in any way detracting from their civil rights. All any naysayer had to do was look at the long waiting lists for the chain gangs to see how the inmates desired to be on the gangs.

None of the chain gang members was ever on the gang against their will. It was quite the opposite situation. The inmates of the prisons that had chain gangs wanted more gangs in the prisons, not fewer. The inmates in prisons that didn't have chain gangs wanted the prisons to add a chain gang system. Pat, Knuckles, Slackjaw, Fisheyes, Bigtoes and Fingers were the members of their prison's recently formed 9th chain gang. The prison was attempting to add more and more gangs as the years progressed, against the sentiment of the misguided public.

Pat was the only member of his gang who was still known by his civilian name, since he hadn't spent enough time in the prison to acquire a nickname. The nicknames were based on body parts and had to fit the person. The leader of Pat's cellblock was nicknamed Bigballs, due to his status in the prison. He actually possessed average-sized balls. The word was going around the cellblock that Bigballs was on the verge of nicknaming Pat. Some of the rumored nicknames for Pat were Armpit, Sweatpalms, Bignose and Bubblebutt.

Pat hoped that he wouldn't be nicknamed Bubblebutt, because a name like that could lead to real problems in a prison full of lonely men. After another week of rumors circulating, Pat ended up being called Skull, which was fine by him. It was a masculine sounding name, which Bigballs had given him with some forethought. Apparently, Bigballs noticed something unusual about Pat's skull.

Pat, Knuckles, Slackjaw, Fisheyes, Bigtoes and Fingers started each morning at 7:00 am with the others of the cellblock and ate a hearty, but hardly edible breakfast. It was unfortunate that the cons prepared their own food, because none of them was a good cook, even when following the simple explicit recipes. The cons who had nothing better to do than harass the rest of the prison by cooking crappy food loved their jobs. Sometimes, the cooks and food servers slipped something into the food just before serving it to one of their enemies.

After they ate, the 9 gangs loaded into the 9 vans, with a driver, a boss and the 6 cons per each van. The vans headed out to the secretly designated highway that they were clearing on that particular day. The schedules for roadwork weren't public information, in order to prevent possible prison breaks. Each member of the chain gang wore padded ankle chains to allow the men to work and be chained together by a single 50-foot chain. Each gang member had a 10-foot length of chain spacing to the next guy in line. That spacing was determined to be just the right amount to allow the cons to effectively swing their bush axes to chop the weeds.

The 9 gangs were separated far enough from each other on the highway to prevent one gang from talking to the next gang. The cons were permitted to talk freely among themselves within each chain gang and they often sang to pass the time. The boss and van driver were both armed with rifles when they were overseeing their designated gang. The boss was the primary supervisor of the gang, with the driver acting as a backup.

Working on the chain gang was regimented by the various rules that the cons were required to follow. The cons had to ask the boss when they wanted to put on their jackets or hats in the morning or to take them off in the afternoon. The cons had to ask the boss when they wanted to take a piss, take a poop or get a drink of water. At lunchtime, the cons had to ask the boss for permission to stow their tools before eating lunch. After lunch, the cons had to ask permission to retrieve their tools and start working again. The rules had to be followed to the letter. There were no second chances; the first time a con disobeyed the boss, the con would be immediately removed from the gang and replaced the next day by one of the many gang hopefuls from the long waiting list.

Since Pat, Knuckles, Slackjaw, Fisheyes, Bigtoes and Fingers were new to working on a chain gang, the work seemed brutal at first, but they put up with it. The heat of Texas was unforgiving and the continuous swinging of the heavy bush axe required some aerobic fitness that few of the new gang members had. Pat and his gang tired quickly and drank more water than the other 8

gangs, but after a few weeks, they had gotten into better shape.

The amount of time that any con could work on a chain gang was limited to 6 months. The prison had to allow as many people as possible to work on the chain gangs in order to keep the peace in the prison. The gang members were on a rotating roster. When everyone on the list had their chance to be on the gang for 6 months, the list started over again.

Many of the gang members had gotten into good enough physical condition while working on the gang that they were able to get farm work at the many ranches in Texas after they left the prison. The farms were always looking for tough men to do all the dirty work for low pay. The ex-cons who wanted to reform were glad to get any work straight out of prison. The prisons had agreements in place with the farms to refer cons who were to be released, to get the cons jobs at the farms.

Pat and his gang were out chopping weeds one morning when Pat heard a rumbling sound in the distance. He looked to the west and saw huge dust clouds forming. The rumbling sound became louder. Pat asked the boss what it was and the boss said he didn't know. As the rumbling got closer, Knuckles grunted that it was probably a runaway herd. The boss agreed with Knuckles and told the men to keep working and not to worry about it.

The bosses of the 9 gangs were in constant contact with each other via radios and checked in with each other every 15 minutes. Pat's boss began chatting with the other bosses about what to do about the runaway herd and they all decided to keep working. After 20 more minutes, the rumbling was louder and the dust cloud was larger. The herd was thundering in the direction of the 9 chain gangs and didn't appear to be slowing down. Pat's boss radioed to the prison and the prison instructed all the bosses to load up the gangs and return to the prison.

Due to the time-consuming chaining system involved, it was a huge process to load the gangs back into the vans. The bosses had underestimated the speed of the runaway herd. Before the vans were completely loaded, the herd was upon them. The longhorn steers were gigantic, fast moving and didn't seem to sense what was in their way. The steers carelessly stampeded into the chain gangs and trampled anything and everything in their way.

All 9 of the bosses were trampled; some of the cons were trampled. The vans were all severely damaged by the immense horns of the longhorn steers. By the time the 800-odd head of cattle were done, it looked like a bomb had been dropped. The herd continued stampeding in the same direction and headed off into the desert. After a few minutes, 13 frantic men on horseback came thundering through, apparently in hot pursuit of the longhorns. All the men who had been trampled had various broken body parts for their trouble. No one lost their lives as a result of the stampede, but out of 72 men, 38 were injured. Fifteen of the men were lying unconscious in the dirt with hoof prints on their foreheads and longhorn piss and poop on their bodies. Since the 9

bosses were all outside of the vans during the incident, the stampeding cattle had incapacitated them all. Moments before the cattle arrived and stomped him into the dirt, Pat's boss had managed to radio to the prison that they needed help immediately.

From Pat's gang, Knuckles, Slackjaw and Bigtoes had been safely loaded into the van. While waiting outside the van to be loaded, Pat, Fisheyes and Fingers managed to dodge the longhorns as they thundered through. Fisheyes and Fingers suggested that they take over the operation and try to escape. Pat said to forget it, because they could all clearly hear the prison's sirens going off. The relief vehicles were on the way to their location at full speed. There was no way they could escape. The area would be blocked off and they might become involved in a shootout. Fisheyes and Fingers insisted that they try to do something. There was still time before the prison vehicles arrived.

The 9 drivers who were in the vans jumped out with their rifles and locked the cons inside. The cons and bosses who were unconscious and injured outside the vans were lying in the dirt. The armed drivers ordered the uninjured cons who were standing around outside to lie down on the ground on their stomachs with their arms outstretched.

Fisheyes and Fingers insisted to Pat that they could still do something, as the driver of their van walked over. Their driver barked out the surrender order again. Pat asserted to Fisheyes and Fingers that they had to forget about it. Fisheyes and Fingers were too nervous and jerky for Pat's taste. Pat lay down on the ground as ordered, as Fisheyes and Fingers resisted the driver's command. Some of the cons from the other gangs were also resisting the drivers and yelling to cause a commotion. The drivers couldn't do anything but wait for the help to arrive.

Pat's driver again ordered Fisheyes and Fingers to lie down on the ground or be shot. The cons never imagined that the guards would shoot a prisoner in a medium security prison, but they were all in a tight spot at the time and everyone was nervous. Pat's driver ordered Fisheyes and Fingers one more time and then fired into the air. Pat yelled at Fisheyes and Fingers to get down on the ground, but they still refused. The driver pointed the rifle at Fisheyes' face and Fisheyes dared the driver to shoot him, obviously expecting nothing to happen.

The driver slowly counted to 3, then fired and shot off Fisheyes' left ear. Fisheyes screeched in agony, pressed his hand to the bloody ear hole and fell to the ground, crying. The driver swung the rifle at Fingers' surprised face and again slowly counted to 3. Pat closed his eyes and stayed out of the situation; he hoped that Fingers would give in and lie down on the ground. While he was on the ground pretending to be crying, Fisheyes grabbed the distracted driver by the ankle and pulled the driver to the ground.

As the driver's body jerked, he accidentally pulled the trigger of the rifle. The rifle launched a round that drilled a hole through the uppermost scalp of Fingers' head. Fingers shrieked from the

pain, slapped his hand onto the wound and hoisted up Fisheyes from the ground. On the way down to the ground, the driver pulled the trigger again and shot the unconscious boss in the leg. Fisheyes instantly grabbed the rifle away from the driver on the ground and Fingers removed the driver's ring of keys. Fingers hastily switched his and Fisheyes' ankle chains over to the driver's wrists and the unconscious boss' wrists. Fingers picked up the rifle that was lying on the ground next to the unconscious boss. Fisheyes and Fingers aimed their rifles at the driver and the boss, as the drivers from the other gangs yelled at them over the radio to cease and desist.

Fisheyes and Fingers felt empowered by the moment, sensed sweet freedom and craved to immediately drive away from the area. Pat continued lying on the ground on his stomach as he was ordered. Pat had a sentence of 17 months for burglary and expected to leave the prison in another 9 months. He wanted no part of what Fisheyes and Fingers were doing. When all the ruckus was over, Pat hoped the driver would remember how he had obeyed the driver's order.

Fisheyes and Fingers had longer sentences and lengthy criminal records. They were "products of the system" and didn't care what happened. Pat knew those guys were a danger to themselves and to everyone around them, guards and cons alike. Fisheyes and Fingers chortled at the commands of the other drivers radioing to them to give up. Everyone at the scene heard the sirens of the approaching rescue vehicles, but no one could see anything yet.

Pat begged Fisheyes and Fingers to give up, but they wouldn't listen. Fisheyes yelled at Pat to shut up or he would be shot. Pat didn't say another word. The driver on the ground ordered Fisheyes and Fingers to listen to Pat and give up. Fisheyes yelled at the driver to shut up or he would be shot. Bound by his duty, the driver again barked at Fisheyes and Fingers to give up and he added that they didn't stand a chance of escaping. Fisheyes rolled the driver onto his back and shot off his left ear. "How do you like them apples?" asked Fisheyes. The driver screamed from the pain and then reluctantly became silent. "That's what I thought!" laughed Fisheyes. Fingers laughed. Pat couldn't believe what Fisheyes and Fingers were doing; they had gone too far.

The rescue vehicles from the prison were finally in sight and they were closing quickly. The sirens were blaring and the engines were roaring. "Here they come! Get ready!" said Fisheyes. "Yep!" said Fingers. The drivers of the other 8 gangs managed to gain full control of their cons and had them all locked up in the vans. The drivers radioed to the rescue vehicles that shots had been fired and the rescue vehicles abruptly stopped moving. Fisheyes and Fingers heard the communications on their radio and noticed that the rescue vehicles had halted. "What's goin' on?" Fisheyes asked Fingers. "Dunno," said Fingers. "Looks like they're afraid of us, now!" said Fisheyes. "Ha!" chuckled Fingers. "All dem prison bulls is cowards!" said Fisheyes. "You got dat straight!" said Fingers. In the distance, the prison's best snipers began firing their silencer-equipped rifles through the opened windows of the rescue vehicles. Fisheyes and Fingers heard something that sounded like large mosquitoes whizzing by their heads.

112. Quinn's Machine



112. Quinn's Machine

Throughout history, the concept of time travel had been on the minds of scientists, theorists and dreamers alike. Even though many people had thought about a time machine, only the scientists would actually be capable of constructing such a device. The theorists were always theorizing about this and that; the favorite phrase of the theorists was, "What if...?" The dreamers were the largest number of people who wanted to have a time machine, but of course, they wouldn't know the first thing about building one.

Quinn was the ideal type of person to build a time machine, if anyone could. He was a scientist, theorist and dreamer all rolled up in one. His mastery of theoretical physics placed him near the top of the list of the world's greatest thinkers. The thing that separated Quinn from the other physicists was that he was more capable of creating the machines that could transform idle theories into reality. To be able to create a machine that could somehow transport a human being through time was beyond comprehension. When Quinn was young, he contemplated the greatest mysteries of the world and had dissected every major theoretical principle. When he finished college and received his Master's degrees in Math and Physics, he reflected for a very long time about scientific concepts.

Quinn spent 7 years in deep thought trying to conceive of something that would be worthy of his complete and total mental and physical devotion. Quinn was prepared to spend the remainder of his life on his work and wasn't going to stop once he had started. The various papers that he published had earned him great accolades and enough grant money to finance any amount of research that he required. He patented several nanotechnological devices and licensed the equipment to provide additional cash flow for the construction of his time machine.

The theoretical concepts involved in what Quinn was attempting were almost beyond his means to resolve. He arrived at his time travel concept only after great mental strain and anguish. Quinn's typical means of brainstorming involved intense concentration while he was sitting in a tub full of the hottest water that he could tolerate. A trick that Quinn learned while reading about Einstein was the way that Einstein would occasionally shock himself with electric current to clear his head. When Einstein was working at the patent office, he had been chatting with one of his co-workers who knew a lot about ancient Chinese secrets. One of the secrets was to stimulate the brain with electric shocks. The co-worker wasn't exactly sure how much electricity was necessary to do the trick, so that Albert was forced to experiment with the dosage. At his apartment, Einstein unscrewed the light bulb from one of the lamps while the lamp was turned on. Albert then placed his fingers into the socket. He was instantly shocked by the voltage, knocked unconscious and fell to the floor like a bag of dirt.

When Albert awoke on the floor 2 days later, he noticed that he had soiled his pants, which emitted horrendous stinging vapors into the air. The vapors caused him to cry for hours and

when his head finally cleared, he experienced the vision for his legendary formula of $e=mc^2$. Einstein's vision was only the beginning of the problem; he then had to mathematically prove the formula. Proving the formula to completion required an immense amount of brainpower and perseverance. Albert hung in there for many months until he gradually verified his formula.

Quinn had to figure out how to electronically reduce the human body to micro-particles in some type of machine. The machine would then have to transport itself and the micro-particles through the time barrier. The machine had to be transported in order to automatically reassemble the particles into a human being again on the other side of the barrier. Physicists had come close many times to determining the means of particle reduction, but had always hit the wall when it came to the time barrier.

What was necessary to transport something through the time barrier? What amount of power generation would be required? Of what materials would the machine need to be constructed? What speed was necessary to travel through time? The more that Quinn thought about it, the more the problems seemed to accumulate. It seemed to Quinn that too many layers were adding up and causing resistance to the overall solution. He was becoming befuddled for the first time in his life. Maybe he needed to concentrate his efforts on solving the phases of the overall concept one step at a time.

The obvious 1st step was creating a machine that could vaporize a human being into particles without ending the person's life. The 2nd step was to transport the machine and the particles through the barrier. For the 3rd step, the machine would have to be programmed to automatically rebuild the human being from the particles.

The 1st step of the process seemed to be the reverse of the 3rd, so Quinn attempted to crack that one first. He had 14 journals full of figures, formulas and notes that he had been poring over. Nothing was jumping out at him that would motivate him enough to start building the machine. He didn't want to waste any time or money until he was absolutely ready. Once he was ready, he would hire a team comprised of a machinist, light wave expert, electrician, microbiologist, nanotechnologist and chemist. Quinn knew approximately how many people he needed and had pre-qualified the members of the specialized staff ahead of time.

Quinn decided to try to use Einstein's method of placing his fingers into a lamp socket. Quinn knew he was taking a chance, but he needed to experience the breakthrough that would propel his brain into the next level of conceptualization. When he put his fingers in the socket of the lamp, his life changed forever. Quinn awoke the next day covered in his own filth and the idea came to him like a bolt of lightning.

The scientists had been going about it the wrong way for decades. Everyone had been trying to find a way to reduce a human body to particles, transport the particles and then rebuild the

particles on the other side. Quinn's insight from the electrocution was to apply the cryonic concept of freezing and thawing the human precisely, instead of vaporizing for the transporting process. By being cryonically frozen, the person would be protected during transport.

Quinn would have to add a cryonics engineer to the staff. The cryonics person would need to design the freezing/thawing part of the machine to be automated to thaw the time traveler who would be incapacitated after the machine arrived on the other side.

Once Quinn felt that the 1st and 3rd phases had been initially theorized to his satisfaction, the much more difficult 2nd phase of transportation through time needed to be tackled. What was necessary to force an object into another time? Was it even possible? Quinn decided to undergo more electrocution to unlock the yet unknown secrets from his brain. The tricks were hidden away somewhere in his gray matter; they had to be.

Quinn set up 2 lamps close enough to each other to be able to insert fingers from both hands into the lamp sockets. Quinn was intelligent enough to know that he could be ending his life in his search for knowledge. He could easily end up as a crumpled foul smelling heap on the floor. He couldn't worry about the risks. Like many of the scientists before him who had their eureka moments, he had been compelled to do whatever was necessary. If he died while seeking the truth, so be it.

He inserted his fingers into the lamps and was instantaneously electrocuted. The electricity from the 2 lamps stopped his heart for 17 seconds. Luckily, his heart restarted again and Quinn slept fitfully on the floor in his own sewage for the next 2 1/2 days. When Quinn awoke, the vision for time travel became so clear to him that his excitement caused his heart rate to increase rapidly and he began to hyperventilate. His body was unable to supply enough oxygen to satisfy the needs of his heart and he fainted. When Quinn awoke after another 2 days on the floor, he was ready to begin building the time machine. While soaking in a tub of hot water for many hours and scrutinizing the notebooks that contained the multi-phase magnetic theory, he verified his latest vision.

The vision elucidated that the time machine would need to employ the reverse of the process used by Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) equipment. It would be difficult, but Quinn knew that he could calculate the frequencies necessary for MRI reversal. After a few days of soaking in a tub of hot water, Quinn had the calculations ready and called the members of the staff to prepare to mobilize. Quinn contacted an additional person who was the leading expert on MRI technology. Quinn had the staff review his general notes for the machine and welcomed any input they might have.

All the members of Quinn's staff were required to sign an ironclad contract, which stated that they couldn't reveal any of the secrets of Quinn's time machine or cryonics process. None of the

staff would be given any credit or notoriety for Quinn's machine. The staff members would only be present for their individual expertise and for the sole purpose of assisting Quinn. They would all be paid handsomely for their participation and contractual silence. None of the staff members had any qualms about the contract and they all signed up immediately.

Quinn's people were amazed at what they were participating in and couldn't imagine how Quinn had figured out everything to such finite detail. No one was permitted to see any construction plans other than those specific to their expertise. Even though the staff members signed contracts, Quinn wanted to prevent theft the details of his processes. No staff members were permitted to carry anything in or out of the laboratory. A security guard searched everyone whenever they entered and exited the lab.

The cryonics expert went to work on the freeze/thaw aspects of the machine along with any of the staff who were required to assist. The other staff members assisted the MRI expert with the necessary final calculations, which were derived from Quinn's initial numbers. The MRI expert found the concept of a reverse MRI system quite fascinating. The MRI person held numerous meetings with Quinn to delve deeper into the proper method of constructing the circuitry. After weeks of lengthy discussion, Quinn realized from the MRI expert that some changes would have to be made. When Quinn had formulated his initial calcs, he inserted a weight factor for the machine and person being transported. Once the final estimated weight of the cryonics section of the machine had been delivered to Quinn by the cryonics expert, it was realized that a larger reverse MRI unit would be necessary.

A typical MRI machine was a massive device, weighing hundreds of pounds. The cryonics section would also add hundreds of pounds to the overall weight of the time machine. The MRI expert noted that the reverse MRI electronics process involved a multiplier. It wasn't a simple direct formula, but a formula that multiplied indirectly as the total amount of weight kept increasing. When adding 200 pounds for the human, the total weight of the time machine topped out at an estimated 2,600 pounds.

It was like a catch-22 where the heavier the equipment became, the more powerful and subsequently larger the reverse MRI had to be. At some point, they would have to decide on the final size and weight of the components to determine the reverse MRI's power requirements. The time machine would also require a non-combustion power supply built into it, which would be composed of a combination of a generator, batteries and solar panels. The generator would be initially started by the batteries and then once running, it would charge the batteries. The solar panels would supply backup charging power for the batteries.

When Quinn digested the MRI expert's comments about the weight, he became upset. Quinn had somehow miscalculated. He never expected the time machine to be so heavy and cumbersome. He had to figure out a better way to power the system. The technology didn't exist that could

provide the lightweight power generation in the amounts required by the time machine. Quinn was familiar with capacitors that were capable of storing large amounts of energy. Quinn discussed capacitors with the MRI expert and the conclusion was that the current capacitor technology limited the size and power of the units. Quinn notified the staff to put the project on hold and he retired to his private room with the lamps and the bathtub. He needed another crucial vision.

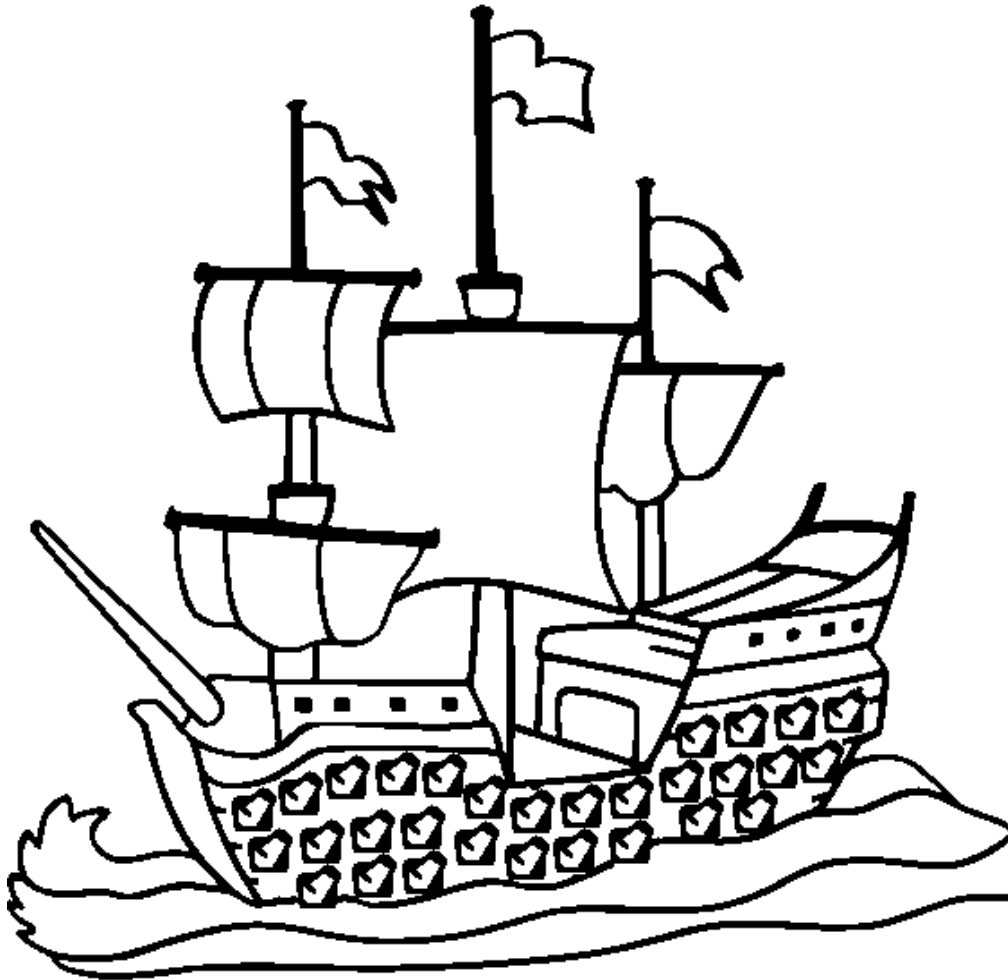
Quinn added a 3rd and 4th lamp to his electrocution setup and hoped for the best as he inserted his fingers and toes into the 4 lamp sockets. Three days later, Quinn awoke on the floor with such a clear head that his eyes became momentarily blurry. He was completely bald and his entire stenching body was hairless. He didn't care if his hair ever grew back, as long as he would be able to apply his latest principle. He soaked in a tub of hot water for 11 hours as he read his notes and hastily wrote down the fresh information. He found that his electrocution sessions had given him the greatest insights of his lifetime, but his memory was getting worse with each shock treatment. If he didn't annotate his latest theories quickly, the concepts would likely be lost. Quinn avowed that the loss of his memory was a small price to pay for scientific achievement.

Quinn put the project back into operation and discussed with the staff his new method for constructing super-powered capacitors. One of the staff members knew exactly what to do and began building the first super-capacitor per Quinn's new specs. When the device was completed after 2 days, it was tested and was found to be an incredible stroke of brilliance on Quinn's part. More capacitors were immediately constructed, which would replace all the previously designed power-supplying units. By eliminating the generator, batteries and solar panels, a subsequently smaller reverse MRI could be employed and the total estimated final weight of the machine with a 200-pound person on board came to only 900 pounds. Quinn was much happier with the new numbers, as was everyone else on the staff.

The final calculations & specs for the components were adopted and the time machine was constructed and tested with a 200-pound mannequin. The idea was to first test the machine with an inanimate object for safety and then Quinn planned to become the first human test subject. The mannequin and machine were sent back in time to the previous day. To everyone's complete astonishment, the mannequin and machine disappeared from the lab. The time machine's programming went into operation and within seconds, the mannequin and machine reappeared. Of course, there had been no cryonic freezing involved, but at least the machine worked!

The staff realized they were in the midst of a historic event. Everyone in the lab danced around, cheered and carried on. Champagne corks flew into the air and much merriment commenced. The MRI expert loudly exclaimed to Quinn over the gleeful noise, "You did it, Quinn! Congratulations! You're a genius!" Quinn slowly looked around the lab with a vacant expression on his face and sadly whispered, "Quinn? Who's Quinn?"

113. Captain's Booty



113. Captain's Booty

Captain wasn't the typical pirate of the 1600's who ran around stealing gold from the Spanish ships to use for his own pleasure. Captain had recruited a group of men to work on his ship for the sole purpose of taking the money from the Spanish to give it back to the poor. Captain and his compadres had all grown up in poverty under the fierce rule of the Spanish. The parents of Captain and his crew had all been worked into their graves by the Spanish royalty. The Spanish were at the apex of their world domination and thought nothing of conquering and enslaving everyone they encountered. The Spanish royalty had enacted such severe taxation on their subjects that many had to become indentured servants to pay off their debts. Often, after the debts had finally been paid, other debts had accumulated and forced the subjects back into indenture. Some of the people never emerged from debt and were technically slaves for nearly their entire adult lives. Captain and his friends endured hard lives growing up and barely made it to young adulthood without encountering many painful obstacles and intense deprivations.

Captain's crew consisted of 15 stout men who were in their 40's and all hated the Spanish government for its savagery and barbarism. Each man was capable of working at any position on the ship including loading, unloading, rigging, cooking, cannons and anything else that might come along, especially the attacking of the Spanish gold ships. Captain's crew was a maniacal bunch who knew how to fight and could dispatch their enemies with their bare hands, if necessary. Captain's men had unusual names for such fierce fighting men, but they had adopted the names to maintain confusion in their victims when they attacked. Avocado, Watermelon, Bean, Sugar beet, Carrot, Radish, Fig, Pear, Guava, Okra, Lettuce, Date, Tarragon, Yam and Jojoba were the names of the members of Captain's crew.

The vessel that Captain used as his attack vessel had been custom built for maximum speed, firepower and cannonball resistance. The vessel was constructed by using the most current shipbuilding standards of the day. It took Captain and his crew 2 years to construct and arm the ship before they set out to sea. On their first mission, they attacked a Spanish ship that had \$20 million in gold aboard. Captain took the money back to their village for the people to hide and gradually spend over a period of years, to avoid suspicion. Captain's idea for stealing the money from the Spanish was to provide somewhat better living conditions for the poor, but not necessarily wealthy living. The amount of money that Captain and his crew had acquired over the years was enough to rescue thousands of villagers from certain lifelong indentured slavery. Captain had earned the reputation as being the Robin Hood of the high seas.

The majority of the time, Captain and his crew stayed at sea and acquired all their provisions from the ships that they attacked. The few times over the years that Captain put into shore were at the remote islands. The men needed occasional friendly company to keep them from going insane and the undeveloped islands were inhabited by many friendly peoples. Captain always

left large amounts of gold behind on the islands to share some of the wealth with them. Since Captain and his crew had decided early on to never become rich from their pirating, they needed to have numerous places to deposit the vast wealth that they had stolen from the Spanish royalty.

Since Captain's ship had been engineered from the get-go with self-sufficiency, they were able to capture a few whales on their travels for occasional succulent blubber meals. Captain and Avocado were particularly good cooks and had many recipes for preparing the delicious whale blubber. When they visited the undeveloped islands for friendly companionship, they stocked up on all the herbs and spices that were available. Watermelon, Bean and Sugar beet were exceptionally well versed in the use of seasonings for their meals. Carrot, Radish and Fig learned from their parents how to salt and dry virtually any fish or meat. As a result, Captain's crew always had great quantities of a variety of jerkies on board their vessel. Pear, Guava, Okra, Lettuce, Date and Tarragon were the best bakers on the 7 seas, because the breads and pastries they baked fresh each day were as delicious as any eaten by the Spanish royalty.

Yam and Jojoba made such tasty pasta and potato dishes that the crew was most likely the best fed anywhere on earth. They were frugal enough with their provisions to expertly combine the ingredients via their various skills. Captain felt that while they were easily giving away 90% of the gold, they were only keeping the remaining 10% for ammunition. Captain and his crew earned no wages and had devoted their lives to giving back to society. They didn't expect to win any medals for their humanitarian efforts and were just happy to see the smiles of the people who received the gold.

Captain and his crew had been attacking Spanish ships, taking the gold and donating it to the poor for 17 years and counted their lucky stars that they hadn't been caught yet. Captain estimated that he and his mates had probably returned about \$340 million in gold coins, bars and other valuable items back to the people. The undeveloped islands had received much of the money, because it was easy for Captain to give it to them. The locations of the islands made it ideal for dropping off the gold, because the Spanish rarely visited the islands.

They had been attacking the Spanish for so long that Captain had begun to feel immune to capture. It was because of Captain's great care at being impossible to identify that he was able to keep the crew somewhat safe. Whenever Captain and the crew anchored the ship at the small islands, they all donned wigs and fake beards. When they were back on board, they removed their disguises. They always looked different on shore compared to how they looked at sea. They regularly repainted the ship with a new color. Since they never flew any flags on the masts, it added even more anonymity.

Avocado, Watermelon, Bean, Sugar beet, Carrot, Radish, Fig and Pear had tougher times growing up than the rest of the crew. They grew up in the village of Colonnada, which was one the highest taxed of all the villages. Guava, Okra, Lettuce, Date, Tarragon, Yam and Jojoba had

grown up in the village of Paradiso, which wasn't as highly taxed and somewhat easier to survive in, but not much easier.

Captain and his crew held a meeting while they were building their ship to create a suitable name for the ship. They decided to call it Daisy in honor of Lettuce's aunt who had been beheaded by a Spanish guillotine for refusing to remove her hat in the presence of the visiting Spanish royalty. The crew unanimously agreed that it was a good name for the ship. They didn't want to paint the name on the ship, in order to maintain secrecy. Captain and the crew only referred to the ship by name when they talked among themselves. They would boast how mighty Daisy was when they attacked this or that ship.

They would say, "Daisy really showed them how it's done!" Or they would say, "Wow it's a good thing we were on Daisy that day, or we would have been done for!" Or they would say, "It's a good thing that Daisy had so many cannons to bombard that Spanish ship!" Or they would say, "Wow, Daisy really stuck it to them that time!" Captain and the crew loved Daisy and Daisy valiantly loved them back by giving them her all during each attack.

When they sat around developing the design for Daisy, they all concluded that they needed to have more cannons on Daisy than were on any other vessel ever built. They talked to a lot of different people who had traveled the world to come up with the number of cannons and then doubled the number. The number of cannons naturally required a large stock of gunpowder and cannonballs with which to load and fire the cannons. Captain had talked to many of the Navy men who had ideas of their own for loading and firing the large amount of cannons. The cannons typically had to be loaded one at a time, but with proper iron mechanisms in place, multiple cannons could be fired simultaneously.

By firing the cannons in that manner, concentrated destruction was possible. The ideal way to quickly disable a ship into surrendering was to take out the masts as soon as possible. Without masts, a ship was just a pile of wood floating in the water and was incapable of navigating. Captain personally never wanted to intentionally end any of the lives of the Spanish sailors. It was unfortunate when the Spanish sailors were occasionally hit by the crushing volley of simultaneously fired cannon balls, but it had to be expected during combat. When that happened, Captain felt no sympathy for the fallen men. The men were in the way of Captain's quest for the gold. It was that simple.

Captain's strategy was to hit the Spanish ship so hard and fast within seconds, that the Spanish would feel immediately overwhelmed and surrender in order to save the remaining men and the ship itself. The value of the ship was rarely equal to the value of the gold on board, but the Spanish ship captains loyally valued their sailors. Even though the Spanish captains were duly bound to fight to protect the gold at all costs, they never wanted to sacrifice their crews. Everyone had a job to do, but very few Spanish captains were suicidal enough to give their lives

and the lives of their entire crew in order to defend the gold. Captain had discovered the loyalty of the Spanish captains early on and took full advantage of it. Captain's crew wasn't suicidal either, but they knew they always had the upper hand when they attacked. The sheer firepower of their greater number of cannons with the multiple-firing mechanisms consistently scared the daylights out of the crews on the Spanish vessels.

When Captain got close enough to the Spanish ships and gave the order to open fire, the Spanish sailors couldn't believe what was happening. When a Spanish vessel was hit by 150 cannon balls within a few seconds and the Spanish masts were splintered like matchsticks, there was little that the Spanish could do in retaliation. Captain's cannons had the ability to be reloaded faster than any other cannons as well, due to modifications engineered by Watermelon, Sugar beet and Carrot.

If Captain and his crew desired, they could almost become a one-ship armada. The Spanish ships began traveling in pairs to avoid being conquered by Captain. Two Spanish ships traveling together posed more of a problem for Captain than a single ship, but he was still able to quickly disable both of them. Typically, when 2 ships traveled together, only one of them had the gold on board and the other ship was along for support. It didn't matter to Captain, because Daisy's superior firepower was able to destroy 2 ships almost as easily as a lone ship.

Captain's crew had the cannons specifically aimed in groups to blast at the masts. Daisy had 150 cannons mounted on each side and Captain's strategy was to rapidly fire all 150 cannons on one side of the ship simultaneously, and then turn Daisy to fire the cannons on the other side. As Daisy kept turning from side to side, the opposite side cannons were being reloaded. Within 15 minutes time of firing, maneuvering, reloading, etc. some 600 cannon balls could be volleyed at one or more of the Spanish vessels. The Spanish ships' masts and sailors were weakened so quickly, that Captain rarely had to do much war making afterward to get the Spanish to give up the gold.

That's the way Captain and his crew preferred to conduct their business. Obviously, any time Captain had to board a vessel that was resisting, there was a risk of injury. Captain and his crew had been injured many times over the years, sometimes seriously. Luckily, they had been able to get to the small islands that they had befriended over the years to get medical treatment. Even though the small islands were deemed uncivilized, they were surprisingly well versed in how to treat nearly any injury, minor or major.

Avocado had lost some fingers on one of his hands when a Spanish sailor stomped his hand. Watermelon lost the use of his right hand when he was sliced by a Spanish sword some years back. Bean had his foot smashed by a cannon ball during an attack 2 years ago. During a particularly violent assault, Sugar beet had the bad luck to have his eye plucked out by an aggressive Spanish sailor. After scooping out the eyeball, the sailor threw the eyeball back at

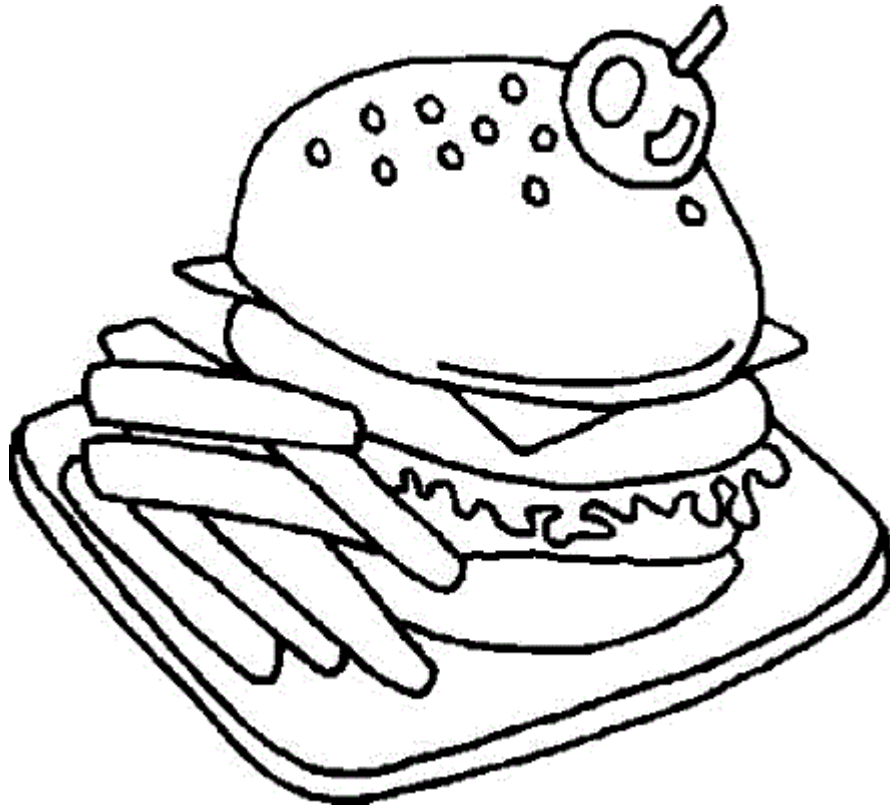
Sugar beet and hit him in the forehead with it. Carrot was so enraged by the action of the Spaniard against Sugar beet that he chopped off the sailor's head with a machete. Carrot then kicked the severed head out into the ocean as someone would kick a soccer ball. A similar fate had befallen Carrot during an attack years ago when one of his eyes had been thumbed out and eaten by a sadistic Spanish sailor.

Radish had his skull cracked so many times during battles that he had to wear tightly wrapped cloth on his head to hold the loose pieces together. Fig looked like one of those prototypical pirates with his wooden peg leg. The leg had been meticulously crafted from mahogany by one of the small island craftsman. Pear was lucky to be alive after being hit in the chest by a Spanish cannon ball, which permanently collapsed one of his lungs. From that point on, Pear always had to be careful when they attacked the Spanish ships. He couldn't allow himself to get too worked up or he might faint from the limited amount of oxygen provided by the solitary lung. Both of Guava's shoulders had been dislocated several times over the years; for some reason, he had unusually loose joints. It was guaranteed that during each attack, one of his shoulders would become dislocated. He would just casually pop it back in and resume the battle.

During a seemingly average attack on a Spanish ship, Okra had one of his legs chopped off between the knee and ankle. Captain performed the best doctoring that he could, but incorrectly set the severed bones together. As a result, one of Okra's feet was always pointing at a slight angle. Over time, Okra mentally compensated for the crooked foot and was soon able to outrun all of the crewmembers. Lettuce had been hit in the head by a cannon ball, which scraped off the scalp on the top of his skull. He ended up always having to wear a bandana to cover up the scarred bald spot. Date was the best singer on Captain's crew. When he was hit in the balls by a cannon ball, the tone of his voice improved dramatically and he sounded like a prepubescent choirboy when he sang. When they were on one of the uncharted islands, Tarragon ate some strange plants, which drastically impaired his vision. He was forced to wear glasses with excessively thick lenses. Fortunately, it didn't affect his aim with a crossbow. Yam and Jojoba had suffered from 2nd degree burns when they jumped onto a flaming Spanish vessel. They were attempting to rescue Captain and Lettuce, who had been trapped under fallen masts.

Each member of Captain's crew had sustained wounds of one form or another, including Captain himself. Sooner or later, after many years of attacking Spanish ships that were full of angry sailors, something would take place that resulted in physical harm. For all their fierce battles over the years, they were all lucky to still be alive. Captain's ears had been damaged so severely during an attack that they eventually fell off after a few days. His hearing wasn't affected, but the makeshift iron ear facsimiles that he had strapped in place occasionally rusted when it rained. He had to keep applying olive oil to the iron ears to prevent excessive corrosion. Captain was looking forward to his new mahogany ears that were being carved by the same craftsman who had fashioned Fig's custom peg leg.

114. Ralphie's Life



114. Ralphie's Life

Ralphie awoke at 6:00 am to the annoying sound of his alarm clock. His nanny Omarossa knocked on his bedroom door 10 minutes later to see if he was awake yet. Ralphie yelled through the door to Omarossa that he was awake and was on his way to the bathroom. Ralphie hated to have to wake up so early each day, but the movie in which he was co-starring required 10-hour filming days and he had a lot to do before he even got to the movie set. Ralphie had to get out of bed, shower, eat breakfast, get in some tutoring and be at the set by 9:00 am. The movie was a great experience for a boy of 11, since he had hardly done a thing toward landing the role in the first place.

Ralphie had been skateboarding in the mall parking lot with 2 of his friends when someone drove by in a limo. The limo backed up to where they were boarding and stopped. Just as Ralphie and his friends were about to skateboard away from there, the back window went down on the limo and a woman called to the boys. The woman announced that the boys needn't worry, because she was a movie producer. Ralphie yelled to her that he had heard that story before and cued his friends to continue on their way out of there. Ralphie exclaimed that she was probably trying to kidnap them. The woman insisted again that she was a movie producer and intended no harm.

Ralphie and his friends began spewing vulgarities at the woman to get her to leave, but she wouldn't. Ralphie and his friends began screaming as loud as they could that a stranger was attacking them. A mall security vehicle had been passing by as the 3 boys were screaming and pulled over to investigate. Ralphie squawked at the security patrol that the woman in the limo was trying to abduct them. The security approached the limo and demanded the license, registration and ID's of the driver, the woman and the man in the back seat with the woman.

The security patrol had verified that everything was legit and the boys were told to go about their business. The security patrol reminded Ralphie and his friends that skateboarding wasn't allowed in the mall parking lot. Ralphie and his friends began to leave and the woman called to them again. The woman asked the boys if they ever heard of a director named Clint Eastwood and Ralphie said that he had. Clint peeked out from the rear window of the limo and the boys immediately ran over to get a closer look. The woman was the producer of a movie that Clint was directing. The woman said that Ralphie looked like the perfect boy for the co-starring role in the movie. The woman asked Ralphie if he had done any acting before and he said that he had.

Ralphie lived in an LA suburb and had acted in plays all through school. He had also taken acting lessons, as had many of the other kids in the area. Living anywhere near Hollywood tended to make people think that they could be rich and famous actors some day. It seemed easy; all anyone had to do was take some acting lessons and then get discovered.

The woman gave Ralphie her card and advised Ralphie to have his parents give her a call.

Ralphie said goodbye to Clint, the woman and skateboarded home. The next day, Ralphie's mother called the woman and within a week, Ralphie was on the set of the movie. The movie was about a young girl and boy who became good friends. Ralphie and his young female co-star were supposed to become a little bit like boyfriend and girlfriend, but not too much. Ralphie thought the girl who co-starred with him was cute, but didn't feel romantically inclined toward her. He wasn't old enough yet to think that way about girls. Ralphie found out that it was the first movie role for the girl as well.

When the movie was over, Ralphie never saw his co-star again, but he was offered another role where he was again the co-star with another young girl and the girl's dog. After that movie, Ralphie was offered a 3rd role as the star where he was trapped on a deserted island after his family's yacht had smashed into an underwater object. Ralphie loved filming that 3rd movie, because it had a lot of action sequences. He was allowed to perform all his own stunts, which was really the most fun he ever had in his life.

Ralphie starred in 3 movies in one year and was beginning to get popular, and then he hit the age of 12 and suddenly started growing and physically changing too quickly. His face transformed and he wasn't the same cute kid that he was only a year ago. His nose grew into an odd shape, his lips became puffy and his eyes made him look like a rat. Ralphie had gone from a slightly odd, but still cute looking 11-year old boy to a homely 12-year old young man. The movie producers immediately stopped calling. Hollywood no longer had a use for Ralphie and he was thrown away by the movie industry like a used Kleenex. He was only 12, but had already become a Hollywood has-been. As hard as they tried, his parents couldn't find any more roles for him and he became destitute. Just when he was on his way up, he crashed and burned.

He continued to be home-schooled and missed the friends that he had abandoned during his short year of stardom. He had become one of those child actors who was destined to disappear into oblivion, if he lived that long. Ralphie didn't realize it at first, but he missed the fame; he wasn't able to capitalize on the fortune, because he was too young to get at the money. The money was put into a trust that he couldn't tap into for another 6 years. He supposed that it was for the best, because he would probably waste the money on buying something stupid like a sports car that he couldn't drive anyway.

Ralphie began having coping issues that he kept to himself, as did most people with recently discovered psychological anomalies. Ralphie was still basically a kid after all. He felt he hadn't experienced any bad things in his life that would be causing his confused thoughts. That was what he thought anyway. He should have said something about his feelings to his parents, but he couldn't. The quick burst of minor stardom, followed by the explosion of the bubble, definitely left a mark on Ralphie. Even though he was just a young man, he was still capable of emotional insecurity. He was awash with the phony adoration of strangers who only loved him for his

roles, not for the real him. He had lost the sensation of true friendship.

Ralphie missed the simple old days when he could skateboard at the mall with his friends. Unfortunately, he had turned his back on his friends as his popularity was rising. It wasn't really his fault though. During the hectic filming schedules of the 3 movies, he didn't have any extra time for himself and friends. The limited time that he did have was devoted to the Hollywood machine. Once Ralphie had signed the contracts, he was just a piece of property to be used as the industry saw fit. Hollywood didn't care about Ralphie's old friends. The industry gave Ralphie new temporary friends with whom he was forced to become quickly acquainted.

Ralphie was a typical kid who made a few great friends at school that were friends for life. The friends that Hollywood threw at Ralphie were like toys for him to play with for a while, get sick of and then kick to the curb. The Hollywood friends were just there for exposure, not real friendship. Hollywood was full of people who were friends with each other by acquaintance only. The nature of the business made people into a bunch of phonies who only wanted the contacts from other movie people.

Actors and actresses knew that sooner or later, they would act with many other people as long as they stayed in Hollywood. The issue with Hollywood was the balancing act that the actors and actresses had to play between the most suitable role and their co-stars. Sometimes, the players had to perform roles with people they didn't necessarily like and sometimes hated. The Hollywood industry didn't care what the players felt. They were all actors and had to pretend to like their co-stars, whether they actually liked them or not.

Ralphie began to feel more and more disillusioned and it acutely affected his psyche. He didn't want to admit to himself that there was something wrong, because he was unsure if there was a problem. He was too young to know what a psychological disorder was. All he could do was attempt to alleviate his bewilderment somehow. He started a routine of eating more sweet snacks than usual. He began to enjoy eating cupcakes and other snack cakes more than he ever had in the past. He asked his mother to buy more varieties of sweet snack cakes and he sampled all of them. He began his love affair with Hostess cupcakes, Ring dings, Ho hos and Drake's cakes.

He convinced himself that his mysterious grief was somehow being relieved by eating the sweet snacks. It had to be working; at least he attempted to make it work. Ralphie didn't want his parents to know that he was slipping. He wasn't sure if slipping was the correct term for it, but it seemed appropriate. Ralphie concluded that he was successfully reducing his slipping by eating the sweet cakes. Along the way, he noticed that the increased calories from the sweet cakes had made him fatter. Even though he had the metabolism of a young man, the calories from the sweet cakes were overwhelming his metabolism. He asked his mother to buy him new clothes of progressively larger sizes.

After a year of binging on the sweet cakes, Ralphie gained 20 pounds, in addition to the normal weight gain of 20 pounds from increasing in age from 12 to 13. Ralphie assumed that his parents had accepted his larger and larger-sized clothes as a part of normal growth and he felt confident in eating more and more. He was becoming mentally and physically addicted to the sweet cakes. Ralphie was really starting to enjoy overindulging on the sweet cakes. It was fun. It was the only way to calm himself. Whenever he felt his anxiety pangs, all he had to do was eat some cupcakes and the anxiety would disappear for a while. Ralphie created a schedule of comforting himself, by which he ate a pack of snack cakes each hour and was calm for the entire day. He walked around wearing a backpack that contained a large variety of cakes. He had all his favorite flavors and manufacturers in the precious backpack. As long as Ralphie had his backpack with him, he would be ok.

When Ralphie turned 14, he realized that he might be getting fat to the point of people noticing it and possibly saying something about it. The people who should have been saying something about Ralphie's obvious unnatural weight gain were his parents. Ralphie was one of the thousands of kids whose parents enabled their kids to get fat and stay fat. The poor kids who had overweight parents who subconsciously wanted their kids to be as fat as they were, had it even worse. Fat kept begetting fat and Ralphie had become another statistic of the obesity epidemic.

One day, Ralphie attended a rare audition for a small movie role and he had been rejected for being too fat for the part. Ralphie was confident that he did a tremendous job at the audition. The casting director had politely claimed the reason for rejection was that Ralphie was simply not right for the part. Ralphie had accidentally overheard some of the support staff talking in the hallway after his audition. The workers whispered to each other that Ralphie had been rejected for being too fat. "Too fat?" When Ralphie heard those words, he was floored.

Just when Ralphie thought he had successfully alleviated his confusion by eating the sweet cakes, he had been labeled as being too fat. Was he actually too fat or was there another reason for the rejection? How could he find out? As one of many actors auditioning for a role, he had no direct access to any of the movie's principals. That was the way the system worked; there was no favoritism. A particular actor or actress might be in the mind of the movie's director, but everyone had to participate in auditions. Ralphie couldn't ask for the actual reason why he was rejected for the role. He was forced to accept their politically correct answer. Was he too fat? Maybe he really was too fat and it was time for him to come to grips about it already.

Ralphie decided to lose weight by cutting out the sweet cakes and getting tough with his alleged mental condition. He couldn't let his psyche take control of him. He lost that movie role, because he was a fat pig. He threw away his precious backpack and all the remaining sweet cakes. At first, it was incredibly difficult to stop eating the sweet cakes, but then it became easier. He told himself that sugar was toxic and that it had clouded his mind. He had to get on

the path to becoming slim again. He had to get back to the weight at which he was supposed to be. He endeavored to make himself more suitable for Hollywood's persnickety eyes.

He went on a crash diet in which he only ate in the presence of his parents. He stopped eating snacks of all kinds and only drank water as a beverage. He began exercising and running. After some time, he was back to the weight that was considered normal for his age and height. It wasn't good enough for Ralphie. When Ralphie turned 15, he felt that he was still too fat and he increased the intensity of his exercise program. He started running marathons and other long distance running events. He entered junior iron man events and any other strenuous athletic events that he could find. Ralphie's parents were very supportive of his exercising and athleticism. He appeared to his parents to be eating properly at breakfast, lunch and dinner at home.

The excessive amount of exercise that he was performing was finally causing Ralphie to become emaciated. The Herculean amounts of exercise burned more calories than he took in. His parents said nothing about his new appearance. When he requested new clothes with reduced sizes, his mother said nothing. Once again, Ralphie's parents were enabling him to become unhealthy, but this time it was in the other direction.

Ralphie's vision of himself had been twisted by his psyche. Ralphie continued to see himself as being too fat, no matter how slim and physically fit he had become. He began eating his meals with his parents and following the meals with visits to the bathroom. He ate well at the dinner table, but routinely refunded the food into the toilet afterward. He saw himself as always being too fat, even though his body had gone past athletic looking and had become skinny looking.

Ralphie felt better than ever. He had foolishly allowed himself to become weak after Hollywood had tossed him aside years ago. It was all his fault. He should never have allowed himself to find comfort in those poisonous sweet snacks. Those stupid snacks made him fat and had lost him an important movie role. Even though the role wouldn't have been as a star, it might have been the one that got him back into Hollywood. How could he have been so foolish? He had his chance and he blew it! Never again!

Ralphie didn't think anything was wrong with his body. Maybe he still had to lose a little more weight though, just to be sure. He couldn't change any of his behavior just yet. He had to maintain his strict weight-loss and exercise program until the next audition came along. He was preparing himself for his next big chance. When Ralphie was changing his tee shirt in the laundry room after a long run, his mother noticed how his ribs were sticking out all over his body. He looked to her as if he hadn't eaten in weeks and she began quietly weeping. When Ralphie saw his mother crying, he told her to relax. He was in full control and he knew what he was doing. He was almost at the perfect weight for the Hollywood directors. Ralphie didn't want to be rejected again for a part because he was too fat.

115. Steve's Secret



115. Steve's Secret

Steve had grown up during troubled times and was lucky to make it into young adulthood without too many behavioral problems. Due to various parental issues and sour romantic encounters, he had evolved into a somewhat bitter man, never completely trusting anybody except himself. At some point, he became interested in acting and suggestions by friends steered him in the direction of a particular acting school. He managed to save up enough money to take a few acting lessons at Stella Adler's school in New York. While Steve was there in 1952, he met a woman named Gia. It was Gia who had planted the seed in Steve's physiology that changed his life forever. When Steve was intimate with Gia for the short time that they were together, something strange happened to him. From that point on, Steve had an irresistible urge to become similarly amorous with every woman he became friendly with, with the exception of his 3 wives.

Steve met his first wife Neile in 1956 and married her after a relatively short courtship. Steve and Neile were both in show business and well aware of the temptations that existed around every studio corner, but they decided to make a go of it anyway. Neile tried to keep up her end of the fidelity bargain, but Steve was too dang wild to keep his horse in the barn. Steve always claimed to himself that he truly loved Neile, but he stubbornly maintained that his infidelity was a necessary part of his increasingly macho persona. Hollywood demanded that Steve appear to be untamed and untamable in all his exploits, both on the stage and off. Steve was more than glad to oblige Hollywood by fully experiencing all his leading ladies.

In 1959, during the filming of his breakthrough TV role, "Wanted: Dead or Alive," Steve became involved with one of his co-stars named Virginia. There was an innate flaw in Steve that prevented him from becoming overly emotional with any women. He was content to be friendly with a woman briefly and then move on to the next one. Steve made it known to Neile that he had been involved with Virginia in a more than professional fashion, which upset her, but she accepted it. Neile was confused by the fact that Steve confessed his cheating, but she realized that no matter what she said, he would do it anyway. Steve was becoming a rising force in Hollywood and she wanted only the best for him. If wanting the best meant allowing him to socialize at will, so be it. By admitting to Neile that he cheated on her, Steve felt that it made it ok. His brain was more than a little twisted, when it came to women.

On the set of the TV show, the director had asked Virginia about some marks on her neck and she told him her boyfriend caused the marks. Virginia had a boyfriend at the time, but it was Steve who made the marks on her neck. The director was able to conceal the marks with the skillful staff of the makeup department. Steve interacted with numerous women while filming the TV series and was friendly with all of them. The women were all left with the same marks on their necks. All Steve knew at the time was that he was driven to make contact with as many

different actresses and wannabe actresses as he could. His wife Neile was a celebrity in her own right and knew how the business worked. She fully realized when she first met Steve that he might not be able to maintain a monogamous relationship. Steve also felt that Neile would be unable to be faithful to him while they were both in the limelight. There was simply too much going on in Hollywood and too many people who could help each other career-wise.

By simply being seen with another celebrity or even minor celebrity, one never knew what contacts could be made from that rendezvous. Steve maintained an enormous list of his many conquests in his head, choosing to never write down any of the phone numbers. He had a knack for remembering faces, names and numbers. Perhaps it was that knack which enabled him to memorize his movie lines so easily. Steve was a director's dream for the way he so efficiently appeared for work each day, always ready to perform at a high capacity.

Steve removed a little bit of soul from each of his lady friends. At least that was the way he looked at it. In reality, Steve was taking something else from the women. The girls always walked away from Steve with some type of small marks on their bodies, which were almost unnoticeable. The marks were always on parts of the body where they could be concealed in some manner. Steve made sure of that. Each time he performed the act that made the marks, he picked a different part of the girl's body.

Since Steve was such a potent lady-killer, the women rarely noticed what he was doing when the marks were being made. Steve had a way with the ladies in which they were lulled into a state of hysteria and had somewhat dulled senses. When Steve performed that act on the women, they never felt a thing. Immediately after the act had been performed, the ladies might have felt a little woozy, but that was all. None of the women initially suffered from any real side effects from their encounters with Steve other than minor itchiness at the site of the marks.

Steve felt that his encounters with women had become necessary for his very survival. When he had his first encounter with Gia, Steve felt a strange boost of invigorative juices in his blood and body. Whatever had happened to his biochemistry back then had compelled him to perpetuate the feeling. The only way of maintaining the feeling was to meet with more and more women in the same manner. After a few years of performing his act on women, Steve began to feel invincible. He could do whatever he wanted, as dangerous as it might be and he never feared injury or death. Steve rode and raced motorcycles. Steve drove and raced cars. He jumped out of airplanes. He climbed mountains. He swam with sharks. He did most of his own stunts in his movies, despite the director's warnings.

On the mornings after Steve's encounters with the women, he always felt as dynamic as humanly possible. On those days, he could stay awake for hours at a time. He amazed and impressed everyone around him. When his cohorts asked him his secret, he said it was because of his clean lifestyle. Steve always watched his diet and constantly exercised to maintain his desirable actor's

physique. He practiced martial arts with Bruce Lee and Chuck Norris and occasionally beat them when they casually sparred. It wasn't diet, exercise or vigorous physical activity that gave Steve his invincibility; it was something else. Steve was at the top of his world and he saw no reason whatsoever to stop what he was doing with women. He continued to have associations with all his leading ladies, as well as many others on the set who would have him.

Steve's wife finally grew tired of his exploits, mainly because of the way that her friends had talked to her about it. Neile personally didn't care what Steve did, as long as he was happy. They had 2 great kids together and everyone got along with one other. Neile had her singing career keeping her busy and Steve was busy making movies all over the world. The family unit was as tight as it could be, given the celebrity circumstances. Neile struggled with the importance of keeping the family together for the sake of the children. She had been raised in a typical household and wanted her kids to have a similar upbringing. Steve loved his wife and kids, but had always been too distracted by the bright lights of Hollywood to be wholly faithful to Neile. Steve hoped that Neile would be around long enough for the kids to become mature and become able to somehow understand their father.

Steve was possessed by gaining everything he could from the Hollywood machine. Steve's escapades with women empowered him more and more. He gained more confidence and fearlessness as the years passed. His status in Hollywood reached astronomical proportions. He had risen to being the highest paid actor in Hollywood. He rejected dozens of movie scripts and chose to perform only in the movies that he felt would propel him ever higher. He refused to perform any roles that pigeonholed him into a typical figure. He had started in westerns on TV and wanted to branch out into everything else available in Hollywood movies.

Steve's role in "The Magnificent Seven" was actually small, but he somehow managed to emerge as the star. In "The Great Escape," he again played a relatively small part, but his hard-hitting confidence had rocketed him to the top of the reviews. In "The Thomas Crown Affair," he was finally the star and commanded the highest salary ever paid for a movie role. Steve had pioneered the concept in Hollywood of receiving a percentage of the profits of a movie in lieu of some of the salary. When the movies did well, which in his case at the time they always did, the seemingly small percentage sometimes generated thousands of dollars of additional income.

Steve created his own production company to be able to have full control of making movies, including picking the actors, actresses, director, etc. He became leery of uncaring directors. Steve felt that some of Hollywood's directors seemed to attempt to belittle Steve in some movies that paired Steve with equally famous stars. Steve's continuously increasing confidence soon made him arrogant. Steve demanded to be the star in his movies with top billing. Steve was the best thing to happen to Hollywood since Bogart or Robinson or Grant or any of the other legendary greats. Steve's acting ability had always been somewhat unique. Steve created a style

of acting in which he uttered fewer lines than the other top actors. He would inject silent gestures, facial expressions and subtle movements into a movie scene and without speaking, steal the viewer's focus. Steve created the less-is-more acting style. The traditional classically trained actors scoffed at Steve's particular style, but he beat them at their own game.

Steve's steely conviction had forced Hollywood and the moviegoers to fall in love with his style. Steve was a one-of-a-kind personality. His acting ability was foreshadowed by his higher than average level of confidence. Steve had created a god in himself in Hollywood. There was no one like him before or after his era. He had succeeded more than he ever imagined. Steve's problem however, was that he craved more and more women. Eventually, Neile tired of Steve's philandering and they divorced.

Steve then moved onto Ali during the filming of "The Getaway" and was married to her for a while. Steve's appetite for other women soon exceeded Ali's patience and they also parted ways. By the time Steve met his 3rd wife Barbara, it was definitely too late for him to change his adulterous ways. Steve continued to meet with as many different girls as he could, sometimes as many as 2 or 3 in one day. While Steve had still been with Neile filming "Le Mans" in France, he enjoyed meeting with as many as 12 girls per week during the 4 months of filming. The time in France is what really pushed Neile over the edge and primarily led to their divorce soon after.

When Steve met Barbara, he had such an appetite for women that he was already at the point of losing control. He had become careless and didn't care if the girls were a part of the Hollywood scene or not. Steve's need for women had exhausted his typical supply of starlets and he turned to complete strangers. It seemed that it would be just a matter of time that Steve would discover a woman who was poisonous. Steve was to the point where he was eating less and mysteriously relying on his encounters with women to sustain himself.

His 3rd wife had known when she met him that he was a man of legendary status. Like Neile and Ali before, all the women who met with Steve thought that they could make him their own. It was never meant to be. It was impossible for Steve to be a one-woman man for any length of time. Oddly, the only 3 women on whom Steve had declined to leave strange marks were his 3 wives. It was Steve's carelessness with all the other women that led to his ultimate undoing. Steve wasn't exactly sure when it happened or with which girl it happened. He thought about it during his last days, but was never able to precisely narrow it down. He reckoned that it might have happened while he was filming in Mexico and had been cavorting with all the señoritas he could get his hands on.

Steve believed that he needed women to help him stay on top of Hollywood, but of course by that time, he had lost his top acting status. Toward the end of Steve's life, he had become disillusioned with Hollywood, but still needed to feel invincible. He may have not been able to be the best in Hollywood, but the female encounters still enabled Steve to feel as if he were the

top male in the world anyway. Steve's confidence had evolved into arrogance and then evolved again into a form of megalomania.

Steve dropped out of Hollywood and quit racing motorcycles and cars. He started collecting things and had invested millions of dollars in various valuable collectibles. He flew airplanes and felt a great satisfaction in conquering the skies. Just as his life began a great new era, Steve's hunger for female encounters had finally caught up with him. Steve had come down with an illness and became very sick. The public didn't know it at the time back in 1977, but after 3 years of tremendous pain and suffering, Steve finally died in 1980. The doctors claimed that Steve had succumbed to complications related to mesothelioma, possibly from asbestos that was inhaled in an unknown manner.

The story that was handed to the grieving and confused public was carefully crafted to avoid controversy. When Steve was younger, he had been in the Merchant Marines and scraped the walls in a boiler room. He may have breathed asbestos at that time. He may have had excessive exposure to asbestos from years of racing motorcycles and cars. The doctors released their phony report to the public, because Hollywood had demanded it. Steve had millions of movie fans. The only believable explanation for the public to explain Steve dying at the young age of 50 had to be from some unusual cause, such as from the rare form of cancer called mesothelioma.

The reality was that Steve had contracted some disease from one of his female friends. It could have happened during any of the hundreds of his exploits, but Steve's personal assistant claimed it might have occurred during filming in Mexico. Who knows? The true story about Steve was that he didn't die from mesothelioma as the doctors had been forced by Hollywood to report to the shocked public.

Steve had been a vampire for the last 30 years of his life, which started back when he encountered the actress Gia in 1952 in the acting studio. At her apartment after rehearsal one evening, Gia had bitten Steve's neck and infused her vampire venom into his blood. Steve instantly became a vampire from Gia's bite. From that point on, Steve had been uncontrollably compelled to bite and drink the blood of as many women as he could, leaving the strange marks on them. He couldn't help it and didn't want to help it. He liked it. It was too animalistic of an urge for him to resist. Steve's vampirism had given him his greatness and virility. He felt he could attempt to do anything and be successful at it. He did it all and was indomitable. Nothing could kill him, not speeding motorcycles, racing cars, mountains or airplanes.

The mysterious woman whom Steve had bitten, possibly in 1977 possessed some kind of immunity system disease. Whoever she was, it was the right thing for Steve to do at the time. Steve was so addicted to the superhuman feeling of being a vampire, that nothing else mattered. Regrettably, even a bloodsucker like Steve had a weakness and it wasn't a crucifix, sunshine, garlic, a stake through the heart or any other such superstitious nonsense.

116. Randolph's Haul



116. Randolph's Haul

Randolph didn't care what he was hauling when he drove the 18-wheeler; anything would do to pay his bills. He had been driving for a long time and had millions of miles under his belt. He was considered as good as gold to the trucking companies. Anytime a company could latch onto a driver with so many miles and so few preventable accidents on his record, they wanted to keep him forever. Randolph actually only had one accident, which occurred while he was swatting a bee that had stung him on the left eyebrow while driving his rig.

Randolph didn't have a high standard of living and invested most of his extra money in dividend stocks on which to retire someday, if he were ever forced to stop driving for some reason. The real money in driving tractor-trailers was in the long-haul business, where the drivers drove for 10-14 days at a stretch. The long haul business was heavy in the Midwest in the vast vicinity of Chicago. So much commerce passed through the greater Chicago area that trucking was enormous and essential in the region.

There were many different opportunities for truck drivers, depending where the drivers lived in the country and the type of driving they wanted to do. Sometimes, drivers got team driving situations, which were ideally suited for couples. A driver and their significant other could drive on the long hauls and switch drivers frequently to stay fresh. They didn't necessarily get the equivalent rate of 2 individual drivers, but at least an opportunity existed for driving couples.

During the winter in the Midwest, snowstorms and blowing, drifting snow tended to close highways. Occasionally, the traffic was stranded on a highway and the drivers were trapped in their vehicles. Naturally, the truckers had no control over the weather. When the weather got ugly is when the better drivers prevailed and became the obvious choices by the companies. The proven drivers always had work, because of their dependability. The young drivers had to bide their time and log the clean miles before they got the consistent work.

When the hours of daylight dwindled through the late fall/winter/early spring months, many of the hours driven were in the dark. There weren't many things as depressing as being alone in the cab of a tractor staring at the limited tunnel view provided by the headlights. The driver's vision and hand/eye coordination were sometimes the only things that kept the tractor/trailer on the road. The games that the mind played with itself were at times amazing. At the end of the long days, the drivers were glad when they pulled off the dark highways into the well-illuminated truck stops for some food, rest and cleaning up, etc. The truck stops offered the drivers many things that were necessary for their survival. The big truck stops out in the Midwest were enormous facilities with restaurants, groceries, liquor stores and almost everything imaginable. The drivers needed those oases to give them back some of the civilization that they lost on the highway.

On some days, when Randolph was passing through the bigger cities, the traffic was chaotic and he had to apply all his skills to avoid becoming involved in an accident. Depending on the time of day, the cars treated the lumbering trucks as if they were motionless buildings. The cars weaved in and out of the lanes, coming within inches of the trucks, never expecting them to vary from an anticipated path. Once Randolph made it through the traffic-jammed regions, he could relax again. Most of his driving involved being the alert robot-human behind the wheel.

The companies that Randolph worked for in the early days had well-worn tractors pulling the loads and the drivers were forced to be creative when driving them. It wasn't always possible to anticipate a hill far enough ahead of time, due to vehicle traffic darting in and out. When a hill was spotted far enough ahead of time, he could kick the truck into high gear and hit the hill at speed. As soon as another truck that had been trapped in the right lane pulled out into the left lane in front of him, the run was over. There was nothing that slowed down highway traffic flow as efficiently as tractor-trailers in the left and right lanes crawling up a long hill.

Randolph was at the point in his driving career where he was making the top rate and was hauling the tandem trailers. The tandems were by far the most efficient means of hauling known to humanity. Australia employed triple trailers, which weren't yet legal on American soil, as much as the industry wanted them. The obvious limitation of the tandem was its excessive length. The tandems required so much empty lane to move over into when passing that they basically had to stay put and slug it out in the right lane for most of the time. When the driving the tandems, the amount of traffic that was already in the left lane sometimes prevented Randolph from ever moving out of the right lane.

The traffic rarely cared about the need of the tractor-trailers to move over in certain situations. Agile vehicles wanted to get where they had to go and hated those stupid clumsy trucks out there. Traffic rage was the primary difficulty that the new drivers had to get control of early in their careers. The sooner the new drivers realized their place in traffic, the better off they would be. The drivers had to realize that the traffic wasn't angry with the truck drivers per se; the traffic was angry at the slow-moving large object that was in their way.

At the truck stops, it was always easy to tell the new drivers from the old drivers, not necessarily by the age of the drivers, but by the look on their faces. The older high-rate drivers such as Randolph had calm looks on their faces when they walked into the truck stops. They were calm people, just doing their jobs. The newer low-rate drivers who hadn't calmed down yet, were scary-looking characters indeed. The young drivers at the truck stops had looks on their faces like soldiers that just walked out of a field of combat. Depending on the weather they were subjected to, some of them looked like they were just glad to be alive. They looked like they could do some damage to somebody if they were crossed. Randolph had seen many different looks on faces over the years and it was always easy to spot the new drivers. Occasionally when

Randolph was eating at the counter sharing conversation with fellow drivers, the new drivers would ask for advice. Randolph would always emphasize that a truck driver was always working while he was driving; he was just doing his job. Part of the job was professionally tolerating the traffic. The drivers had to let annoying things go when they popped up. The drivers had to prevent things from building up in their brains to the point of causing reckless driving.

Randolph offered to the young drivers the advice to consider driving as a game with relatively few rules. The more a driver could relax while playing the game, the more efficiently the driver could play. The game of driving was meant to be won by the driver; all they had to do was be more defensive to the traffic instead of aggressive. Being an aggressive driver involved too many risks of expecting traffic to remain instantaneously in position. Being a defensive driver enabled the trucker to better fit in with the constantly changing flow.

Randolph had been trained by some the best instructors in the business when he started driving. His instructors were former drivers who passed on loads of valuable information to the students. The one thing that Randolph was always careful to watch for was the cut-off and rear-ending accident scam that occasionally took place. The scam involved a trucker driving in the right lane and another car would quickly cut in front of the trucker from the left lane. The cut-off car would already have had another car strategically placed in the right lane ahead of the trucker. That other car would slam their brakes on, causing the cut-off car to be rear-ended by the trucker. Randolph had never been involved in such an accident, because of his training.

The scam was a common insurance ploy, which involved obviously desperate people who would risk injury from being rear-ended, just to make a few bucks. Randolph was always prepared for the scam, because he could sense when the scam was being setup. When Randolph drove, he always allowed a long following distance to the vehicle in front of him. No matter what the vehicle in front of Randolph was doing, Randolph always allowed for extra room. Randolph lost track of how many times he had avoided the scam from being pulled on him. He always watched his left side view mirror and waited for the cut-off vehicle. As soon as a vehicle seemed as if it was coming across, he braked slightly, to allow for space. If the vehicle behind him was following too closely to stop in time, it was their fault.

Randolph endured some treacherous driving during the winter months and had many close calls, but never jack-knifed any of his rigs. Randolph had a reputation among the companies as a platinum driver and had earned numerous mileage awards for his millions of miles of clean driving. Randolph treated driving on snow and ice like any other driving, where he adjusted his driving to the conditions. When it was windy, snowing, icy, excessively rainy, he always reduced his speed. It was simple physics. Randolph never claimed to be the smartest person around, but he was instinctively intelligent. He learned from every experience that he ever had. Anytime something happened to him that warranted taking note of, Randolph logged it into his

memory banks.

Randolph was always listening to and feeling the tractor's sounds and vibrations. He could always tell when something was amiss with the machine. He didn't always wait for the gauges to indicate low oil pressure, high coolant temperature or low voltage. Whenever Randolph pulled into the truck stops, he checked under the hood for things out of place or leaking. He checked the tires religiously, because they were the most important entities for maneuvering the 80,000-pound load.

On one steamy July morning, Randolph was in Texas heading north to Chicago when he came upon a dusty tractor-trailer rig that was probably hauling products from Mexico to Chicago. Randolph had his tandem rig full of products that he was transporting from Dallas to Chicago. He had driven his current route for a few months and was accustomed to encountering occasional northbound trucks driving from Mexico. The truck that he came upon was driving about 68 mph when he approached it from the rear, but then it increased its speed to 70 mph, which was Randolph's speed. He decided to follow the Mexican rig for a while, because it was always the easiest way to drive by not having to look down at his speedometer all the time. His current rig had cruise control, but it wasn't operational.

After 2 hours of following the rig on flat land, they hit a gradually steepening grade and some liquid began pouring from the truck in front of him. Randolph postulated that the liquid was just some condensation from the top of the trailer that trickled down the back and onto the pavement. Some of the liquid landed on Randolph's windshield, necessitating the use of his wipers. When the road leveled out again, the liquid stopped trickling from the truck in front of him. After another 2 hours, Randolph flowed the Mexican rig into a truck stop to get something to eat and drink. Randolph didn't notice who was driving the Mexican rig, because they parked in different quadrants of the large truck stop. After refreshing his hunger, thirst and gastrointestinal system, Randolph headed back to his tandem rig to give everything a quick check. When he climbed up to clean the windshield with a squeegee, he noticed that the liquid on this windshield smelled like piss.

He pulled out onto the highway again and after about 17 minutes of driving, caught up to that same Mexican rig that must have exited from the truck stop ahead of him. Randolph followed at 70 mph again for a half hour until they encountered a hill, at which time liquid again trickled from the Mexican rig and splashed onto Randolph's windshield. Randolph rolled down his window, caught a whiff of the liquid on his windshield and determined that it was definitely piss again! How could there be piss trickling from the truck? As Randolph pondered the question, wisps of smoke began seeping under the back door of the Mexican rig. What the hell was going on with that truck? First piss, then smoke - what next? Randolph pulled into the left lane, accelerated and evened himself with the driver of the Mexican rig, hoping to notify him of the

smoke and possible fire taking place. The driver looked at Randolph as Randolph pointed to the back of the Mexican rig. The driver turned his head back to the highway in front of him, ignoring Randolph's gestures.

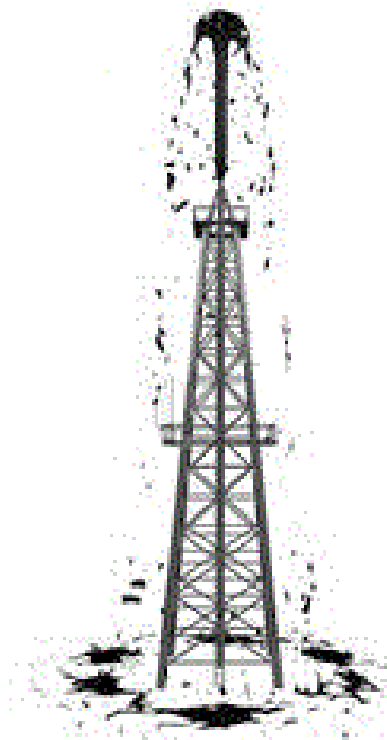
Randolph reduced his speed, retreated behind the Mexican rig at a safe following distance and called the State Police on his cell phone. As the smoke continued to pour from the Mexican rig, suddenly dents began appearing on the back door of the rig. Randolph managed to contact the troopers and informed them of the current mile marker. With his window rolled down, Randolph heard hammering sounds that were most likely associated with the dents that kept appearing on the inside of the back door. There had to be someone in the back of the Mexican rig hammering away at the door! Randolph heard someone yelling "Ayuda! Ayuda!" Help? Someone was screaming for help in that Mexican rig! Soon, flames began spurting under the door of the Mexican rig as the driver of the rig increased his speed to 80 mph, then 85, then 90 mph! Due to his truck's limitations, Randolph could only follow the Mexican rig up to 83 mph and then had to back off, hoping the troopers would get to the scene in time.

After 7 minutes of chaos, a trooper finally showed up, sped past Randolph and was in hot pursuit of the flaming Mexican rig miles up the highway. Another trooper appeared on the highway ahead of the burning Mexican rig and the 2 trooper vehicles managed to get the crazed driver to pull over. Fire trucks, additional troopers and ambulances were called to the riot. Randolph pulled over and parked on the shoulder to witness the sickening scene from a mile away as fire trucks sped to the site to douse the burning Mexican rig enough to pry open the back door. Randolph couldn't believe what was happening. He had heard about such atrocities taking place, but never witnessed such a thing. He wished it wasn't happening, but was unable to look away.

The driver of the Mexican rig was lying face down in the shoulder with his hands cuffed behind his back. Two of the troopers were kneeling on the driver's back as they orated the Miranda rights to the driver in English and Spanish. The driver's right cheek was red and scuffed from the gravel pressing into it. His back was bruised by the weight of the knees holding him down.

Randolph could only stare in silent horror. Tears welled in his eyes as Randolph watched 187 frantic immigrants leap from the back of the still-smoking Mexican rig with various burns and abrasions. Desperate crying men and bawling women vaulted with screaming children in their arms. Teenaged weeping boys and shrieking girls with tattered and smoking clothing jumped for their lives. Barely-breathing babies could be seen still clutching their partially melted baby bottles. Older people dragged their steaming bodies to the opening and simply fell out the back of the truck onto the ground. The pitiful people launched their injured bodies through the quenching spray of fire truck water and landed on the puddled muddy shoulder of the highway. All the inhabitants of the truck had blackened faces and bodies from the smoke. Apparently, they had tried to burn their way out of the smuggler's vehicle. Not everyone made it out alive.

117. Jeremiah's Oil



117. Jeremiah's Oil

Jeremiah had always played with fire his entire life. His father was always out of town with his sales job and his mother hired babysitters to take care of him after school. Jeremiah's mother worked long days as a sales associate at the mall. The babysitters she hired for Jeremiah probably weren't the most responsible, but they were cheap. All the babysitters liked candles and used matches to light them. Jeremiah always stole the packs of matches to start fires with them. He started many fires and burned a lot of things as he played outside in the backyard. He used to walk around the neighborhood with his friends trying to find stuff to burn. He dragged any piece of junk that he could find back to his house to burn it.

It was fortunate for the neighbors that Jeremiah's house was on the edge of town. When he and his friends started their fires, the smoke was often toxic smelling and black, depending on what was burning. The wind was usually blowing in a direction away from the neighborhood toward the creek, which was next to Jeremiah's house. When the backyard fires occasionally got out of control, Jeremiah and his reckless friends grabbed buckets of water from the creek to put out their fires. Jeremiah's favorite fires were created by burning tires. The smoke that poured from the tire fires was thick, black and foul. The petroleum in the tires was responsible for the blackness of the smoke. Sometimes tire fires were impossible to extinguish when they were large enough and really got going.

Jeremiah wondered if it was true about large tire fires and he decided to investigate the claim. When Jeremiah turned 16, he got his working papers and began doing odd jobs for landscapers, delivering newspapers and pumping gas. When he started driving at 16, he bought a pickup truck. He and his friends drove around the neighborhoods on junk days and gathered all the used bald tires that people threw away. They collected tires for months until they had a pile of tires assembled on railroad property on the edge of town. Jeremiah estimated that they had about 8,200 tires in the pile, when he set fire to the gasoline-soaked pile; it became the subject of many legends. The tires started burning slowly and then quickly. The clouds of black smoke were so thick and choking that Jeremiah and his friends had to vacate the premises. They observed the giant tire fire burning in the distance as they watched the high school football game at the stadium on the other side of town.

Every fire department in town and several from surrounding areas attempted and failed to extinguish the great filthy fire. The mammoth tire fire burned for days and eventually weeks. After a while, the fire departments gave up trying to put out the fire and let it smolder until it would eventually stop burning of its own accord. Jeremiah found that the rumor was true about a large tire fire not being extinguishable and thought about it for a while.

The typical fire department methods for extinguishing fires were to overwhelm a fire with large quantities of water. The water attempted to do 2 things. The first thing the water did was to

react with the flames to reduce the energy of the flames by converting the water into steam. The second thing the water attempted to do was eliminate the oxygen that the fire required as part of combustion. For a house fire that involved mainly wood burning, water was effective. When the water encountered petroleum-based burning objects such as plastics and shingles, etc. the water wasn't as effective.

Jeremiah had researched the fire/water connection and wondered about it as it related to his tire fire. The fire departments back then when Jeremiah was 16 only used water to put out the fires, but obviously, the water was almost useless on something as unusual as a large pile of petroleum in the form of tires. The temperature of the burning tires was too high for the vaporizing water to reduce the energy by any measurable amount. The boundless fuel provided by the tires resulted in almost unlimited energy to keep the tires burning for a long time. The amount of petroleum was intensely concentrated in the tires. The burning tires seemed to be immune to the water.

Jeremiah thought about it and realized that there had to be another method used to extinguish a tire fire or other type of petroleum-based fire. What was necessary to extinguish such a fire? If water didn't work, what would? Jeremiah drove his truck to the still-burning tire fire with a number of things in the back of his truck. He tried shoveling dirt onto the base of the tire fire to smother it and it seemed to have a positive effect. The dirt was working because it eliminated the oxygen. Obviously, it would be impossible to put out the entire mountain of burning tires with dirt, without the aid of large equipment to move the vast quantities of dirt.

How else could a large petroleum fire such as his tire fire be extinguished? The key was to smother the fire and not to attempt to react the fire's energy away with water. The petroleum fires need only be smothered. There was no use to apply water, due to the high temperature of the burning petroleum. Jeremiah reckoned that what was necessary was some type of substance that was capable of smothering the fire and could be applied at a distance. Water was good for applying to a fire at a distance, but couldn't smother an oil-based fire. What else would work? Jeremiah had some cement and water in his truck. He mixed up the cement and water into a loose slurry and poured it onto a section of the tire fire. It quickly smothered it.

Jeremiah witnessed an example of water working as a medium for the cement to smother the fire. If some form of cement or similar powder could be formulated that when added to water, the resulting slurry could be squirted onto the fire, it would smother it. Jeremiah thought about it for a while and then realized that it would require someone with chemical knowledge to figure it out. It was beyond his capabilities.

Jeremiah's giant tire fire had finally burned itself out many years later when he was much older. Jeremiah didn't realize it at the time, but back when he was 16, he had originated the concept of fire foam, years before it had been put into use. Thanks to his love of fire, Jeremiah had pioneered many other fire-related ideas since his great tire fire. He had gone to college for

chemistry with a double major in fire science. Jeremiah found that when it came down to extinguishing oil well fires, not much had been done along the lines of trying to figure it out scientifically. While Jeremiah was still in college, he had interned at petroleum companies to work with the oil well fire problems that were so often encountered.

Jeremiah learned everything he could about the chemical nature of petroleum fires. He realized in college that his insights as a teenager were essentially correct. At the time of his giant tire fire, he didn't yet possess enough knowledge to pursue and develop his ideas. Jeremiah began working for Exxon in the oil fields of Texas. When the oil wells were initially drilled, they were at their most dangerous state, due to the pressured gas in the ground. The wells sometimes exploded into major infernos and couldn't be extinguished quickly enough to prevent barrels of lost oil, injuries and equipment loss.

Jeremiah thought about the fires for a while and realized that specialized devices needed to be engineered to extinguish the fires. Once again, Jeremiah determined that the fires had to be smothered to put them out. Jeremiah possessed an unnatural fearlessness of oil well fires that put him into a league of his own. He felt invincible in the face of fire, a trait that he had his whole life. Many people thought he was crazy and a little bit touched in the head.

Jeremiah and his friends never revealed to anyone that he had engineered the great tire fire back in his hometown, although many people had suspected him. Jeremiah thought back to that beautiful fire many times and had thanked it for his current wealthy existence. He wasn't afraid of that fire back then and never feared any fire afterward.

Jeremiah's fearlessness of fire enabled him to design devices for smothering fires that no one else had thought of. Because Jeremiah had no fear of fire, he was able to get close enough to the burning hell to effectively use his device on it. He would don his fireproof metallic suit, drive his machine toward the oil well inferno and lower the device onto the spouting flames to smother the fire.

Jeremiah patented in excruciating detail every device and process related to oil well fire extinguishing that he ever created. He had created his own industry and became world famous for his ability to quickly extinguish the oil well fires with minimal destruction to the all-important wellhead. Many people perished while attempting to use his methods, but no one had his mastery of the art. Jeremiah's science involved a combination of his unequalled fearlessness and the expert timed usage of his devices that resulted in his eventual monopoly in the industry.

There was no fire that Jeremiah was afraid of or that he was unable to extinguish. Over time, Jeremiah had earned the nickname of "The Fireman," which he absolutely deserved. Jeremiah had many close calls over the years of putting out the fires. There had been explosions, but he had never been hurt. Even though Jeremiah wore a metallic fire suit, the intense heat of the fires

had scorched the hair on his head and face at times, but he always emerged essentially unscathed.

Jeremiah loved fire and what it was capable of, but obviously wasn't any kind of pyromaniac. Jeremiah's thing wasn't starting fires; it was ending them. Anyone could start a fire, but just try to put out a blazing oil well fire. It wasn't something for amateurs. An out of control oil well fire was like an old faithful geyser that was continuously erupting in flames. The well could violently explode in an instant. It was Jeremiah's touch when using the equipment of his own design that made it work every time when he used it.

When an oil well exploded into a flaming fountain, it resulted in a number of negative factors, some potentially fatal. The flames presented a hazard to everything and everyone near the flames. Working in an oil field was one of the most dangerous occupations, due to the risk of fire, explosions and the toxic nature of the continuously leaking fumes. Functioning oil wells near the burning well were at risk of also exploding into flames.

Whenever wells burst into flames, Jeremiah was always a phone call away. His company owned a 727 jet by which he could be anywhere in the country within 3 to 6 hours, depending where he was at the time of the call. Jeremiah demanded a minimum fee for extinguishing oil well fires and the price increased depending on the size of the well and location of the fire.

Jeremiah was available 24-7-365 to the oil industry and had finally started licensing the use of his patented devices and procedures. He loved fires and extinguishing them so much that he wished he could go on forever doing it. Because new oil fields were being discovered every day that required his system to put out the fires, he wasn't able to do all the work himself. The company he created eventually had locations worldwide to be able to handle as many of the fires as possible.

When Saddam Hussein was driven out of Kuwait and scurried away in his rat like manner, the fiend had set fire to every oil well, resulting in over 1,000 oil wells simultaneously burning black smoke into the air. The U.S. government called on Jeremiah to extinguish the fires, which he accomplished over a period of a few weeks. Jeremiah made millions of dollars on that project, the largest that he had ever attempted. Jeremiah had become a household name after that Gulf War and his business became boundless. Between the size of his massive company and the many licensing agreements, Jeremiah had become a millionaire many times over.

Understandably, he had made enemies in the oil industry by patenting his devices and methods. The monopoly that he had in the early years had resulted in many losses by some of the companies that were forced to wait for Jeremiah's company to arrive to extinguish the fires. If Jeremiah had licensed his system sooner or had increased the number of locations sooner, much oil company money would have been saved, oil losses prevented and loss of lives much reduced.

Jeremiah had many interesting meetings with Exxon, Mobil, Shell and the other oil companies, but he had to protect his own interests. Jeremiah was the genius who had devised his devices and procedures in the first place. It was just like any other invention. Whoever came up with the idea first, won. Jeremiah sued and won many lawsuits against the companies that had attempted to steal his inventions. The lawsuits had cost him a lot of money, but the courts were always on his side. The seemingly simple concepts that he had originated were solely his intellectual property and he deserved all the rights to his ideas. His intensely detailed patents were essential.

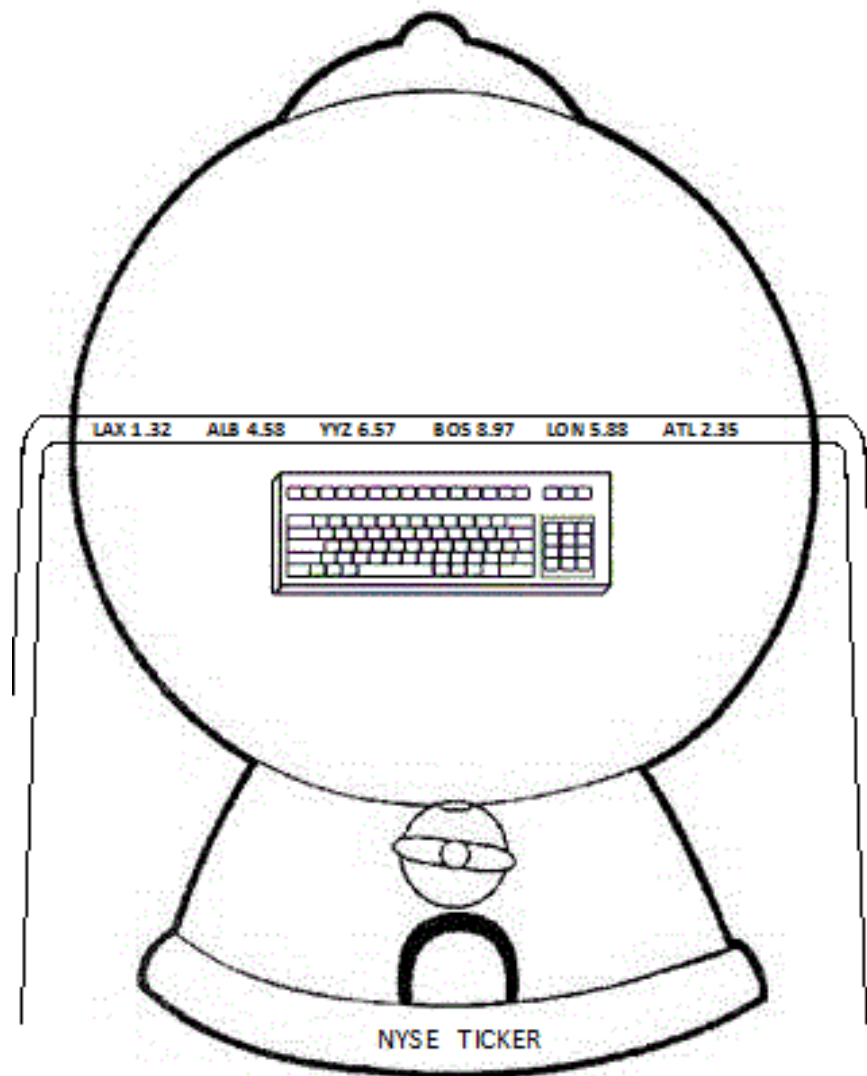
In the early years, the government had approached Jeremiah wishing to purchase all his patents to release them to the public, but he had resisted their magnanimous offers. He ultimately profited many times more than the government initially offered. Jeremiah had received threats against his life over the years for his resistance to release his patents, but shrugged them all off. He knowingly worked in a highly profitable industry and was fully aware that he was playing a game that the big boys played. He had perennially enjoyed playing with fire and thoroughly savored messing with everybody's heads.

Jeremiah was no fool and had adopted the practice of wearing a bulletproof vest and sidearm wherever he went. He hired an armed fulltime security guard who followed him everywhere. Jeremiah was ready for anything. He had to defend himself every couple of years when people shot at him from speeding cars. Jeremiah and his guard were always quick enough to rattle off a few quick rounds of their own. Jeremiah had unfortunately been penetrated a few times by stray bullets and actually lost a few security guards along the way, but he always survived the attacks. It was when Jeremiah and his guard caused the occasional car that shot at them to crash into a telephone pole and burst into flames that he felt true justice.

When a large oil well platform exploded into flames in the Gulf of Mexico, British Petroleum called Jeremiah to the task. Fortunately for BP, Jeremiah had been working on a system for extinguishing the ocean platform fires. He recently completed the design and had received the 879 patents for the system. The system involved the use of 4 of the largest helicopters in the world that would fly to the scene of the burning platform. A barge was in place near the fire that had a large specialized "tarp" made of numerous layers of different materials. The different materials would perform different functions as the fire was extinguished.

The "tarp" was attached to the 4 helicopters via 4 massive heat-resistant woven steel cables, lifted from the barge and lowered onto the burning oil well platform. The different materials in the "tarp" would perform their chemical functions and the fire was smothered and gradually extinguished over a period of hours. By the time the fire was out, the "tarp" was nearly disintegrated, having sacrificed itself to the fire. Jeremiah was awarded the Nobel Prize for chemistry for his giant "tarp." Jeremiah loved the mascots of the fire departments, the Dalmatians, so he donated the million-dollar prize to the ASPCA.

118. Buster's Ticker



118. Buster's Ticker

A stockbroker is an individual or firm that charges a fee or commission for executing buy and sell orders that are submitted by an investor. Brokers are registered with the Financial Industry Regulatory Authority (FINRA). The brokers combine flexibility, judgement, automation and anonymity with state-of-the-art technology and order management tools. They are positioned at the point of sale during openings, closings and unique intra-day occurrences to execute trades. To own a seat, a broker must go through a stringent review process and once accepted, they are required to maintain high levels of compliance and ethics. In serving their clients, brokers are held to a standard of conduct based on the "suitability rule," which requires there be reasonable grounds for recommending a specific product or investment. The broker must make a reasonable effort to obtain information on the customer's financial status, tax status, investment objectives and other information that can be used in making a recommendation.

To become a trading floor broker on the New York Stock Exchange (NYSE), a person has to go through a number of steps. First, they have to obtain a Self Regulatory Organization (SRO) and have an established connection to a clearing firm. Second, they have to complete and submit the necessary forms, which included the NYSE Member and Floor Clerk application, the Floor Employee Application, the NYSE Securities Lending Representative Agreement, the NYSE Equity Trading License Application, the Common Access Point (CAP) Agreement, the Mnemonic Request Form, the Client Session Request Form and the Algorithmic Routing Access Agreement.

Buster absolutely loved everything about the stock market. He had always wondered about it as a child and once he learned a little more, he went after it full throttle. Buster had gone to college and acquired dual Bachelor's Degrees in Finance and Business. When he got out of college, he worked for a number of financial institutions to gain the necessary knowledge and resume-filling experience to become a broker. Every company he worked for emphasized that he had to have a sound resume to be able to pass the scrutiny of FINRA. By the time he was 31, he finally acquired his seat on the NYSE and was able to begin trading.

He had been cautioned at every step of the way to be honest and ethical. He witnessed many of his fellow brokers performing various unscrupulous actions with their clients. Buster wanted to stay on the up and up and hoped to never intentionally ruin any of his clients' financial portfolios. It was too easy to take advantage of the widows, widowers and other found-money people who had more money than they knew what to do with it. Buster witnessed the corruption every day. There would always be rotten individuals around who paid their bills from the easy commissions. Buster was well aware that the stock market was full of evil characters and always would be. The design of the market from the beginning encouraged foul play at every turn. It was up to the watchdogs to try to prevent chaos, but it wasn't always possible. When the market was ripe for a

big rise or a big fall, there wasn't much that anyone could do about it except to hang on for the ride.

When Buster first started making trades and gathering his client base, it was easy. As time went by and the stock market went through several severe rises and falls, people began getting nervous and jerky about investing. Even though it was a well-documented fact that \$10,000 invested in dividend stocks in the 1970's would be worth a million or more today, people were people. Stingy investors wanted to make money on a continuous basis by expecting their brokers to do more than they were typically paid to do. The brokers had to be careful with their licenses and the finances at the same time in a sort of double-edged sword scenario. Buster had to maximize gains for his clients while avoiding illegal or flag-raising endeavors. Insider trading occurred everyday everywhere; some were caught doing it, but most were not. Since the brokers always had access to inside information, the temptation to take advantage of it was at times maddening.

One morning after Buster's 3rd cup of coffee, something clicked in his head that shouldn't have happened. Perhaps it was his integrity to be an honest broker that caused it. Maybe he psychologically wasn't capable of restraining himself completely. Whatever it was, Buster suddenly became interested in gambling on the side. It might be that the millions of dollars that electronically passed through his hands each day were too much for him to bear. Buster felt himself wanting to take a chance, a gamble at something and since he forced himself to avoid gambling at work, something had to give.

Buster made a good piece of change as a broker and collected about \$400k per year in various fees, perks and bonuses. Since he was single and lived in a modest rented apartment, he had piles of money sitting around making conservative boring gains for him. He wanted more. He wanted excitement. After work on that Tuesday, he went to the nearest Off Track Betting establishment and bet on a race. He lost. He then bet on 3 more races and won back all his money, thus breaking even. He thought he did pretty good the first time out and went home. The next day after work, he did the same thing, but lost a little. He wasn't worried as long as he would eventually break even or come out ahead.

He continued hitting the OTB until he needed more, so he went to the casino to add some more cheap thrills to his conservative lifestyle. He played every game and slot machine in the casino over a period of a few months. He was beginning to come out ahead and liked it. Between the OTB and casino, after 6 months he was up \$14k. That wasn't enough though. He began associating with other gamblers who convinced him to bet on boxing, football, basketball and other sports. He invested all his paychecks into his numerous gambling binges and lost a lot on some days and gained it back on others.

He felt he was still safe and began to increase his bets at all his establishments. He never intended to touch his savings, but it happened. After a year, he exhausted all his accounts and

only had his paychecks to live on, which were still lucrative, if he stopped gambling that is. He couldn't stop. He needed more money to keep his exploits in place. He loved the risk of gambling, especially when he won. He needed more money to maintain his hunger, so he turned to loan sharks for the easy money. That was a mistake.

Loan sharks are more than glad to lend you money, but the interest is substantial and depending on the shark, non-payment can lead to problems. Because Buster's particular shark knew of Buster's employment situation, the shark was more lenient with the payback schedule. The shark knew Buster was good for the money. Buster continued to gamble ferociously and borrow from the shark to keep the high perpetuating. Buster became a drug addict where gambling was the drug and the loan shark was a sort of drug dealer who supplied temporary means to access the drug.

Loan sharks are similar to the tobacco companies that like to get someone hooked for life; both don't want the ride to end. Buster's shark went by the name of 77, since he didn't want anyone to know his real name, for obvious reasons. As long as Buster paid back his loans to 77 within a week or so, 77 was content. For the first year, everything went along relatively smoothly. Buster would gamble at his many activities, win a little and lose a little. Sometimes he would pay back 77 and not have to borrow for a week or 2. Sometimes Buster would pay 77 with recent winnings. Other times, 77 would lend Buster money to pay back the loan, which was a particularly risky proposition. When a loan shark gets involved in the lending to pay back a loan deal, the borrower becomes at risk of losing personal property or perhaps bodily injury.

It hadn't come to anything drastic yet, but 77 sensed that Buster was on a one-way street to next-level measures. Loan sharks treated their businesses just like banks; they were heartless and uncaring to their borrowers. A big boxing match came up with great odds placed on the challenger and Buster had been talked into a large bet by 77. Buster lost the bet and owed 77 \$110k that he didn't have. The loan shark wasn't upset by the situation and gave Buster 2 weeks to pay back the money. At the end of the 2 weeks, Buster had ceased all his gambling, since he ran out of all his liquid finances. Buster was hoping to gamble the money back to pay 77, but it didn't work.

Buster was forced to make a decision to which he already knew the answer. He had to make a risky investment with some inside information. It went against his grain and grated at him as if he were a large potato being grated in one of those chef mandolin things. He felt as if his skin were being boiled from his body like tomatoes that are blanched in boiling water to remove their skins. His tongue felt like a sun-dried giant garden slug that was trapped on a sidewalk in Phoenix, Arizona in July. His fingers began sweating to the point that they wrinkled as if he were in a swimming pool for 7 hours. He began feeling and hearing unusual sounds in his gut. He thought so hard about the problem that he began farting and actually pooped a little in his

underwear before he was able to get to the toilet in time. While he was sitting on the toilet attempting to evacuate his bowels, his ass began sweating profusely and he slid off the toilet. He hit his forehead on the iron toilet paper dispenser. His forehead began bleeding.

He sat back down on the toilet seat, wiped his ass and got up to bandage his wound. As he flushed the toilet, his shaky hand applied too much pressure to the cheap handle and a piece of it broke off, hitting him in the right eye. "Oh my god!" he screamed aloud. He looked at himself in the mirror and saw a reflection that made him shudder. As he began quietly weeping, he bandaged his forehead and squirted some saline into his throbbing eye. He was so thirsty from fear and anxiety that he quickly bent down to the faucet to drink some cold water and smashed his mouth on the faucet. His one-eyed vision had altered his perception of the exact location of the faucet. A small chip of one of his upper front teeth fell into the sink with a drop of blood. "Oh no!" he exclaimed.

It was a big enough section of tooth to be noticeable as he attempted to smile at himself in the mirror. He ran to the living room to call the dentist and picked up the receiver of his landline phone with his still-wet hand. He pulled too hard on the receiver while adjusting his grip and pulled the heavy base of the phone off the table. The heavy base of the phone crashed down onto his left big toe, breaking it. Buster shrieked at the top of his voice from a combination of the fresh injury, the previous injuries and the insanity he felt rushing in. The pain was so excruciating that he instinctively bent over to reach down to examine his broken toe while trying to lift the foot to the hand that was reaching for it.

Buster lost his balance and slipped on the small loose area rug that was on the wood floor. He fell backwards over the couch and landed on the filthy floor behind the couch. He briefly lost consciousness and awoke to the sound of the phone making that sound a phone makes when the ringer is off the hook. In his dazed state, he tried to get up and felt a shot of pain from the broken toe. He noticed that the bandage had fallen from its previous location on his forehead to the dusty, dirty floor. His tooth and forehead were trickling blood. Buster decided to lie on the dirty wood floor behind the couch for a few moments to collect his thoughts. His life suddenly didn't seem so rosy. What happened?

After 2 minutes and 45 seconds of Buster's brooding, a large cockroach emerged from under the couch and crawled across the dust and up onto Buster's bleeding forehead. Buster waited for the insect to walk on by, but when the roach began to feed on Buster's forehead injury, that was all Buster could take. Buster wailed out loud and slapped at the giant cockroach. It was the biggest cockroach he had ever seen. The insect probably attained its large size by being a wary creature, because as Buster attempted to hit it, the roach leaped from the forehead injury into Buster's open mouth. Buster's hand slapped his forehead wound, causing him an unexpected jolt of pain and suffering. The cockroach misjudged its leaping force and had gone farther into Buster's mouth

that it had intended.

The insect landed on the back of Buster's tongue and Buster instinctively gagged from the large insect in his mouth. The cockroach felt fear for the first time in its life and bit down on Buster's tongue. Buster tried to expel the roach from his mouth and accidentally bit down on it and his own tongue at the same time. The cockroach became bitten in half by Buster's teeth and Buster was then able to cough/spit out the 2 halves of the giant insect from his mouth. The 2 bloody pieces of roach flew through the air, hit the back of the couch and landed on the polluted floor. Buster noticed how bloody the cockroach pieces were and then felt the pain of his just-bitten tongue. He thought that he hadn't bitten his tongue in a long time and always hated when it happened, because it always took a couple days to heal.

Buster began sneezing spastically, most likely due to his body trying to expel whatever might be remaining in his mouth and throat area. He sneezed with such force that he hit his bleeding forehead on the back of the couch frame. On the third sneeze, his nose unfortunately made contact with the couch frame and gave him a bloody nose. "Argh!" Buster choked. Buster attempted to carefully rise from behind the couch to resume calling the dentist. He successfully made it to his feet and slowly walked to the location of the phone lying on the floor. As he bent down and began picking up the receiver and base of phone, a mouse scurried over the top of his broken toe and in his startled state, he dropped the phone.

The phone landed on his broken toe and caused so much pain that Buster yelled in rage and he threw the phone at the mouse as it scampered toward the small hole in the wall on the other side of the living room. The mouse entered the hole in the wall and disappeared as the phone receiver and base collided with the wall 3 feet to the left and 2 feet above the hole. The plastic phone parts shattered into numerous pieces and the cord tore loose from the wall. Since Buster had no cell phone, he had been rendered phoneless. He couldn't call the dentist from his apartment. "Dammit!" he roared. He had to call his dentist to make an emergency appointment to get his tooth fixed. He had heard that if you damaged a tooth and carried the broken piece to the dentist fast enough, it could be glued back almost perfectly. He didn't want to have to get some mismatching repair job done on it.

Buster decided to get cleaned up a little and then go over to the neighbor to use their phone. As he took a step to the bathroom, he felt the agony in his broken toe and decided to go to the emergency room after the dentist to get his toe fixed. What a day! He leisurely hobbled to the bathroom to clean up as neatly as he could. He bandaged his bleeding forehead, squirted some saline into his throbbing eye, packed some cotton into his bloody nose and wrapped some white Red Cross tape around his broken toe. While patching himself up, he noticed that he had also 3 broken fingernails. From the bathroom, Buster heard a large fist knocking at the door, followed by "It's 77! Let me in, Buster!"

119. Gyro's Warriors



119. Gyro's Warriors

As Gyro sat in his kindergarten class, he started thinking really hard about something. He was wondering about the lunch that his mother had made for him. He was hoping that she didn't put any of those cut-up carrots in the Ziploc bag again. He hated those carrots, even though they were supposedly good for him. It may have been partly because of the fact that the carrots were supposedly good for him that he didn't like them. He hated carrots anyway, because of the color. Gyro hated any food that was of the color orange, such as pumpkin, squash, sweet potatoes and other such onerous foods. He actually liked oranges, because they were so sweet that he couldn't resist liking them.

All the kids of his age liked everything sweet with as much sugar as could be put into the food. Kids especially enjoyed the fruit juices that were essentially sugar water with some vitamins and minerals sprinkled in so they could be labeled as being good for the kids. Gyro had been in the middle of playing a game of Checkers with one of his classmates when he had been thinking about his lunch. It was weird, because at just the moment that Gyro was thinking about what might be in his lunch, his Checkers opponent asked what Gyro had for lunch. Gyro remarked to the classmate named Chili that he had just been thinking about his lunch at the same moment that Chili had asked him about it. Chili said that it was funny how that happened so much in life.

Gyro reflected about it for a while, and then he concentrated on something else intensely, just to see if Chili would say something along a similar line. Gyro thought about going swimming in his family's pool when he got home from school. Gyro thought about it for a few minutes, then closed his eyes and thought really hard about it. Suddenly, Chili asked Gyro if he was going swimming after school and wanted to know if he could come over. Gyro told Chili that he had just been thinking about going swimming when Chili asked him about it. Chili then remarked that it was scary how it happened again.

Gyro said that he had purposely tried to think of something to get Chili to think of it and it actually worked. Chili suggested for Gyro to try it again, but to pick some really obscure thing that would be a proper test. Gyro agreed and tried to think of something unusual. Gyro thought back to the time that his grandfather had given him a pocketknife that his father had given to him. Gyro thought hard for a few minutes and closed his eyes to increase the level of awareness. Suddenly, Chili asked Gyro about the knife and Gyro was amazed how it happened again. Gyro told Chili that he was correct about the knife and they tried the experiment again and again, each time being successful. The 2 boys were best friends and decided that what they had discovered was a special thing that they should keep a secret between the 2 of them. After school, they swam in Gyro's pool and discussed how they could garnish the greatest advantage from Gyro's apparent power.

Chili wondered if Gyro would be able to actually put thoughts into the mind of people, not just

appear to think about the same thing at the same time. Gyro experimented with the suggestion by trying to get his older brother Porthos to allow them to use his BB gun. Gyro's brother never let the BB gun out of his sight and wasn't allowed to let his younger brother Gyro touch the BB gun, for safety reasons. Gyro's father agreed to let Porthos have the gun because he was old enough, but Gyro had been strictly forbidden to use it. While Gyro, Chili and Porthos were swimming in the pool, Gyro began to think about the BB gun.

After a little while, Porthos swam over to Gyro and whispered something in Gyro's ear. Gyro couldn't believe what he had heard. Porthos actually said that Gyro would be able to take the BB gun out to play with it on Saturday. The next day in school, Gyro mentioned to Chili what Porthos had said about the BB gun. Chili was flabbergasted. Chili suggested that Gyro try to use his mental power on the teacher. Gyro wanted to know what Chili meant by that. Chili said that Gyro should try to get the teacher to give Gyro and Chili good grades, no matter how they did on their tests. Over the next few weeks, Gyro mentally coerced the teacher to give them A's on all their quizzes. Gyro and Chili discovered a gold mine.

The 2 boys used Gyro's power to get free stuff from stores, including all the candy and soda that they could eat and drink. Gyro realized that as time went on, his power became more intense and could be inflicted at a distance. The bullies at the school were dealt severe blows by Gyro as Gyro forced the bullies to pull their pants and underwear down in the cafeteria and poop and piss on the floor. Gyro made the bullies kiss each other and hold hands. The bullies were forced to sing childish songs and prance around the school. The entire school of kids roared with laughter as the bullies humiliated themselves day after day. Gyro had so fully destroyed the aggressiveness of the bullies that they were soon being bullied by the kids whom they had previously bullied. It was a surprising turn of the tables.

When Gyro graduated from kindergarten, he went to a different school the following year. His friend Chili was unable to be assisted by Gyro in school and Chili had to resume studying again to pass his tests. Gyro continued to influence his own teachers to get straight A's in the first grade of his new private school. The private school required Gyro to wear a uniform, which he hated doing. Gyro preferred to wear whatever he wanted and not be bored by wearing the same thing each day at school. Gyro used his power to influence each teacher in the private school into allowing him to vary his uniform the way he wanted. Gyro's power had increased each day that he used it. Gyro was able to eventually emit a brainwave aura around himself that was so powerful that anyone within 10 feet of him saw what Gyro wanted them to see. Gyro was soon wearing his old clothes again, but anyone who saw him thought he was wearing a perfectly tailored uniform with tie and shiny shoes.

Gyro still used his power to get small treats for him and Chili when they went out after school, but nothing major that would be too obvious. Chili suggested getting 2 new bikes, but Gyro

didn't want to push it. He knew what he had was potentially dangerous and he wanted to keep it as much of a secret as humanly possible. Chili didn't have the power and hadn't nothing to lose so he could afford to make reckless suggestions to Gyro. Gyro soon became maniacal with his mental power and decided to cut Chili out of the secret, before Chili clumsily revealed it to anyone. One day while swimming, Gyro floated in the inner tube, concentrated with full force and caused Chili to nearly drown in the pool. When Chili came back to consciousness after being pulled from the pool, he had lost all of his recent memory.

Gyro didn't want any harm to befall his best friend Chili, but at the same time, Gyro wished to have the secret all to his own. The next time that Chili and Gyro got together, it was as if they had gone back in time, far enough back for Chili to be unknowledgeable of Gyro's mental powers. That was all Gyro wanted; the secret of the power was his and his alone to use at his discretion. As Gyro breezed through Elementary School and then through High School with straight A's, he graduated as the valedictorian of his High School. Gyro managed to avoid having to give the requisite speech at his High School graduation by mentally forcing the principal into changing the policy. Gyro realized that with his immense mental power, he could essentially have anything that he wanted, but sooner or later, he might be put into the limelight and be at risk of discovery or personal harm.

He never had many luxuries growing up and didn't crave them. He was happy just getting by in life and didn't really need much to be happy. He didn't have any real interest in romance, perhaps because he was so content with his mental control of his surroundings. He didn't have the typical needs of average people. He was happy as long as he had food and a comfortable place to live. He decided after High School to try to make the world a better place, instead of merely making his own piece of the world better, as nearly everybody else selfishly did. His power was too much for one person to benefit from. He was born with a special ability and purpose. Through his school years, he realized that he had almost gone in the wrong direction by pursuing a wholly selfish lifestyle.

He wanted to help the world with his power, but he wasn't sure of the best way. He consulted with all the religious figures of his locale - the priests, rabbis, ministers and Islamic people. He tasked the leaders to define a method of fixing the world according to their various religious teachings. He consulted with each leader individually and then had a great meeting with all of them together. After a number of months of intense discussions and arguments, Gyro realized it was a waste of time. The problem with organized religion was that they each had their own interpretation of the way things should be. No single religion had a best definition of how to live together in a great world. Each religion was too stubborn to permit the other religions from existing purely side by side with their own.

Gyro threw his hands up in the air and decided to go to college to obtain a quick degree that the

Peace Corps held in the highest demand. He would then join the Peace Corps and help the world in that manner. Gyro felt there had to be a way of using his power for the ultimate betterment of humanity; there had to be. Why else was he born with his great power? Why did the creator bestow the amazing power upon him? If people believed that everything in life happened for a reason, then why had he been born with such a great power? There had to be a reason. The religious figures had been useless to help him. Gyro shouldn't have put so much trust in the organized religions to come up with the answer. He should have known better, but he had to give them a chance.

Maybe he could find a way to use his mental power to influence warring tribes in some far away land to help them make a permanent peace. The Peace Corps was always in need of general practicing doctors to work in the undeveloped regions of the world, particularly in equatorial Africa. After 6 years, Gyro gained his degrees and licensing in general practice and surgery. He finished several years earlier than the average person attempting the same feat. Gyro employed a combination of his natural genius and mental manipulation to acquire what he needed to start working in Africa.

At the relatively young age of 25, Gyro began working in the equatorial African village of Jeb Jeb where the BukToot tribe lived. The people had unusually large upper middle front teeth, which was a trait passed on through many generations of the tribe. The BukToots were a gentle people and were unfortunately attacked occasionally by the local more aggressive tribes. Gyro began working with 2 other doctors and 6 nurses in the raw heat and humidity that took great tolls on everyone. The 9 people of Gyro's group were responsible for the health of dozens of local Africans and as many others from as far away as they could travel.

The small clinic had the limited amount of facilities that the Peace Corps and Red Cross could furnish, but supplies needed to be carefully utilized, locked up and guarded to prevent theft and misuse. The main health problems encountered at the clinic were related to infections that were the result of injuries. The Africans were as careful as anyone else when they used tools and implements for farming and agriculture, but when they were hurt, it took many of them a long time to get to the clinic for treatment. By the time they made it to the doctors and nurses, gangrene had set in and resulted in limb loss.

After a month, Gyro managed to become the head doctor and supervised the other 8 Peace Corps people. He wanted to somehow help the Africans more than just by treating their injuries, giving them shots and helping them birth their babies. The patients sometimes came in with major injuries that they received from attacks by the local tribes. The BukToots feared the Bwer, Grop and Bpoo tribes the most because those 3 tribes surrounded the village of Jeb Jeb. It pained Gyro and his crew to see young BukToot men and women come to the clinic with spear, knife and ax wounds inflicted by the Bwer, Grop and Bpoo warriors. The Peace Corps had a strict policy of

not interfering in local politics and tried to stay out of skirmishes. It wasn't always possible.

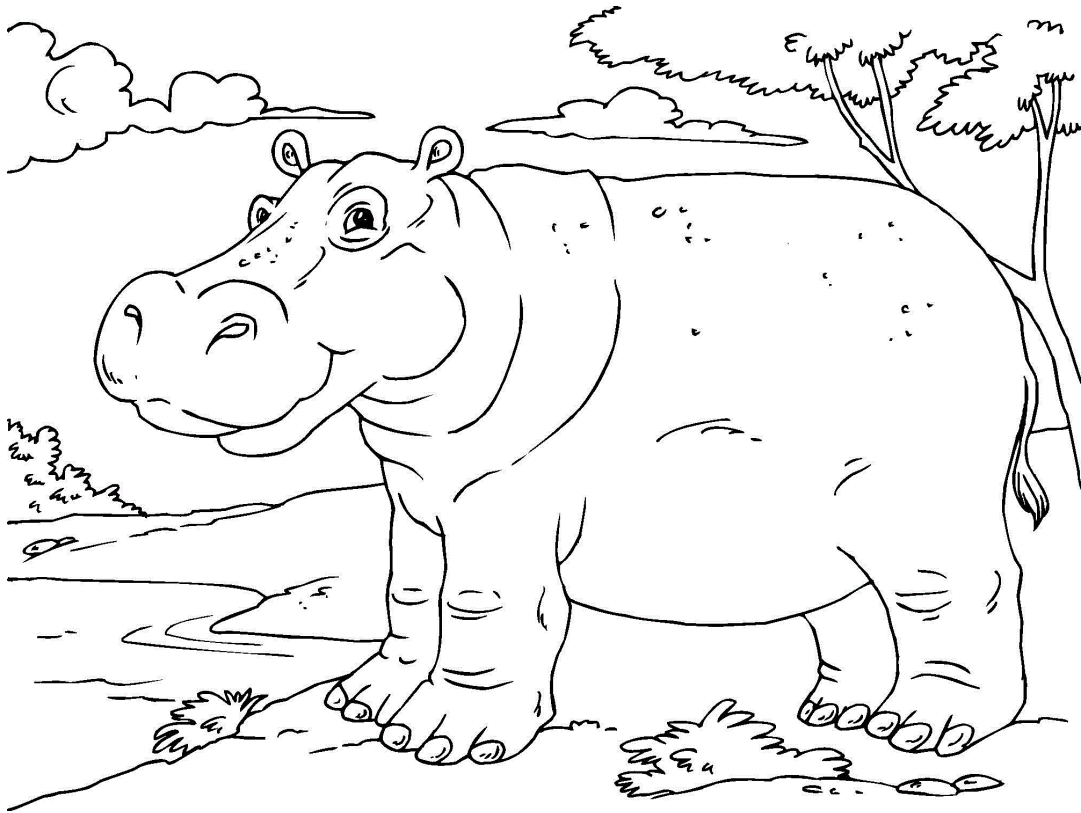
On a Saturday afternoon, some Bpoo warriors invaded the Jeb Jeb village and attacked the clinic where Gyro and his crew were feverishly working. Two of the nurses were in the middle of birthing babies when the warriors entered the clinic by smashing down the front door. Bpoo warriors stood in the clinic with blood tipped spears and smiles on their faces. It seemed that trouble was afoot. Gyro looked up from his surgery at one of the warriors and made the warrior stab the other 3 as fast as he could. The bright-eyed warrior then turned and ran out through the door, closing it behind him. Outside the clinic, the warrior then ran around and stabbed as many of the remaining Bpoo warriors as he could until he was fatally stabbed.

Gyro ran outside and stared down the remaining warriors who stood in place dumbfounded with fear. Gyro forced the remaining 78 warriors to throw down their spears and run away. The next day Gyro held a meeting with the chief of the Jeb Jeb tribe whose name was Jeb. The chief's actual name was Mfungu, but he took on the temporary tribal name of Jeb during the tenure of his leadership. Gyro instructed Jeb that he had special mental powers that could be used to the chief's advantage if necessary. Jeb responded that the BukToots were a gentle people that would never fight or retaliate if attacked, because it was their way. Gyro realized that it was pointless to try to convince the chief of any changes in their ways. Since Gyro was working for the Peace Corps, he knew he had a responsibility to do things their way. However, Gyro refused to sit back and be attacked while trying to help people.

Very early on Sunday morning, Gyro enlisted the aid of a stout young BukToot man named Maarky to sneak over to the Bwer tribe just outside the Jeb Jeb village. At the first sight of Bwer people, Gyro went into action. He mentally forced every one of the Bwers to grab torches and burn down the entire encampment. Gyro then forced the Bwers to march single file into the Frg River and they all drowned. On Monday, Gyro and Maarky visited the Grops and inflicted the same damage on that tribe. On word of the goings on, the remaining Bpoo people left the area and never returned. Gyro then mentally erased Maarky's memory of the events to protect everyone involved.

After 17 years of working in Africa, Gyro and his crew expanded to 43 doctors and 90 nurses. They overwhelmingly increased the scope of the clinic into a hospital-sized system of buildings. The Peace Corps was immensely pleased by the success of the Jeb Jeb village health care system and the complete elimination of the local unrest and occasional violence that occurred in the past. It was precisely because of the past problems that the Peace Corps and Red Cross had been so limited in their ability to invest in the African village. In the time before Gyro arrived, the world's health care financial institutions had always been reluctant to invest beyond what was considered an acceptable loss of people and supplies that might be lost due to attacking tribes. Acceptable loss of people?

120. Herc's Herd



120. Herc's Herd

The other hippos in Herc's herd unanimously called him Herc because of his amazing unnatural strength. Herc was the only hippo in his herd that was capable of climbing trees. It wasn't climbing in the typical sense the way that monkeys and cats climb trees. Herc could only climb a tree when its trunk was at a certain angle or flatter. Usually the trees that Herc climbed were trees that elephants had pushed over to get at the dates growing near the tops of the trees. Once the elephants had migrated out of the area, the pushed-over trees remained growing at whatever angle the elephants left them. Herc and his herd were the lucky beneficiaries of the dates on the still healthy trees.

It was actually on a dare when Herc climbed his first date tree. Fatso, who was the fattest hippo of the herd and Flinty who was the skinniest hippo of the herd, had both dared Herc that he couldn't climb the tree. Herc was never a hippo to turn down a good solid dare and cautiously climbed up the fallen tree. When Herc reached the dates, he ate them all as a gesture of success. With his new tree climbing confidence, Herc decided to climb every slanting date tree that he could. After climbing 14 trees and eating every date that he could reach, Herc began tossing dates down to the other hippos on the ground to eat.

After eating so many dates on that first day, Herc became sick and barfed out all 67 pounds of dates that he ate. A flock of vultures hungrily devoured the pile of barfed dates, much to Herc's dismay. The sight of the vultures eating the dates made Herc sick to his stomach and he barfed again, mainly stomach juices. The next time the dates came into ripeness, he didn't eat as many, because he didn't want to go through the barfing process again. Herc was able to climb all the other trees pushed over by the elephants, including the coconut trees and mango trees. Herc emerged as the king of the hippos and freely climbed the angled trees at will whenever he felt like a nice fruit snack.

The amount of fruit that Herc ate supplied his body with many more minerals and vitamins than the other hippos consumed, giving him immense strength. Herc may not have been the largest hippo of the herd, but he was by far the strongest. Herc was the only member of his herd to challenge and defeat a lion, an elephant and a tiger. Herc's exploits were well known throughout his neck of the woods. For some reason, the large amount of fruits that Herc consumed had altered his skin color from a typical hippo's gray color to a brownish color. It didn't take neighboring hippos long to be able to recognize Herc's brown color. When Herc walked into a mud hole, everyone knew to allow him to go wherever he wanted. If a drowsy hippo had been sleeping in one of the best parts of the mud hole, usually the deepest, Herc would wedge his nose under the hippo and flip the hippo end over end out of the mud hole. All the other hippos would laugh for hours afterward at the sight of the foolhardy hippo flying through the air.

After flipping the foolhardy hippo out of the mud hole, Herc would occupy the nice deep spot in

the mud hole and would happily wallow in the filth for hours. The other hippos envied Herc for his strength and knew they were incapable of matching his feats. Herc was a hippo like no other and was lucky enough to be born as fearless as he was. Some hippos felt that sooner or later, Herc would challenge a foe that would defeat him on the field of battle. Herc didn't worry about it. Herc enjoyed his hippo life to the fullest and took advantage of everything that nature had to offer him. Herc had access to all the female hippos of the herd that would freely offer themselves to him whenever they were in heat. It was nature's way for the females of most animal species to mate with the strongest males of the species.

Darwin's theory of survival of the fittest is what fueled the concept. Herc certainly had his pick of the hippo litter of the herd, but he grew tired of having to mate with so many females all the time. It was a grueling process for hippos to mate, which involved a great deal of physical exertion on the male's part. Herc was more than up to the task, but he preferred to devote more time to figuring out ways to improve the herd's living standards than of simply increasing the size of the herd. One of Herc's recent great ideas was to erect walls around the mud holes to make them deeper. When one of the rare heavy rains filled a mud hole, the amount of time the water lasted in the hole was based on how much water was in it. Naturally, the deeper the mud hole was, the longer it would retain water.

Herc pioneered the idea of erecting walls around the mud holes to double or even triple their water capacity. The first such mud hole that Herc worked on was his favorite, because it was surrounded by the majority of the regions bent-over fruit trees. Herc tripled the water capacity of that particular mud hole. When it rained in that mud hole, the amount of soothing mud would last almost until the next rare rainfall. Herc decided to raise the walls even higher to make it hold mud on a continuous basis.

Herc came up with the idea of creating walls around the mud holes one day while he was at the top of a mango tree eating the mangos. He paused between gulps of mango to look around the area. He spied a colony of giant ants that had erected a wall around their pyramid housing structure. The idea hit Herc like a bolt of lightning to erect a similar wall around the mud hole. The ants erected the wall around their pyramid to keep out invading ant colonies. Herc surmised that a wall around the mud hole might make the mud hole deeper and it would hold more water over a longer period of time. Herc started on the wall by dragging his great snout along the ground to move the dirt from the outskirts of the mud hole toward the edge to form a high spot around the mud hole. After repeating the process all the way around the mud hole, it became obvious that the mud hole would get deeper and deeper with rain falling in it.

The other hippos of Herc's herd followed suit by imitating Herc's method of dirt transport. In no time, Herc's entire herd was erecting walls around all the mud holes. Since the dirt was packed so hard in the immediate vicinity of the mud holes, it was difficult for the hippos to move the

dirt. They had to find and move the dirt that was located farther and from the mud hole to erect higher and higher walls. To erect a wall of 10 feet height, the hippos had to push dirt from up to 100 yards away or more. It was definitely a chore, but it worked fantastically well. When the great rains fell later in the year, all the mud holes filled to great capacities and had water in them for a much longer time. The hippos were able to wallow in the protective soothing mud for a much longer amount of time than the neighboring hippo herds. The lifespan of Herc's hippo herd increased as a result of the greater water and mud supply. Herc's herd drastically increased in size as a result and soon there were 3,679 hippos happily wallowing in the deep mud holes of the area.

Due to the larger water capacity stored in the extra deep mud holes, the roots of the fruit trees also had more water available to them. The fruit production of the trees was greatly increased, which enabled the enormous herd to thrive on the extra food tossed down to the herd by Herc. The super-sized mud holes also began growing larger species of the aquatic weeds that the hippos ate, which also contributed to the survival and expansion of Herc's huge hippo herd. The extra capacity mud holes also enabled new species of fish, eels and crustaceans to evolve and thrive. Herc's herd had so much extra succulent food to eat that hippos from neighboring areas began migrating to Herc's area. Eventually, there were too many hippos coming into Herc's area and he had to fend them off to keep them where they belonged.

Herc instructed the neighboring hippo herds how to build walls around their mud holes so that they would also benefit more from the infrequent rainfalls. Herc was a highly respected hippo, perhaps the most respected hippo in the history of hippos. His superior strength and fruit eating enabled him to devise many innovations, which helped his enormous herd and the neighboring herds to prosper. Another of Herc's innovations was to gather as much of the thorn bushes as they could find in the area to build up a prickly perimeter to keep out the lions, tigers and hyenas. The predators always preferred to tread through areas that were easy walking. Whenever the thorn bushes were encountered, the lions and other savage predators usually went around, instead of trying to fight their way through the barbed obstacle.

Fatso and Flinty were constantly impressed by Herc's ability to come up with such great ideas that helped the hippo herd in so many ways. Another improvement that Herc came up with that would result in the strengthening of the herd was to feed the newborn hippos exclusively on mother's milk and papayas. Herc had noticed through observation how the hippos that ate the papayas were obviously smarter and stronger than the others. Herc reluctantly had to relinquish some of his precious papayas when the crop was in season, but he knew that the herd benefited from his sacrifice in the long run. By having an intelligent and strong herd, the entire herd profited, especially the older more feeble ones.

Even though the thorn bushes on the perimeter prevented the lions, tigers and hyenas from

invading, it didn't stop the occasional bold elephant herd from infiltrating the hippo ranks. It was fine for the elephants to enter the hippo village, as long as they respected the rules. Since elephants possessed such immense appetites to feed their large bodies, they sometimes destroyed the trees from which they were eating leaves. Herc didn't mind an occasional fruit tree getting pushed over for him to climb, but he didn't like it when the elephants killed the shade trees, which provided some resistance to water evaporation. As hot as it was out there, a little shade can go a long way toward preserving the life of a mud hole.

Since the elephants were migratory, they didn't care how much damage they inflicted on the environment when they were in town. Because the hippos essentially stayed put near the mud holes for their lifetimes, they needed the trees in the area to stay alive and as leafy as possible. After the last elephant herd passed through the area, Herc vowed to prevent the beasts from damaging his beautiful new hippo village. At the first sign of elephants pushing through the thorn barriers, Herc scampered over to meet the leading bulls of the herd. Even though there were only 13 elephants in the herd, no amount of hippos, even Herc's enormous herd, would dare to challenge them.

The bull elephant leader of the herd had 10-foot tusks almost dragging on the ground and he slashed wildly at the thorn barrier, laughing as he thundered through the opening. Herc stepped forward and stood on his back feet, which made him nearly as tall as the bull elephant. At the sight of Herc standing on his back feet, the bull leader stopped and snorted at the ground with his long trunk. A huge cloud of dust was kicked up by the incident and Herc was quickly covered by a layer of dirt, which clung to his wet body that just came from the mud hole. Herc didn't mind being covered with the dust cloud that was snorted up by the bull elephant. Hippos preferred to walk around with a coating of mud on their bodies for protection from insects and sun.

It was the arrogance of the gesture that irked Herc. The elephant leader knew all too well what his dust snorting gesture implied - that the elephant was the king of the area and all other animals better just step aside. Herc didn't see things that way. Herc had taken on and defeated all the other large animals in the area, save for an elephant. It was time to step up to the canvas and fight the big man. Herc knew that his only chance of defeating the bull elephant might be to get the elephant to back down. That's why Herc stood up on his back feet to face the elephant leader. The bull initially scoffed at Herc's insolence and snorted at the ground again. Herc stood his ground. The bull began gnashing at the ground with his great tusks, shoveled hundreds of pounds of dirt in every direction.

The other elephants of the herd backed away from the scene. Herc instructed his herd to back off as well. The bull elephant began trumpeting and stomping its feet. Herc stood there motionless on his back feet. Herc respected the awesome size and power of the bull elephant and chose to not hurl insults at the great pachyderm. Herc hoped that by standing his ground firmly and

respectfully, that the bull elephant would realize that Herc was just another bull leader such as he was and would respect Herc trying to defend his hippo territory. The bull elephant was surprised by Herc's resistance and stopped trumpeting and gouging the earth. The bull elephant looked directly into Herc's eyes and slowly moved toward him. Herc gulped and realized that his bluff might just have been called. He might be on the verge of becoming shredded by the huge bull leader's gleaming tusks.

Herc's mind began racing. Now what? Herc immediately thought of that new trick he had been working on. Herc had been trying to figure out a way of getting to the top of a tree that he was unable to climb, such as a tree with too narrow of a trunk for his feet to obtain firm footing. Herc had been exercising in his spare time and began walking at a brisk pace, then jogging and eventually running. After a few months of practicing, Herc found that he could reach the speed of approximately 21 mph for a short distance. He was able to use that speed to help him to leap into the air and get to the top of the previously unreachable tree.

Herc quickly dropped on all fours turned around and ran in the opposite direction of the bull elephant that was still slowly walking along with that menacing look on its face. Herc was about 100 yards from the challenging bull elephant when Herc began his fast-pacing walking, then jogging and then full running. At about 20 yards from the bull leader, Herc leaped into the air and landed on top of the bull elephant's head. Before the huge elephant knew what was happening, Herc was pissing and pooping on the head of the elephant. The hundreds of hippos in Herc's herd burst out laughing. Herc continued to piss and poop on the elephant's back and stomped around on it to smear it in properly. The elephants of the bull leader's herd were initially shocked by what they saw, but began laughing along with Herc's hippos.

As hard as the bull leader attempted to fling Herc from the top of its body, it was to no avail. Herc was simply too agile to be bucked off. Herc began laughing along with all the hippos and elephants and laughed so hard that he farted the wettest, squeakiest, smelliest farts ever. It must have been from the excitement of the moment. The bull elephant was so embarrassed and enraged by the goings on that it stopped trying to eject Herc from its body and Herc stopped smearing the poop. Herc and the bull elephant silently acknowledged to each other that a truce had been reached. Herc leaped from the back of the huge elephant and landed on the ground in front of it. Herc immediately stood up on his back feet again to face the bull elephant leader.

The bull elephant and Herc silently stared at each other for a few moments and then the bull leader turned around and walked out through the thorn fence with his elephant herd behind him. Herc waited for a few moments until the elephants had disappeared from sight and then he dropped down to all fours. Herc's hippo herd began screaming and carrying on with glee. Their great leader Herc had essentially defeated an elephant herd without the use of violence. It was a great day in hippo history.

121. Teddy's Run 2



121. Teddy's Run 2

Teddy rolled up onto the windshield of the car. The girl quickly looked up from her phone and slammed on the brakes. Teddy rolled forward down the windshield, over the hood and onto the shoulder of the road. Teddy grunted and the girl screamed. The girl hastily exited her car on the driver's side, leaving the door wide open. She ran around the front of the car to view the victim. She asked if Teddy was ok. Incredibly, Teddy was unharmed except for a few brush burns on his elbows. A truck that had been driving behind the girl's car smashed into the door that the girl left open, tearing it off at the hinges.

The girl turned from Teddy and watched her driver's door go flying down the road. "My car!" she cried. Teddy chuckled to himself, "Typical!" The girl offered Teddy all the money in her purse if he would forget the incident. Teddy gladly accepted the girl's \$874 in cash. He didn't know how and when the money might come in handy. Teddy asked for the girl's cell phone and she declined. She said she needed it to call for a tow truck and to help her deal with the truck driver with the smashed front end of his truck.

Teddy rose to his feet and galloped down the road, laughing to himself. He figured that careless girl probably had enough problems on her hands at the moment without a lawsuit. He felt fine and was a little bit wealthier to boot. He needed to continue his quest and keep heading to California. He didn't realize it, but he had suffered a mild concussion from the impact with that girl's car. After 3 hours of trotting, he began feeling a mild sensation of euphoria that he thought was the "runner's high." His mind drifted back to school again and in his daydream, he was teaching his Science class in Elementary School.

He was a bit of a classically geeky teacher, who wore large glasses and cut his own hair with one of those Flowbee contraptions. He never managed to get the knack for using the device and always ended up with a noticeably bad haircut. He didn't mind being jeered at for his hair, because he wasn't concerned by trivialities. He loved the power of Science and the unlimited amount of scientific knowledge available to those who wished to obtain it. He was at the chalkboard attempting to craft a drawing of an oil well to explain the nature of petroleum production in the United States. The students were giggling as his drawing, because even though he had been a teacher for 26 years, Teddy still had the drawing ability and handwriting of a 7 year old.

One of the students shot a spitball at the back of Teddy's head just as Teddy was bending over to grab the eraser. The spitball hit the chalkboard with a splat and stuck there. Teddy chuckled and snatched the spitball from the board, spun around to the class and hurled the spitball at the kid who spat it. Unbeknownst to the kids in the classroom, Teddy had recently installed small mirrors in the corners of his glasses to watch the rascally kids while he was at the board. Teddy nailed the kid in the forehead with the spitball, which was still wet and had some added chalk

dust on it. The other kids started laughing and at first, the spitball kid sat with a blank look, and then started laughing himself. Teddy was already laughing when he shot the spitball, so in seconds the entire classroom was laughing hysterically. The spitball kid laughed so hard that he farted, which made other kids who heard the fart laugh harder.

Soon, numerous kids in the classroom had farted, to the point that it stunk so bad in there that Teddy had to open the door for ventilation. The vice principal of the school was walking by at the moment that Teddy opened the door and caught a whiff of the fart cloud emanating from the classroom. The vice principal instantly broke into song, "Beans, beans, they're good for your heart, the more you eat, the more you fart!" "No kidding!" said Teddy. Teddy walked out into the hallway to glimpse the vice principal singing and skipping down the hall to his office. Teddy tried to run down the hall after the vice principal in the hopes of catching the guy before he entered his office. Teddy was too slow.

Since Teddy still had the piece of chalk in his hand from drawing on the chalkboard in the classroom, he felt an urge to draw something on the floor of the hall. He carefully etched a nice diagram that is commonly seen in schoolyards. The diagram is used for playing hopscotch. When Teddy was done with the diagram, he began playing hopscotch on the floor and starting singing the beans/fart song. He started out whispering the song, and then sang louder and louder. When he was singing as loud as he could while still having a decent singing voice, he hit the word "heart" and at the same instant, the vice principal darted out into the hallway.

The vice principal started singing along with Teddy in unison and began skipping around the hopscotch diagram on which Teddy was playing. The 2 of them actually sounded pretty good together, because Teddy sang in a slightly lower key than the vice principal and their voices harmonized beautifully. The vice principal then began skipping backwards around the hopscotch diagram while Teddy was playing on it and they continued singing the fart song together.

As Teddy kept running along the shoulder of the road in his dream state, he covered many miles and before he knew it, he was in Tampa. He must have been running for days without realizing it, through the daylight and night. He continued running and headed north along the west coast of Florida. His body didn't seem to need food or water; maybe in his zombified state, he opened his mouth to catch the rainwater that had been falling on him on and off for hours.

Teddy found himself running along the surface of a lake somewhere and noticed that the water seemed really soft on the soles of his sneakered feet. Even in his dream state, he was able to somehow appreciate a little comfort. As he ran along the surface of the lake, a fish jumped through the air into one of his hands. When he looked down at his hand, the fish had turned into a freshly cooked fish fillet and he took a bite out of it. Teddy loved a good fish fry, but where were the fries? Another fish jumped out of the lake into his other hand. When he looked down at that fish, it was actually some freshly fried steak fries, not too hot, just warm and crispy

enough to eat and not be burned by the heat. He dipped the fries into the ketchup in his left vest pocket. He dipped the fish fillet into the tartar sauce in his right vest pocket. Yum!

As Teddy skittered across the lake, an alligator shot up out of the water in front of him and he smashed into the large reptile. When Teddy opened his eyes after the impact, he found that he was wearing alligator-skin sneakers that fit his feet perfectly. His backpack had turned into an alligator-skin product as well. He reached up to his head and discovered an alligator-skin baseball cap on his skull. His shirt and shorts had become alligator-skin items of clothing as well. He wasn't positive, but he thought that his underwear might have become alligator-skin as well, just by the reptilian feel on his balls.

Teddy suddenly dove down into the lake and found himself swimming underwater like some kind of Aquaman. He looked back at the location of his feet and noticed that his feet had turned into a fish-like tail. He liked the tail because it enabled him to swim with great speed. Even though he just ate a fish fry, he was still hungry and began snapping at bluegills and perch that he encountered as he swam. The raw fish had a surprisingly good flavor. To balance the meal properly, he also chewed some hunks of seaweed. To wash it all down he simply swallowed a few gulps of water. The lake was fresh water and had a so-so flavor to it.

Teddy swam into a cave that opened up into fresh air again. It was a cavernous space overrun with geese all over the place. The geese were running to and fro on their wingtips. Teddy wasn't surprised at the sight of hundreds of geese getting around the way they were. It somehow seemed normal, just like the millions of bats that were walking around on their feet on the floor of the cave. When the bats pooped, they shot it to the ceiling of the cave, where it stuck like glue. Teddy hoped the poop would stay up there on the ceiling until he walked by.

Teddy was abruptly awakened from his dream state by running headlong into a telephone pole and was knocked momentarily unconscious. When he awoke from his unconscious state, he just lay on the ground for a while looking up at the stars in the night sky. Since he was lying in the tall grass next to the road, he was safe from being seen or worse, being run over by a vehicle pulling into the shoulder. Teddy wondered where he was and what he was doing there. After 34 minutes of droopy-eyed reflection, he remembered that he was trying to run to California to win the Cadillac.

He rolled over a few more times in the grass and fell asleep for 4 days. When Teddy awoke from his refreshing slumber, he felt like a new man. Even though he doesn't remember eating or drinking anything, he wasn't hungry or thirsty. Just to be sure of getting some nutrition, he ate and drank some of the stuff from his backpack. As he nourished himself, he remembered being hit by the careless cell phone girl and he peaked into the money pocket of the backpack. He saw the fat wad of money in there and was relieved.

He felt the bump on his head caused by running into the telephone pole and looked around until he could see the pole. "Aha!" he shouted. He wondered how he could have been so stupid to run into the telephone pole in the first place. Wasn't he paying attention while he was running? How could he have not seen that pole? He kept rubbing the bump on his head while struggling to figure out what happened. He couldn't figure it out. There was simply no use in crying over spilled milk. He thought that was a stupid expression. He would never cry over spilled milk. Maybe he would be a tad upset, because he would have to clean up the spill. If there were a cat or dog close by, he could instruct one of those animals to lap up the spill. Teddy was convinced that spilling milk would never, ever bring him to tears, except maybe if it happened to him while he was a baby and he was really into drinking the milk at the time.

He wondered what liquid spilling would actually make him cry. He believed that if his own blood were spilling out of his body, he would probably cry. Maybe if he were in the desert and only had a gallon of water left to drink and the water somehow spilled out of the jug. That might make him cry. He definitely could not think of a situation when he would cry as an adult over spilled milk. He vowed that if he ever gained knowledge about the person who invented the spilled milk saying, he would attempt to find the person or their heirs and tell the person or persons that the saying was stupid, didn't make any sense and it should be eliminated from the English language.

Teddy didn't suppose that thinking incessantly about the saying was doing him any good at the moment, but it bothered him anyway. Teddy was one of those people who can become obsessed with a molecule of annoyance and ponder over it until it became many molecules. He wished he could become one of those people who didn't sweat the small stuff. Maybe it would lead to a longer lifespan. Maybe not.

Teddy went back to trying to figure out how he missed sighting the telephone pole and decided that it must have been because it was getting dark and he mistook the pole for a shadow of something harmless and just plowed on into it like some kind of idiot. That didn't make sense though. He knew from the get-go that he had to be vigilant and careful while running out there and he was supposed to be watching out for such obstacles. Why did he run into that stupid pole already? As he ached for an answer, he fell asleep again for 2 days.

When Teddy awoke from the 2-day nap, he decided to start running again. He realized that he had been lying there in the grass for 6 days and had a lot of miles to make up. He simply had to make it to Alabama by June. It was still a long way off, but the only way to get the miles behind him was to get going. He ate & drank something, pissed & pooped in a large drainage culvert and began running again. After only 3 minutes of running, a beer case of empty beer bottles hit him in the back of the head. Some rednecks heaved the trash out the window of their pickup truck to avoid being busted by the Police for have open containers in their vehicle. The rednecks

honked their horn and jeered at Teddy as they sped away. Teddy his best to maintain his balance, but wavered a little and lost his balance. He ran in an angled path off the shoulder and back into the tall grass again. As hard as he tried, he was unable to avoid running into the telephone pole. He was knocked unconscious and didn't wake up anytime soon.

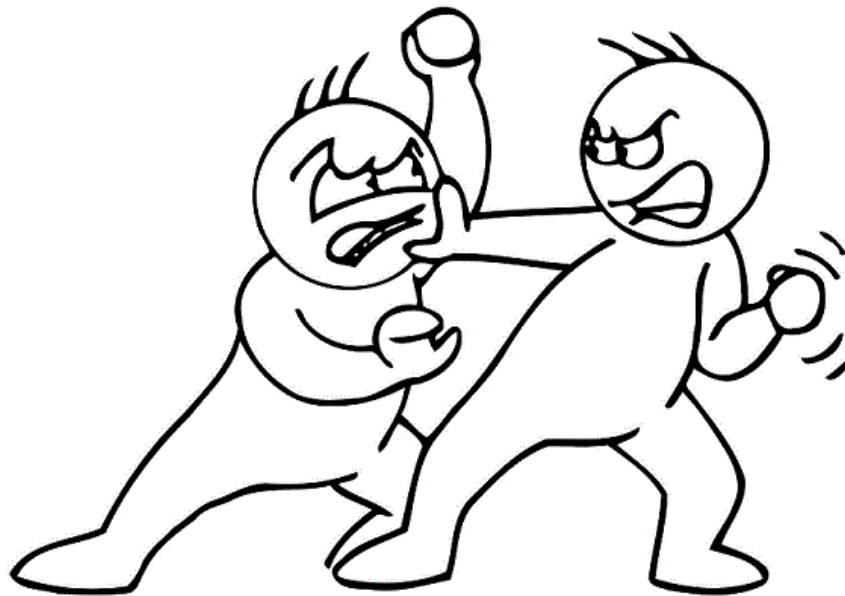
Teddy was back in school again teaching gym class. He was showing the kids how to use a trampoline. The first step is how to correctly mount the apparatus. You get a running start and flip yourself up onto the thing doing a somersault in the process. Care must be taken to avoid getting your head caught in the springs. Then carefully make your way to the middle of the tramp. Start bouncing slowly until you get the feel of the motion and gradually bounce higher and higher within your comfort level. As your legs become accustomed to the motion and coordination involved, you can begin to get fancy on the thing.

The higher you bounce, the more you can do while you are up in the air part of the bounce. First, try to do a flip, and then try to get more height to do a double flip and so on. The higher you bounce, the more tricks you can do. Teddy was in the process of demonstrating a triple back-flip, when one of the students on the edge of the trampoline tossed a banana peel onto the device just after Teddy bounced upward. Teddy did his triple back-flip with no problem, but as he descended from the flip expecting to land on grippy trampoline material, he instead landed on the banana peel. His landing foot slipped on the peel and Teddy went flying through the air. Fortunately, the climbing rope was still down from the rope-climbing exercises. He was just barely able to grab the rope with the fingers of his hand and clamp down on it. He climbed down the rope, ripped it down from the ceiling and shouted to the boys who were around the edge of the trampoline to get in a line.

Teddy demanded that the boy who put the banana peel on the trampoline to own up to it or every boy who was around the trampoline would get 3 lashes from the climbing rope. Teddy gave the boys 30 seconds to decide. At the end of the 30 seconds, none of the boys admitted to the prank so Teddy ordered them to step up one by one to get their lashes. To the first boy, Teddy uttered the famous words, "This is gonna hurt you more than me!"

Just as Teddy raised the thick climbing rope to whip the boy, he awoke from his slumber in the tall grass. He rose to a seated position and felt the lump on the front of his head from the telephone pole and on the back of his head from the case of beer and decided that he needed to buy a helmet from Walmart. The only way he was going to survive the run was if he wore a helmet while running. As stupid as it might look, he realized it was a necessity. As he put his hand down to help himself to his feet, his hand sunk down into the ground into a mucky, gooey substance. The substance seemed to pull his hand and arm down farther, the harder he tried to pull it out. Quicksand? Here? Teddy didn't know what it was, but he suddenly became very afraid. He had read about the dangers of quicksand before and it never had a happy ending.

122. Indio's Bout



122. Indio's Bout

Indio ran far ahead of the guy to gain enough distance to be able to reach down to the ground for a handful of dirt. Indio slowed down just enough to lean over, grab dirt, spin around quickly and toss it in the general direction of his assailant's face. The guy was agile, but not enough to avoid some of the dirt landing in his eyes. The guy yelled some expletives and tried to wipe the dirt from his eyes while expecting Indio's retaliatory attack. Indio ran at the man with a closed right fist and made contact with the man's jaw, knocking him to the ground. The man quickly rose to his feet and countered with a punch to Indio's gut.

Indio believed the man to be Sparky, but couldn't be sure. All the members of that association looked alike to Indio; they were all scar-faced, cauliflower-eared and nearly toothless. It was lucky that Sparky had forgotten his weapons at home or Indio would have been pushing up daisies in some shallow grave somewhere in the Catskills. The battle was down to hand-to-hand combat and both opponents were about even. Indio blocked Sparky's next punch and hit Sparky in the gut. The fight seemed to be going nowhere, except that both guys were beginning to tire. Indio was all too aware of Sparky's undoubted determination to finish his task of putting Indio down. Indio ran to the barn and tore off a loose piece of lumber from the dilapidated wall next to the barn door.

Indio swung the piece of wood at Sparky's head and Sparky ducked; on the second swing, Indio made contact with Sparky's rough skull. The wood hitting Sparky's head sounded like a hammer hitting a bowling ball. Indio was happy with the sound, but it only seemed to increase Sparky's resolve to finish off Indio. Sparky had realized by that point in the brawl that Indio was going down fighting, if he was going down at all. Sparky was confident that Indio would be going down all right, it was just taking a little longer than he had anticipated. Sparky had misjudged Indio's fighting abilities, to the point that he wished he had at least one of his typical weapons in his possession. Normally, Sparky can dispatch nearly any man with a few well-placed punches and kicks, but Indio was a tough nut to crack.

During the battle, Indio had been trying to figure out why Sparky was after him in the first place. To the best of Indio's knowledge, everything had gone according to the plan laid out by Sparky's chief. Indio was a member of an out-of-town group that had been brought into town to work with Sparky's association for the project. Indio and his cronies had performed their parts to the letter and the goal was accomplished with flying colors. The only thing that could have happened was that Sparky's chief had become greedy and wanted more of the take. It happened all the time in their business where jobs would take place and someone would want more money or all of the money and then somebody would be erased from the picture. Indio heard about such issues all the time, but was never personally involved.

Indio's chief always operated under a safety net and usually avoided projects where he or any of

his crew would be in peril. What else could have happened? The 2 crews just finished the job yesterday and all of a sudden, Sparky was coming after him. The money hadn't been divided yet, per the usual arrangement, to avoid obvious the displays of wealth to the prying eyes of law enforcement. After every operation, there was always a cooling off period to let the heat go away from the players. After a suitable time, the project money would then be doled out accordingly.

The blow to the head was handled by Sparky by shaking his head. Sparky was one of those guys who could shake off a smack to the head somehow like in the cartoons. Indio was surprised that Sparky didn't fall to the ground like a bag of dirt. Sparky swung the board again at Sparky's head and Sparky ducked and snatched the board from Indio's weaker grip. Those battle-scarred guys like Sparky were tough hombres. Upon realizing the loss of his weapon, Indio scurried into the barn. Sparky yelled at him to come back and fight. Indio knew better. As Indio entered the barn, the board flung by Sparky hit him in the back of the neck, causing him to fall on the ground inside the barn. When Sparky saw Indio go down to the ground, he ran over to begin the kicking.

By the time that Sparky was in the barn, Indio was up in the hayloft, via a hasty climb up the ladder. Indio waited in the loft for Sparky to get a little closer. As Sparky looked around in the dark barn and then looked up to the loft, a bale of hay landed on his head and shoulders. Indio then tossed another and another. In 6 seconds, 9 bales of hale were on top of a wriggling Sparky. Indio shinnied down the ladder and jumped up and down on the pile of hay and Sparky. Sparky still had plenty of wherewithal and grabbed one of Indio's feet. Sparky yanked and Indio fell down into the hay. Sparky tried to punch at Indio and only made contact with Indio's thighs. Indio punched at Sparky and only hit him in the chest. It was too dark in the barn for either combatant to be very effective.

Indio squinted as he punched and looked around the barn to discover other possible weapons. He saw something and jumped to his feet, while kicking at Sparky's gripping paw. Indio made his way to a length of hanging chain. Sparky jumped up to his feet and found an old milk can. The 2 began again. Indio swung the chain and Sparky blocked with the can; they kept at it for a few minutes like 2 gladiators in ancient Rome. Neither guy was able to inflict any real damage with their makeshift weapons. As Indio swung the chain, he kept looking around for something more lethal, as did Sparky.

Indio dropped the chain and ran to an old lantern that was hanging from a nail. He tossed the lantern at Sparky, who simply deflected it with the milk can that he was still using. Indio then tossed some horseshoes, handles, nails, ropes and finally another bale of hay. Sparky laughed at Indio's desperate attempts and spat in Indio's direction. Indio ran back to the ladder and climbed up to the loft again. Indio began raining down bales of hay again, but all were dodged by Sparky with his dark-adjusted vision. Soon, all 127 bales had been lobbed down and Indio had nothing left to heave, so he waited up in the loft.

As Indio waited for Sparky to climb up the ladder to resume the duel, Indio thought hard about what might be going on with the organization. Too many times when a crew invites another crew to team up for a project, there was an ulterior motive, which resulted in the invited crew being wiped out. Indio's chief had always been too careful to allow that to happen though. What was going on that Indio didn't know about? Indio's chief had figured the reason that Sparky's chief had extended the invitation was because of the lack of projects going on at the moment. When times were tough, sometimes it was better to team up for a little while, so that at least some gains could be made. When things got better again, things would go back to normal with each crew doing its own thing.

The project collaboration seemed ok to Indio's boss, but the business was a tricky machine that came with no guarantees. If something went wrong, then every man was on his own to struggle to survive any way that he could. Indio was struggling to survive at the moment and Sparky was the cause of it. Actually, Sparky's chief was the cause of it, because Sparky was only following orders like any of the obedient gorillas of Sparky's association.

Sparky yelled to Indio that he was coming up the ladder. Indio knew that Sparky would be cautious enough to prevent being kicked off the ladder, so he had to come up with a plan. As Sparky began ascending the ladder, Indio took his pants and underwear down and squatted over a dirty piece of cardboard. The fight had worked up his intestines quite thoroughly, so he had been on the verge of pooping anyway. Indio forced out a nice foul pile that was the consistency of soft ice cream on a cone. Indio bunched the cardboard with the present and sneaked over to the edge of the loft. When Sparky was about 2/3 of the way up the ladder, Indio flung the poop at Sparky's upturned face.

Sparky went flying back off the ladder and landed on the milk can, hitting his head. Sparky lay dazed on the floor of the barn with his bruised head on the milk can. Indio quickly pulled up his underwear & pants and climbed down the ladder to inflict more damage on Sparky. Sparky was too tough though and leaped to his feet before Indio could get to him. Sparky still had some of Indio's poop on his face and Indio laughed at him and slapped him. Sparky spat on Indio's face and slapped him back.

From behind Sparky's back, he produced an old ball peen hammer, which he swung at Indio. Indio produced a rusty hatchet from behind his back that he used to block the hammer that was headed for his eyebrow. Apparently, the 2 thugs had found some more toys in the darkness of the barn for their battle. They traded blows once again, as they had with the chain and milk can. Neither fighter landed any real hits.

Suddenly an enormous cat jumped onto Sparky's head and scratched him with all the claws on all 4 of its feet. Sparky screeched in pain as blood poured from the multitudinous wounds in his balding head. The huge cat disappeared in the darkness. It looked as if it were a bobcat or some

mutation of a cat and a bobcat. Whatever it was, it was a big freaking cat. Seeing his chance, Indio swung his hatchet at the distracted Sparky, but Sparky's fighting instincts enabled him to block Indio's hatchet with his hammer. Sparks flew in the dim lighting of the barn as the 2 iron tools gnashed and crashed into each other time and again. Some sparks landed on the dry hay that was scattered on the barn floor. In seconds, the hay was smoldering, then glowing, then ablaze. As Indio and Sparky kept fighting, they noticed the fire and made their way toward the barn door to take the fight outside. Indio could see the scratches and blood on Sparky's cat-mauled head and he chuckled. Sparky asked Indio what he was chuckling at and spat at him. Indio spat back at Sparky and then spat again.

As Indio backed his way out of the barn with the hammer/hatchet clamor still ongoing, a flock of bats descended from the rafters of the barn. With his back to the bats, Sparky was unable to experience what Indio was experiencing, which is to say sheer horror. Both being city boys, neither of them had ever seen bats, except in movies. The only bats people ever see in movies are usually vampire bats. Indio was speechless, attempting to say something to the best of his ability. His tongue was twisted and tied. As hard as he tried, Indio couldn't say anything. Sparky made fun of him for his mumbling and stuttering and spat at him. The bats were indeed vampire bats and had been enticed from their slumber by the smell of the blood on Sparky's cat-mauled balding head.

Indio mumbled and pointed at the descending bats with one hand while still swinging his hatchet at Sparky with the other. Sparky asked what Indio was pointing at, but it was too late. The bats had reached Sparky's head and began their nightly feast. Since vampire bats were equipped by nature with tiny claws on their feet for holding onto their blood-donor animals, they dug into Sparky's head like flies on a rib roast. In less than half a minute, 14 vampire bats had taken root on Sparky's skull and were gorging on the blood from the cat scratches and the fresh wounds created by their fangs. Sparky swung his hammer into the air to fend off the bats. Indio swung his hatchet as well. The bats were persistent.

From the flock of 37 bats in the barn, 14 remained on Sparky's head, refusing to let go until their bellies were full. In the meantime, the 23 other bats flew around the 2 men in a state of frenzy, some attacking Indio and more attacking Sparky. Initially, Sparky was the main attraction for the bats, because of the blood trickling from his head, but Indio was immediately added to the bats' dinner menu. In a record time of 2 minutes and 16 seconds, the 37 bats had all found a meal and their tiny sharp claws had taken hold somewhere on the bodies of the 2 agonized men. There seemed little that the men could do against the bats.

Indio and Sparky stumbled from the barn in the direction of the swamp. Neither of the men cared any longer for defeating each other; instead, they were trying to escape the horror of the bats that were consuming them. Sparky heaved his hammer at one of the airborne bats, before it

had gained a solid foothold on Indio's face. Likewise, Indio donated his hatchet to the failed bat-removal cause by launching it wildly at one of the bats clinging to Sparky's head. Both men blindly clawed and tugged at the tenacious feeding bats. The men chose to keep their eyes tightly closed to prevent the bats from feasting on their eyeballs.

As the men blindly stumbled and tripped, they got closer and closer to the swamp. Indio managed to squeak out some advice to Sparky that they try to get into the water to rid themselves of the bats. Sparky nodded and whispered something intelligible with a gurgly voice. The men and bats were almost to the swamp. The bats sensed that something was afoot as the men proceeded into the mucky water. Since bats hated water, it seemed that the men might have made the right decision by walking into the swamp.

As the men's bodies became covered with the foul swamp water, the bats began to leave their ravaged bodies. The bats remained hovering over the men and continued to dive bomb them, taking bites from the visible flesh with each dive. The men screamed from the pain of the bat bites. When the men were in the stenching swamp up to their necks, they were able to fight off the bats from their heads and cover their heads with their hands and arms. The bats continued to dive bomb the hands, arms and heads of the men and maintained their chomping and bloodletting ways.

Sparky and Indio were bawling and crying their eyes out from the agony and anguish they were feeling. They couldn't escape the bats. When would it end? Would it end? Would the bats stop attacking when the sun came up or was that just something from the movies? The bats didn't appear to want to stop attacking and eating the men. Whatever clothing the men had on their arms was shredded and provided no bat protection. With 37 still-hungry bats attacking the men, nothing seemed to be able to help Indio and Sparky. They began screaming as loud as they could for help, but knew it was pointless. No one lived out in the middle of nowhere in that part of the country. They were on some old abandoned farm and were told to meet each other there by their respective chiefs to settle some business.

Indio had shown up there innocently expecting to have an amiable meeting with Sparky to discuss the successful project from the day before. Indio had no way of knowing that Sparky had been sent there to eliminate him. The men were underlings in their organizations and only did as they were told. They were expendable. Each agonizing man stood there in the stinking swamp wondering what had happened and why did it have to happen to them? Sparky knew why he was there and kept wishing that he had brought along some kind of weapon. His chief had told him that the members of Indio's group were weaklings. He never realized how tough Indio would be to take down. Indio had a feeling that evening that he might have been getting set up, but he was forced to follow orders. The bats kept battering the beleaguered men, until the men looked at each other, continued into the deeper water and disappeared beneath the surface.

123. Robert's Hoodlums



123. Robert's Hoodlums

From birth, Robert of Southford had always lived in poverty. His parents worked as hard as they could, barely scraped by and provided just barely enough sustenance for Robert and his 17 brothers and sisters. Most of the income that Robert's parents made from working was paid to the greedy Deputy-of-Noddingoff and his flunky Sir-Georgie of Dewsbury to hand over to the King of Ganzvoort. Back in those days, the King stole as much money as he could from the common people to live a life of luxury and decadence with his Queen and favored aristocrats. The Royals never knew how long they would rule or even how long they would be alive, because of the turbulent times. The King tasted life to the fullest on the backs of the poor.

The aristocracy taxed the people as much as the people could pay and then they asked for even more money in the form of fees for services. All the town artisans, craftsmen and shopkeepers were forced to charge extra for their services and products in order to pay the Royals their due. There was no sympathy toward the people if they were able to pay or not. If they were unable to pay, they were imprisoned and served their sentences as long as they could on the minimal food that they were given. A prison sentence typically meant that the convicted person was never to be seen in public again. Men and women were treated equally as criminals, although they were sent to separate prisons.

The Kings and Queens had all the food, drink, riches and entertainment that they could stand. If the Royals hankered for an addition to the castle, they simply raised the taxes again. Royalty was a great thing for the Royals, but an abomination for the ruled. The Royals were feared by the common folk who spoke about them in whispers. The poor never knew if someone was listening in on their conversations. The King had spies everywhere. It was easy to get people to spy for the King, because since nearly everyone was poor, people would do anything to survive. The King paid his spies well. The peasants rarely spoke about politics with anyone but their close family. Even aunts and uncles had been known to rat on their nieces and nephews in order to get a chicken on the dinner table once in a while.

The brother of Robert's father, Robert's uncle Gleeson of Harbinger had become a spy for the King out of desperation. Gleeson's wife had come down with a strange illness and a large amount of money was necessary to perform the life-saving operation. Gleeson attempted to borrow money from people who had no money and was forced to become a spy for the King. After 3 months of squealing on his friends and neighbors to the King, Gleeson's wife had the surgery and survived her illness. Gleeson never forgave himself for what he had done to the people on whom he squealed. They were all imprisoned in the King's dungeon, which was reserved for the criminals who were known enemies of the King. People rarely survived more than a month in the dungeon. A year after Gleeson's wife's surgery, Gleeson disappeared into the woods and was never seen again.

Robert's parents had rarely talked about many things while he was growing up, other than farming and work-related topics. Robert and his siblings struggled to fight boredom while they sat around looking at each other in the candle light. Robert had somehow been born with above-average intelligence and wished to know about everything and learn new things, but his environment made it impossible. When he was older, Robert was able to learn more about the world around him at his own fast pace.

When Robert became an adult, he vowed to somehow help the common people who were his friends and neighbors. His parents had both passed away at relatively young ages from simply being worn out, like huge cakes of soap that were reduced to mere slivers. Robert had always been an expert with a bow and arrow and was able to provide some food for his large family over the years, but it had always been barely enough. The pauperized family was always sickly, skinny and starving. The commoners weren't allowed to hunt for food in the Royal forests and had to get by on the limited fauna that inhabited the marshy land, such as birds, rats, mice, woodchucks, moles, snakes, shrews, worms, insects and occasional stray cats & dogs when they were lucky. The real meaty game such as deer, elk, boars, bears and other larger animals thrived in the off-limit woodlands.

On one fateful evening, Robert had witnessed his neighbor fell a deer that had wandered from the woods into the marsh. As the man approached the deer, the Deputy-of-Noddingoff raced to the scene on his great steed and threw a rope around the man. While mounted on his own horse, Sir-Georgie took the end of the rope from the Deputy and they led the man into town. The pitiful roped man could hardly keep up with the pace of the horses of the Deputy and Georgie. The sight of his neighbor being dragged into town by those scoundrels upset Robert to his core. Something inside him screamed for vengeance. The Royals had essentially worked his parents to death and at every turn continuously beat down the poor people who were struggling. Robert abandoned his inherited threadbare farm in the marshes for his siblings to care for and he headed into the Royal forest to live.

The instant that Robert entered the Royal forest, he became an outlaw. He didn't know what he was doing and didn't care; his rage at the Royals had no limit. He would make the King, the Queen, the Deputy and Sir-Georgie pay for their crimes against humanity. Robert reckoned that by simply living in the Royal forest, it wouldn't be enough of a payback. He hadn't to concoct a plan. He felled a small deer with his bow and ate the entire animal over a period of 6 hours and 35 minutes. Becoming exceedingly drowsy, he climbed a tall tree and took a little nap in the crotch. The next day he was awakened by a blow to the head. Someone had heaved an apple at him. He picked up the apple from his lap, took a bite out of it and looked around beneath him. He immediately spied a stout jolly-looking man who was giggling like a schoolgirl.

Robert descended from the tree and faced the laughing oaf. Robert asked the man if he threw the

apple and the man wanted to know Robert's name. When Robert told the man his name, the man stated that he was Friar-Titus of Welshshire. Robert told Friar that he didn't like being hit in the head with the apple and he was very upset. Friar snickered heartily. Robert demanded an apology from Friar for the insult. Friar chortled, removed a dried piece of cow dung from his frock and threw it at Robert's face. Robert quickly backed away 3 paces, drew his arrowed bow and told Friar to say goodbye if he didn't apologize forthwith. Friar-Titus dropped to one knee, bowed his head and said he was sorry. Satisfied with the apology, Robert tried to release the tension on the drawn bow, but was unable to and the arrow went flying.

The arrow hit Friar in the upright kneecap, producing a great roar of pain from the befrooked gentleman. Robert uttered an embarrassed-sounding "Oops!" Friar pulled the arrow from his kneecap and threw it at Robert as if it were a dart. The arrow hit Robert in the right ear and went halfway through it. Robert screeched like an owl. Friar howled with laughter and pain. Robert then began laughing as well. The 2 shook hands and became friends. Robert felled a boar and the 2 buffoons ate heartily as they sat at the campfire roasting the porky creature. Friar preferred to eat his hunks of boar a little on the raw side and Robert cautioned him about the potential side effects. Friar merely guffawed and swallowed his meat.

Robert and Friar regaled each other with their tales of suffering and distaste for Royalty in general. They were both familiar with the Deputy-of-Noddingoff and Sir-Georgie and hated them both. Robert and Friar had both seen people dragged away and imprisoned. They had both suffered through life, barely getting enough to eat. They both wanted to inflict revenge and bring down the Royals. But how? Robert and Friar ate as much as they could of the boar, and then fell asleep. They awoke to a pouring rainstorm, which continued for 3 days. The 2 men walked around getting soaked to their marrows as they tried to hatch a suitable plot of revenge.

On the fourth day, the sun came out and they sighted a gigantic man in the distance. The guy had to be at least 7 feet tall, probably 7 1/2 feet tall. Robert and Friar had never before seen such a giant of a human. Where did he come from and how could he possibly have found enough food to eat to grow to such proportions? The man was wielding what resembled a small tree trunk in his hand and had a look on his face as if he meant business. The giant was standing in front of the opening between 2 rocky formations. The only way for Robert and Friar to continue in the direction that they were heading was to proceed through the opening. As they approached the giant, the giant roared, "None shall pass!" Robert queried, "What?" The giant bellowed even louder, "I said, none shall pass! What are you hard of hearing or something?"

Friar asked, "What did you say, my large friend?" The mammoth guy yelled, "Are you 2 guys as dumb as you look?" Without an instant's hesitation, Robert fired 3 arrows at the giant, one hitting the top of the giant's club, the second hitting the bottom of the club and the third shooting the large man's hat from his head, pinning the hat to the rock wall. The giant guy's mouth

dropped open in awe at the speed at which Robert had so accurately fired the 3 arrows. "What do you say now, great fellow?" inquired Robert. With that, the huge man fell to one knee, bowed his head and said, "I am Small-Jonah of Black Dunkmayer sir, at your service!"

Robert replied, "Well at least we managed to finally get a civilized response out of you!" "Yeah!" said Friar. Before Robert and Friar could relax, Jonah swung his great club at the legs of Robert and Friar and knocked them to the ground. Jonah then placed the end of the heavy club on Robert's neck and said, "There, we're even!" Friar reached out to Jonah's unsuspecting ankle and with surprising strength, pulled Jonah off balance, sending him to the ground with a loud slam. "Oof!" exclaimed Jonah. Friar grunted, "Now we're even!" "Ok!" said Jonah. "Yeah, now we're even!" snorted Robert. The 3 men in the dirt all heartily laughed for a while at the sight of each other lying flat on their backs.

The 3 travelers made it through the rocky passage and laughed again for a while on the other side when they were in the shade of the woods again. Robert felled a great bear and the 3 men ate and shared life experiences. They all were in the same boat and were equals. They all wanted to get back at the powers that be. After 2 days of traveling together, they encountered a man named Andy-a-Dale who was from Rafael-on-Hudson. Jonah had known Andy for 2 years and had been sneaking around the woods with him, trying to stay one step ahead of the Deputy. Jonah and Andy had spotted the Deputy and Georgie many times from a safe distance and were able to avoid being captured by them. If any of the 4 men had been caught in the Royal forest, it would have been the dungeon for them for sure.

When Jonah informed Andy how Robert and Friar had similar goals, the crew seemed complete. How could the 4 of them inflict the most damage against the Royals? Jonah and Andy agreed that they needed one more person to complete their group. They had to find Wild-Bill-Scarlett of Reedton. He would know what to do. As intelligent as Robert thought he was, he was always willing to learn and accepted the suggestion of Jonah and Andy that they locate this Bill character. A week and a day later, they found Wild-Bill, caught between 2 trees. He was really skinny and gaunt, probably from lack of food and water. They asked Bill how he happened to be stuck there and he said that he had been hidden up in the crotch of one of the trees when the Deputy and Georgie rode by on their horses.

Bill was able to hold on to his perch just long enough for the 2 horsemen to disappear into the forest, when he fell between the 2 trees and became wedged. Robert immediately thought to himself, "This is the brainiac who's gonna come up with a great idea? This guy? Gimme a break!" After they freed Bill from the trees by prying them apart, they immediately gave him some fresh meat from an elk that Robert felled for their lunch. After talking with Wild-Bill for a little while, Robert concluded that the man was indeed more intelligent than any of them, especially from his views on the solar system and the laws of gravity. Wild-Bill had ideas and

theories about everything and boldly stated that the world was round according to his calculations, even though the general consensus was that the world was flat.

The one thing in life that Bill wanted to do was somehow get to the castle to free his sweetheart Maid-Maribel. Bill and Maribel had known each their entire lives and were planning to get married someday. The Deputy-of-Noddingoff kidnapped Maribel from her house 3 years ago and imprisoned her in the castle. Bill agreed to go along with the 4 men and needed to sleep on it to devise the plan. Robert realized that Bill probably wasn't at his full potential from being stuck between the trees and becoming malnourished. They all went to sleep and waited for the morning. In the morning, everyone woke from their sleep except for Wild-Bill. He was apparently still too worn out from his harrowing tree entrapment. Bill slept through most of the day and rolled out of his slumber just before sunset. Robert felled 2 boars, a deer and a mountain lion for their supper. They all ate heartily and had some solid sleep.

Wild-Bill roused the men from their sleep by pissing on them. They all jumped to their feet initially angry and then they had a good laugh about it. Friar-Titus took a huge poop behind a tree and emerged with the pile in his hands. He ran after Bill, caught him and rubbed the poop in his face. The 5 men laughed even more and set about eating breakfast. As they ate the squirrels, rabbits and possums that the archer Robert had rounded up, Bill came up with his grand scheme. Bill stated that the best way to get back at the aristocracy was to hit them where they lived. If the merry band could take the money from the wealthy people who had more money than they needed and give to the majority of the population who had little to no money, perhaps things would balance out. In the meantime, as things became chaotic, they would be able to mount an attack on the castle and free Maid-Maribel.

As each day passed, Wild-Bill grew stronger and gained back his lost body mass. The crew made its way to the edge of the Royal forest and began making daily attacks on the rich who were passing by in their carriages. The wealthy people were unaccustomed to being robbed and didn't know who was performing the robberies. Robert and his hoodlums always wore masks and costumes to conceal their identities. All the money and jewels that the band stole was given to the poor. After a month of robberies, the rich people complained to the King that there wasn't enough security on the roads. The King responded by assigning guards to travel with the coaches to protect them. Due to Robert's skill with a bow, the guards were no protection.

The King ordered the Deputy-of-Noddingoff and Sir-Georgie to get to the bottom of the recent crime spree. The King didn't want any more unrest in his kingdom than he already had; it was bad enough to be hated by the poor, but now the rich were getting on his case. Robert saw how brilliantly Bill's plan was working as the poor began to gain confidence and were planning to rise up against the tyranny of the King. It was just a matter of time before the King and Queen would be overthrown.

124. Yanko's Hands



124. Yanko's Hands

Yanko's hands had picked millions of tons of fruit over his 83 years as a produce picker. When at the age of 7, he left his home country of Mexico, he never returned. He had been smuggled out of Mexico by his godfather Xico, who had been taking care of him after his parents passed away in an accident. Yanko had known no other life than that of the migrant farm worker. He had always had food, water and a roof over his head and wanted for nothing. He was free to come and go as he pleased and never failed to produce for his temporary employers. In the early days of picking, it had been extremely difficult for Yanko, but he learned everything he needed for survival from Xico. On the first day in January that Yanko was put to work next to Xico, the citrus farmer questioned nothing.

As long as Yanko were able to pick citrus fruits at a reasonable pace, he was paid a fair wage. The orchard pickers were paid based on pounds picked, not hourly, so that it was in the best interest of the pickers to produce. From January through May of that first year, Yanko roamed around the orchards of Florida, picking oranges, grapefruits, lemons and limes. By the time that Yanko was 10 years old, he was as efficient at picking as Xico. The older pickers admired Yanko for his quickness at picking the best fruits without batting an eye under the conditions of blazing sun, heat and humidity.

Yanko took it all in stride. He was actually very contented doing his job, even though it was at times a grueling occupation. Since Yanko had been born with a love of the outdoors, it seemed only natural for him to work outdoors year-round, and work he did. As were all the workers, he was permitted to sing, tell jokes and generally do whatever was necessary to pass the time of the long crop picking days. Yanko began singing along with Xico, who seemed to know the words to every song ever written, every song worth singing that is. In no time, Yanko and Xico were harmonizing together, always picking side by side in the orchards and fields.

Yanko and Xico came to be known as "The Songbirds" to their fellow pickers and became so good at harmonizing that the other pickers would vie to get near them in the orchards and fields just to hear them sing. When their voices would get tired, Yanko and Xico would begin whistling the very same songs. They were almost as good at whistling as they were at singing the songs. Even the farmers would look forward to the arrival of Yanko and Xico to the picking operation, because "The Songbirds" made many of the other workers happy and happy workers were better workers. As Yanko and Xico sang, other workers would chime in to the best of their abilities. If the workers weren't as good at singing, they would be told by the others to sing more quietly or not at all. The 2 Mexicans comprised an amazing duo in those early years.

As time went by and Xico grew older, he eventually became sick and passed away when Yanko was 63. Yanko missed picking produce with Xico, but life had to go on. Yanko traveled the nation by bus with many of the same pickers to take advantage of the agricultural industry when

handpicked crops were in season. In particular, when Yanko was in California in June to pick strawberries and apricots, he met a man named Veracruz who turned out to be a better singer/whistler than Xico. Yanko was overjoyed to meet with someone who could successfully take Xico's place as the new member of "The Songbirds." Yanko and Veracruz stayed with each other for many years, singing, whistling and picking produce.

In early July one year, Yanko and Veracruz were in Washington to pick sweet cherries, when they encountered another great singer named Uriangato. Uriangato could sing beautifully, but was unable to whistle due to an accident with his mouth while picking raspberries in California. The 3 of them were still called "The Songbirds." As it turned out the name was perfect, because it didn't have a number in it like Duo or Trio or Quartet, etc. Yanko could sing and whistle in a group while picking with any number of characters and still have a suitable name. When Yanko, Veracruz and Uriangato took a break from singing, Yanko and Veracruz switched to whistling while Uriangato simply rested his rich, melodic voice.

It was through the magnificent coincidental act of nature that the 3 of them just happened to have a correct balance of tones that perfectly harmonized. Yanko sung in a middle tone, with Veracruz singing lower and Uriangato singing higher. Yanko supposed that if he had to, he could possibly adjust his tone a little higher or lower in case he lost Veracruz or Uriangato and he had to harmonize with a different-toned singer. The 3 men wondered if they would be willing to allow a fourth voice to their wondrous trio, but they didn't lose any sleep over it. It wasn't as if they were professional singers or anything. They were simply a happy bunch of goofballs that sang and whistled while they worked.

While picking blackberries in Oregon in mid July, they ran into someone who could whistle like a bird. His name was Quinto. His whistling ability was so phenomenal that it was surprising he wasn't a professional whistler. As good a whistler as Quinto was, however, he was a terrible singer. It worked out perfectly then that the fourth member of "The Songbirds" was a whistler. When Yanko, Veracruz and Uriangato would take a break from singing, Uriangato could rest his voice and Quinto could jump in as the third whistler. Quinto didn't mind being left out of the singing, because he needed his full lungpower for whistling. When Quinto really wanted, he could generate a whistle that reached over 100 decibels. As loud as Quinto whistled, it was always easy on the ear. He never was carried away with his whistling, because he was too much of a perfectionist at his craft.

It wasn't surprising to "The Songbirds" that word was beginning to get out about the group's singing/whistling prowess. They really didn't want the general public to know about them, it simply began to happen. The various farmers who hired them around the country never wanted the public to know anything about their workers, for various reasons. It just happened that some of the farms and orchards were near roads and people driving by would hear the quartet singing

and whistling. In late July in California while picking raspberries, a woman was driving by the orchard and happened to hear Quinto hit one of his 100 plus decibel whistles. When the woman pulled her car into the farm to investigate, the farmer turned her away and instructed her that it wasn't a pick-your-own raspberry farm. The woman merely wanted to know who was blasting out the incredible whistling, but it wasn't to be.

"The Songbirds" didn't really want anyone to find out about them, but it was becoming more and more difficult for them to remain anonymous. A farmer told Yanko in early August in California while picking peaches that they had to tone down their singing and whistling to prevent being investigated. Yanko and his group were happy to oblige. It was easy for them to sing and whistle more quietly, because they had become so good at their hobby. Quinto had to restrain himself from hitting his loud piercing whistle, but he managed.

While down in Florida in mid August picking mangoes, "The Songbirds" had finally reached their new toned-down sound and everyone, especially the farmer was happy. No matter how they sang and whistled, the group sounded incredible. They entertained all day long and had dozens of songs in their catalog. When other pickers would request songs for "The Songbirds" to sing and whistle, all the group needed was a little encouragement. If the quartet didn't know the words to the songs, the requester of the song only had to sing a few words to get them started and then they would be on track. They were simply incredible.

While in Michigan in late August to pick blueberries, "The Songbirds" encountered a phenomenal singer named Ixtapa who sang in such a low tone that it sounded like a bass guitar. Ixtapa was incapable of whistling, but it didn't matter. His bass voice added such an incredible richness to the quartet's sound that Ixtapa was immediately invited to sing along as a member of "The Songbirds." The 5 men singing in that blueberry field sounded so ridiculously good to the old farmer, that he began weeping. He told the quintet that he had never heard anything so beautiful in his long life of 102 years, which is saying a lot. Of course, the old farmer was slightly hearing impaired in both ears, but he was indeed correct in his statement.

"The Songbirds" were just that good. As luck would have it, while in California in September to pick grapes and figs, "The Songbirds" found another phenomenal high-toned singer named Habanero. Habanero's voice was as hot as his name. His tone was so clear at its peak that it sounded similar to Quinto's high-pitched whistle. The 6 men singing and whistling together were so melodious and breathtaking that they began to impress themselves. As the years passed and some of the members of "The Songbirds" came and went, there was always the core of Yanko and Veracruz holding the crew together.

At times when picking pears & apples in Washington in September and October, "The Songbirds" were down to just the 2 of them, but they pressed on. Their primary occupation was picking produce; their hobby was singing & whistling. Not all the migrant workers were capable

of traveling the nation to the same extent as Yanko and Veracruz, most due to their bachelor and childless statuses. Many workers had families in the U.S. and in Mexico and were unable to follow all the picking schedules. One year while in California in November to pick avocados and olives they ran into Uriangato and they reminisced about old times. On another occasion, Yanko and Veracruz met up with Ixtapa in California in December while picking kiwis.

When in Florida to bring in the vast citrus crops, Yanko, Veracruz and Habanero picked together and wondered what had happened to the high-pitched whistler Quinto. Habanero had heard something along the lines that Quinto had been in the middle of hitting one of his high-pitched whistles when a hawk attacked him, apparently thinking that Quinto was a hawk or something like that. The story sounded a little too bombastic to Yanko and Veracruz who laughed at the idea of a hawk attack. Habanero admitted that he had made up the story and didn't actually know what ever happened to Quinto. Yanko and Veracruz laughed when Habanero admitted that he was fibbing. Sometimes in the migrant worker industry, it was fun to make up stories about fellow workers. Sometimes the stories were believable enough to become the stuff of legend.

Yanko had started a rumor about his godfather Xico that Xico had been discovered by a talent scout while singing in California picking apricots. Xico had been whisked away to a recording studio and was given a recording contract. Yanko's rumor also included the gold record that Xico had apparently achieved. After so many years had passed after Xico's passing, nobody really knew if the rumors were true or not. Another rumor that Yanko had spread was the one about Uriangato. Because Uriangato was unable to whistle, he couldn't effectively contact someone over a long distance, the way someone who whistled could. According to Yanko's rumor, Uriangato had been picking pears in Washington one season and had run into trouble with a bear. Supposedly, bears loved pears and had been giving the farmer a lot of trouble lately.

Rumor had it that Uriangato had been attacked and killed by a bear while he was relieving himself on the outskirts of the pear orchard. Because he couldn't whistle, he was unable to notify anyone to help him. Yanko had heard that rumor told back to him many times in the form that Uriangato had been killed by Bigfoot in Michigan or Oregon. After years of not working with Ixtapa or hearing anything about him, Yanko started a rumor that while Ixtapa had been singing in his bass tone in the citrus orchards in Florida one day, a bull alligator had mistaken him for another male alligator and dragged him off. The story went that they heard Ixtapa screaming in his low-toned scream and the first person to the screaming only saw the drag marks on the ground. That Yanko was particularly proud of that rumor.

Yanko and Veracruz often reflected how their lives might be different. Since they were both similarly aged, they had similar feeling about things. Veracruz had been brought to the U.S. as a baby in his mother's satchel and was deposited at his grandparents where he was raised. Veracruz never knew his father who had disappeared in Mexico without a trace. Veracruz never

really knew his mother who never returned to the U.S. Veracruz had started working in the fields with his grandfather at the age of 7, approximately at the same time that Yanko had. Yanko and Veracruz tried to think back that far, but figured it was plus or minus a year.

They had both worked hard all their lives and didn't mind it one bit. They had everything they wanted and needed, which wasn't really that much, because they didn't know any better. They had seen many things as they traveled America by bus, following the seasonal crops. They never cared for the material things that seemed to obsess so many people. Yanko and Veracruz agreed that it seemed like a trap that people made for themselves in which they were caught and couldn't escape. Yanko and Veracruz heard how people wanted things in their lives, but had to go to college to get degrees to get those things. They needed cars to go to college and then to go to work to pay for the things. It seemed like an inescapable trap.

Yanko and Veracruz had known many migrant workers who were as content as they were, even the workers who had wives and children. The migrant worker industry paid the workers as much as they wanted based on their output. They were their own bosses and could work whenever they wanted. Yanko and Veracruz had saved a lot of money over the years and had deposited the money in secret hidden places wherever they worked. The 2 men had iron strong boxes full of money buried all over the place.

Yanko bought and buried his first strong box on the advice from Xico, back when Yanko was only 9 years old. Xico had always stated that no one could be trusted. Yanko had to stay as far away from the public as possible to not risk being sent back to Mexico. For the past 3 years, Yanko had been successful. Yanko had found out from Veracruz that when they both met at the age of 63, they both had strong boxes all over the place. Veracruz had learned from his grandfather of the importance of the stashed money.

When Yanko and Veracruz were both at the age of 90, they had been singing, whistling and discussing matters in Washington while picking apples. They were the only 2 members of "The Songbirds" at the time, so that they could stop singing and whistling to talk quietly. They came to the subject of the thousands of dollars of buried money that they had between them and wondered if they should do anything with the money. They both admitted that they didn't really need the money for themselves or for any spouses or offspring. What would they do with all the money? They supposed that if they had invested the money somehow, it would be worth many times the current value, but of course, that wasn't possible. They considered giving the money to charity, but there was no point. It wasn't as if they needed tax write-offs.

Yanko and Veracruz collected all their money, bought a nice boat and sailed out into the Atlantic Ocean on a lark. Part of the way into the Bermuda triangle, they spotted a man floating in the water near something that resembled a dead rotting whale. The man was thrashing about in the water and was screaming.

125. Dalton's Dilemma



125. Dalton's Dilemma

Damn! Dalton couldn't get to sleep again. It wasn't an isolated incident, however. Dalton had trouble sleeping for what seemed like his entire life. There was little that he or the doctors could do. Was it an active imagination or too much food too late at night? Was it that he drank liquids after 8:00 pm or that nap that he had at 6:00 after that big dinner? What caused his sleep problem this time? He couldn't stand it. He could get to sleep ok, but then he would wake up at 1:00 am and then he couldn't get back to sleep.

How did he know that it was 1:00 am? Maybe it was because he foolishly looked at the clock again to see what time it was when he awakened. The sleep therapist told him to try to avoid looking at the clock when he woke up in the middle of the night, but he couldn't help it. He had a job to go to and was required to be there at a certain time each day. He set his alarm clock for 6:00 am and preferred to be awakened by the alarm, but it rarely happened. It was his obsession with being on time for work and appointments that made him obsessed with his alarm clock.

It was nearly impossible for Dalton to get through the night without looking at his alarm clock at least once. He needed to monitor the clock in case there was a power outage or something. Even though power outages were rare, he still wanted to be able to know if there was a power outage so that he could wake up in time before he had to get ready for work. He would rather get up earlier than the alarm before a power outage had killed the power and prevented the alarm from going off. He simply could not be late for work, ever. He had never been late for work once in his life and he wasn't about to allow a power outage to make him late. He would rather get less sleep by waking up before the alarm than let the alarm not go off because of a power outage.

Dalton had been accustomed to operating on little sleep his entire life or so he thought. His close relatives had always told him that he was lucky for not having to need too much sleep. He had always agreed with the people who made those statements but wasn't really sure if they were correct. The doctors he had seen over the years had always said that he should be getting more sleep than he was getting. The fact that he felt that he didn't need more sleep was an unconscious survival instinct of his brain attempting to compensate. The psychiatrists and therapist had all said the same thing. Dalton definitely needed to get more sleep at night. He had seen as many sleep experts as he had fingers and toes and none of them was able to completely help him

He at least acknowledged that might have an issue with resisting the help. He felt himself doing the wrong things when he was at his weakest while lying in bed awake in the middle of the night. Last evening, against his better judgement, he drank a soda at 8:30 pm. Is that what caused him to wake up this time? As he lay there in bed awake, he didn't feel as if he had to go to the bathroom. Therefore, it couldn't have been the soda that woke him up this time. What exactly was it this time? He had refrained from taking the sleeping pill before bed; maybe that was it. Dalton agreed that the sleeping pills, both over-the-counter and prescription helped him to fall

asleep and stay asleep, but most of them had side effects.

The pills prescribed by Dr. Onjean always gave him diarrhea, which according to the doctor, was due to the herbal formulation. Dalton had always believed that naturally derived compounds were free from side effects, but apparently not always. The pills from Dr. Jinzinpinsky worked great for getting him to sleep, but Dalton always woke up too early. The doctor suggested a larger dose, but Dalton didn't like taking pills as it was and didn't want a larger pill or more pills. Dalton wanted to take only one pill, if he had to take any pills at all.

When Dalton first met Dr. Jubowbowboobabubb from Africa, he thought he might have been onto something positive. Initially Dr. J's pills work incredibly well. Dalton took the single pill at 9:00 pm and by 10:00, he was drowsy enough to fall asleep within 9 or 10 minutes after going to bed. He woke up at the sound of the alarm, which was perfection for Dalton who was so mechanical and needing of control. After 2 months, Dalton began having hallucinations, which Dr. J had warned him might happen. The hallucinations affected approximately 23% of the patients who took the pill. Dalton had noticed while at work one day that he was seeing horses walking around the office. He immediately stopped taking the pill and moved on to another doctor. Each doctor Dalton had seen was always able to refer him to another doctor, so that it took some of the guesswork out of the game.

Dr. Guadalajara provided Dalton with an effective pill that was all-natural and was derived from the Carolina Reaper pepper, which registered at over 2 million on the hotness scale. Extreme caution was necessary in taking the pill, because of its hotness. Only one pill was necessary and was harmless to the patient's gastrointestinal system. If the patient accidentally ingested more than one pill, they wouldn't be able to poop right for a week. Dalton obtained good results from the pill for a month or so, but his psyche soon rejected it as he had rejected all the other help offered to him. Dalton wanted to get better and didn't want to get better at the same time.

What Dalton really needed was a psychiatrist and a sleep therapist working together as a team to help him with his sleeping problem. The doctors could only help Dalton so much, as long as he at some point would begin to resist the prescribed treatment. Dalton supposed that he didn't know what was happening to him. He exercised, ate properly and attempted to follow the advice of the doctors to the letter. There was something in his brain that simply refused to play along. It was as if Dalton didn't have control of his own will. His brain needed sleep and he was fully aware of the fact. He might have been suffering with a split personality that resulted in conflict. Part of him wanted sleep and knew that it needed it. The other slightly more powerful part of him resisted his attempts to get into a proper sleep schedule for a long period of time.

The brain was a funny thing that most people took for granted when it was functioning the way we wanted it to. When something happened along the way, such as with sleep issues, a sticky wicket appeared on the course. Dalton tried to think when his real sleep problems started and he

realized that he always had problems with his sleep. His current situation after so many years of battling made the issue come to the forefront. Dalton had placed his sleeping problem on the top of his list of obsessions. The fact that he obsessed about his sleeping situation was part of the problem.

Dalton read on the internet about a local doctor who came from India. Dr. Venkatanarasimharajuvaripeta was an expert in acupuncture, yoga and meditation. When the doctor applied the 3 facets into a specially customized plan for the patient, it usually solved their sleeping problems. The doctor worked for very low fees and donated most of his income to the poor people of his homeland. Dr. V was a simple man with almost no material needs whose only clothing was a sheet wrapped around his dreadlocked head and another sheet wrapped around his groin. When the doctor's patients first saw him, they were shocked how such a Gandhi-looking character could be so effective at his trade. Dr. V looked like a skin-covered skeleton and at his current age of 78, resembled a snakeskin recently shed by an anaconda. His skin was so unusually leathery-looking that it was probably possible to light a match on it.

At Dalton's initial consultation, the Indian doctor appeared to a strange looking character who from his aroma, probably hadn't bathed in a year or 2. The doctor's office had fans blasting and windows open, so at least the stench was diluted somewhat. Dalton didn't care if the man smelled vilely, as long as he could administer effective treatment. Dalton walked into the doctor's office with some trepidation, but calmed down when Dr. V took his hand to shake it. Dalton instantly felt something passing from the Indian man into him, something he didn't remember feeling in a long while. Dalton had the sensation of wanting to go to sleep. He became immediately calm and sedate. The doctor escorted Dalton to the bed in the adjacent room where Dalton was invited to take a nap as the doctor examined Dalton's medical records.

Dr. V might have appeared to be a lowly beggar from Mumbai, but he was actually a genius of a man who was qualified with many titles such as MD, PhD, DPT, DSc, Msc and DAcM. The doctor had some menacing-looking snakes in a large aquarium with a large DANGER sign in front of it. There was one of those woven cobra baskets on a mat on the floor with a flute-like instrument lying on the floor next to it. Was the doctor also a snake charmer? As Dalton slept, the doctor perused his medical records and claimed to Dalton when he awoke that there didn't seem to be anything medically or physically wrong. Dalton asked the doctor why he had become so drowsy from the handshake and the doctor told him that he had some snake semen on the palm of his hand that made people drowsy. The doctor had wanted Dalton to get a little quiet rest as he looked at the medical records.

Dalton claimed that he felt fantastic after the short nap and thanked Dr. V for the help. The doctor stated that the effects of the nap would soon wear off, due to Dalton's obvious lack of sleep. The doctor told Dalton that he hadn't seen such a look on a sleeping-disorder person's face

in quite a while. Dalton's eyes gave away everything. He had dark patches around his reddish eyes and his face looked haggard. The doctor promised to do what he could and started immediately. The doctor claimed that diet meant nothing when a person had a serious sleep disorder and that acupuncture, yoga and meditation were the keys. Dr. V asked if Dalton were afraid of needles and when Dalton said that he was, the doctor said, "Too bad!" The needles were an important part of the therapy because they stimulated various nerve centers in the body.

Dalton agreed to accept the needle treatment because he was desperate enough to try anything. The doctor had Dalton lie on his back and inserted some of the short needles as he instructed Dalton to think about nothing. The doctor showed him how to breathe in a certain way. Breath control was essential to meditation. The doctor would instruct Dalton on how to yoga at the next appointment. In no time, Dalton was unconscious and sleeping soundly. He slept for 3 hours and awoke more refreshed than he ever remembered in his life. His back felt a little sore from the needles, but it was worth it, Dr. V stated that the sore back would go away in a few hours. Dr. V showed Dalton more breathing exercises that Dalton had to practice all the time at home and at work.

At the next appointment, Dr. V showed Dalton some yoga positions and some literature to go with the exercise. Dalton had to practice the yoga each day at home until he got more and more flexible. The breathing exercises went hand-in-hand with the yoga. Surprisingly to Dalton, Dr. V was the first doctor who hadn't prescribed any drugs. After a month of treatment by Dr. V, Dalton's sleep got better and better. He was astounded at how well the treatment was working. The yoga and meditation were the keys of success according to the doctor. The acupuncture was only used initially to open up the passageways in the patient's body. Passageways were needed for the body's own healing power to kick in. The yoga exercises increased flexibility in the body to allow even more of the body's natural healing juices to flow freely.

After 6 months of therapy, Dalton felt like a new man and was sleeping like a baby each night. He couldn't believe it. Dalton thanked the doctor profusely for the help and continued going to him for a year. Dalton asked the doctor if he would be able to stop seeing him and be capable of going it alone. Dr. V stated outright that it would be impossible for Dalton to go it alone. It was too soon. The doctor's theory was that if a patient could practice his specific plan of yoga and meditation for a 2-year period, only then would they be able to stop seeing him. The doctor firmly believed that there was something about a 2-year period in a person's life. In that time period, habits could be permanently instilled and followed.

Dr. V said it was the same with people who wanted to lose weight and keep it off. The person had to come up with some kind of a plan, whatever it was, and follow it to the letter for 2 years. The person's behavior had to be modified. Losing weight wasn't about crashing weight off for a month or 6 months or a year. Losing weight and keeping it off was just like any other mental

process. The patient and weight-loss seeker had to modify their behavior in a way that they would be able to sustain the new behavior comfortably for the rest of their lives. Dalton agreed to keep seeing the doctor for the full 2 years according to his wishes. The doctor hadn't been wrong so far. What did Dalton have to lose?

Dalton had been trying forever to fix his sleep problem without taking any drugs everyday and the Indian doctor seemed to have found the cure in no time flat. After 18 months of seeing the doctor, Dalton had begun to notice some strange behavior from the doctor. When Dalton asked the doctor if something was going on, the doctor said there was. Dr. V was such a well-read and knowledgeable physician that he constantly kept up on all the latest practices and new cures floating around the globe. The doctor was a fearless scientist who would try anything if it resulted in an improvement. The doctor had been experimenting with snake venom and semen for years. While still in India, he had learned from snake handling experts how to milk snakes for their venom and semen. Both of the snake secretions had medicinal value; however, the use of snake products hadn't been universally accepted by the Medical Industry. Many doctors had published papers on the effectiveness of natural animal juices such as from snakes, but it was too risky to use it.

For years, the doctor had been using the snake semen on his palm when he initially met his patients and shook their hands. The calming effect it had on the new patients was important. Dr. V had recently studied some papers published by some renowned Indian doctors who were esteemed colleagues of his. The new papers suggested the use of certain snake venoms to prepare concoctions for the patients with exceptionally complex sleeping disorders. Dr. V had felt that Dalton's case was one of those. So far, Dalton had responded to the basic therapy, but the doctor feared that at the 2-year mark, Dalton might not be able to break away from the doctor visits.

The unfortunate thing about psychiatric therapy was that the extreme patients sometimes developed a psychological bond with their therapists. The patients experienced satisfactory relief from their issues, but couldn't fathom that part of their relief was based on constant contact with their doctors. As long as the patients continued to see their doctors, they were well. When the doctors cut off the patients, the patients occasionally reverted to their previous maladies. Therapists were cautious to avoid the situations, but they were sometimes inevitable. Dr. V dreaded that Dalton would become one of those patients who reverted. Dr. V had been aching to investigate the new venom therapy and had begun extracting venom from poisonous snakes in his office. One of the best snakes to use was the King Cobra, which lived in the woven basket on the floor. At the 22nd month visit, Dalton entered Dr. V's office as usual and walked into a nightmarish scene. Dr. V was lying on his back on the floor underneath a huge snake that had reared up and inflated its flat head and neck. Dalton looked into the eyes of the snake and became paralyzed with fright. The King Cobra sensed Dalton's fear and flickered its tongue.

126. Stinky's Schemes



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Stinky had always been a schemer. In kindergarten class, he devised a scheme to sell part of his lunch to other kids, even though they had plenty to eat already. Stinky had a way with people in which he was able to convince them that they needed to buy something that he was selling, even though they didn't need it or want it. Stinky convinced his friend Sammo to buy his sneakers in kindergarten class. When Stinky came home from school that day in his socks, his mother demanded that he immediately get the sneakers back. Fortunately, Sammo only lived next door, so it only took a few minutes for the transaction.

Stinky's scheming had started well before kindergarten. When Stinky took his first steps at the age of 12 months, his parents had used a small piece of Snickers candy bar to lure him across the living room. Stinky realized immediately the value of the reward system. When they gave him that first sweet morsel as a reward for walking, he outright refused to walk unless he received something in return. He employed the same strategy against his unwary parents with everything. Stinky only did chores around the house if he was paid to do them. He only got good grades in school, if he was paid for the A's. He only did well in sports when his efforts were rewarded monetarily. Stinky always had the best of everything and flaunted it to his friends. He earned everything he had, so he felt that he should show it all off.

When Stinky showed up in school on the first day of first grade wearing a pair of the latest new sneakers, all his friends envied him. Stinky had earned those sneakers by hitting a homerun in little league. He was captivated by the concept that money was everywhere. In second grade, he got a job delivering papers so he could make his own money, instead of just receiving money solely from his parents via chores. He delivered the papers on the new bicycle he bought from the money he made mowing lawns. When Stinky was in third grade, he bought a car from the money he made on his paper route. The boy was unstoppable. He made money at every turn.

He earned enough extra money to pay for his own tennis and golf lessons and used his own racket and clubs. He played tennis for a year with the new racket and then sold the racket to his friend Skippo for more than he had paid for it. Skippo had been so impressed by Stinky's tennis skill, that he gladly paid top dollar for the racket. Skippo had to do chores without being paid for a year to satisfy the loan from his parents. Stinky sold his golf clubs to Scotto who had to promise to mow his family's large lawn for free for 2 years. Stinky's friends were so inspired by his entrepreneurship that they all attempted to play his game.

Stinky's friend Stevo started his own business selling lemonade and cookies that he baked in his mother's oven, Stevo came up with the idea while talking with Stinky one afternoon about how the Girl Scouts charged so much money for their cookies. Stevo baked a variety of scrumptious cookies by using his grandmother's recipes. Stevo bought his first car when he was in fourth grade. Neither Stinky nor Stevo were old enough to drive their cars, but they rented them to their

older brothers for nice fees. It wasn't long before Stinky's friend Sebastiano cashed in on the activities. He had learned how to give excellent deep tissue massages for one of his Boy Scout merit badges. Sebastiano went house to house with Stevo and they offered people cookies, lemonade and massages. Stevo admitted that Sebastiano had a good thing going with those massages, but knew that he couldn't do it. Stevo hated touching people.

Stinky continued making loads of money working at every job he could find along with buying and selling items at a profit. He had a knack for knowing what products people wanted and found the best places to buy things wholesale. In between going to school, playing sports and doing homework, Stinky was busy every waking hour of every day. He set a good example for his 2 lazy younger brothers who were content going through life like average kids. Stinky was one of those kids who was going to be a self-made millionaire someday. Stinky's parents admired the zest and zeal of their son Stinky and didn't think he would be heading for college as they had hoped. Stinky didn't need to go to college after High School. He seemed to be on his own track of success without the need of higher education. Stinky was the type of person who made his own luck and circumstance.

Stinky didn't wait for things to come his way; he went ahead of the things and grabbed them from behind. For Stinky's sixth grade graduation, he took all his friends Sammo, Skippo, Scotto, Stevo, Sebastiano, Stanno, Setho and Skeeto and their families to an amusement park that had a hotel in it. It cost a pretty penny, but Stinky was good for it. The group stayed at the hotel for a weekend and had the time of their lives. The hotel was well equipped with all the entertainment for their parents. The amusement park was fantastic with a water park and dozens of rides and attractions. Stinky's friend Stanno was a natural at surfing in the watermark and impressed everyone with his balance on the board. Setho was the wildest of Stinky's friends and was ejected from the amusement park for climbing out of the roller coaster while it was at the apex of the ride. Since it was at the end of the last day, Setho didn't miss too much of the fun.

Stinky had bet Skeeto that Setho would have the balls to climb out of the roller coaster. Naturally, Stinky won the bet when Setho climbed out and Skeeto reluctantly coughed up the \$100 that he made from his landscaping business. Stinky gave the half the money to Setho when they all got back home. Stinky had made a secret agreement with Setho ahead of time in order to make the bet with Skeeto. Stinky was constantly working the angles and working his friends against each other for his gain. Stinky was a master manipulator along with his work habits and machinations.

Once, Stinky had Sammo perform some unseemly acts in the neighborhood in order to make some quick profits on a deal he had going at the time. Sammo was only too glad to cooperate, because Stinky paid very well. It wasn't long before Stinky had Skippo and Scotto doing things for him as well. Stinky was born with a naturally keen eye for deals and profit. Stevo and

Sebastiano were put to good use by finding some prime stereo equipment for Stinky to turn around for a quick cash load. Stinky always cut his boys in on the profits, except that Stinky's cut was always much larger than that of his boys. Stan and Setho genes had enabled them to grow up quickly and thanks to their intense weight lifting regimen while on the High School football team, they had become behemoths. The 2 large boys had evolved into being Stinky's right hand men and protectors. No one ever messed with Stinky on the rare occasion that Stinky accidentally wronged them during one of his moneymaking schemes.

Skeeto was born with superior intelligence and ended up becoming Stinky's number 2 in the organization of friends. Skeeto was like a human calculator and had such a way with names and numbers that Stinky never needed to keep notes of his endeavors. Skeeto kept everything in his head, everything. As the years progressed and the boys entered the 12th grade, Skeeto became indispensable to Stinky. With no paperwork lying around as evidence, Stinky could emerge squeaky clean from any sort of investigation. Stinky always had at least one witness who could vouch for his whereabouts whenever the Police found it necessary to question him.

Counting himself, Stinky graduated High School with a 9-man squad of friends who could do almost anything they wanted and no one said anything about it. It wasn't as if Stinky's crew was a gang of hoods who committed crimes or damaged property or people. Stinky had a vision when he was 4 years old of how he wanted to live his life when he got older. He wanted to be as legitimate as possible. He kept his eyes and ears open all the time. Stinky was always talking to people through other people. He never talked on the phone.

Stinky had learned a lot about a potential life plan way back when he secretly watched the movie "Goodfellas" in the basement of Sammo's house with Sammo's older brother and his friends. Stinky had found the movie interesting, but the gangsters in the movie were obviously criminals who were essentially idiots. The way that most of them smoked cigarettes definitely made them look like morons. The organized crime characters in the movie seemed to have only 7th or 8th grade educations by the way they talked and carried themselves.

Stinky watched the movie with great curiosity, but he was determined to do things his way, a better way. Stinky had always worked as hard as he could and made honest money. As he got older, he continued to work hard, but inspired and brought his friends along to help him with the more complex and lucrative endeavors. Stinky was no blatant criminal as in the movie; he was an honest businessperson who put other honest men to work for him. Together, they made a lot of money for their organization.

By the time that Stinky and his 8 friends had reached their early 20's, an actual organized crime unit had moved into the city. Stinky had unannounced meetings with the leader of the unit who threatened to make things very uncomfortable for Stinky if Stinky didn't back away from things. Stinky had an emergency meeting with his friends and they brainstormed for a way to maintain

their opulent lifestyles together in Stinky's mansion. Skeeto had always been a great fan of the entertainment industry particularly the dancing, modeling and movie entities. He suggested to Stinky that they create a dance studio and become ballroom dancers in order to cash in on the dance craze that was hitting the nation.

Stinky agreed with Skeeto's idea and they hired 9 of the best female ballroom dancers in the greater metropolitan area, along with instructors to help the boys learn the ropes. Within months, the 9 men and their women were giving ballroom dance lessons and making a great deal of money. Stinky named the dance company "Nine Brothers Dancing Inc." Stinky knew the importance of creating corporations when starting a business, to protect other assets from loss. The studio did very well the first year and Stinky wanted to add more glamour to his new empire.

Sammo suggested to Stinky that they add a modeling studio to the dance studio in which they would photograph and manage male and female models. Stinky jumped at the idea and they immediately constructed the modeling studio. Stinky hired some of the best modeling photographers in the industry, along with talent scouts and managers for the models who required the extra professionals. Stinky created another corporation called "Nine Brothers Modeling Inc." The new studio attracted many young men and women and it enabled Stinky and his crew to get a piece of profits from the models who became supermodels. All the contracts signed by the models had various fees and percentages paid to Stinky's modeling corporation. As with most young models, they were willing to sign on the dotted lines without looking too closely at the fine print of the contracts.

Stinky and his boys sold their mansion and bought a newer larger one, which had everything. As it turned out, the mobsters who had forced Stinky out of his other pursuits had actually done him a favor. Stinky's gang had managed to take advantage of untapped potential. There were always young men and women around who wanted to become famous fashion models and movie stars. The dance studio created such demand for people wanting to learn how to dance that Stinky had to hire professional male dancers to replace Stinky and his boys. Stinky and his friends were never able to keep up with the rigorous pace of dancing all day, while running their business at the same time. By having a cast of professional male and female dancers, Stinky's dancing corporation became better able to handle the load.

Some of Stinky's modeling managers had inquired about ways of placing Stinky's models into films. The best way to turn your own models into actors and actresses was to put them into your own films. Some of the best actors and actresses in the movie industry had started out in small studio films or independently produced films. Scotto suggested creating their own production company in order to invest in and create their own films. Stinky loved the idea, because it seemed to be the next logical addition to the entertainment empire. Stinky created "Nine Brothers Productions Inc." The men would initially invest money in major films along with

other small production companies to get a feel for how the movie business actually worked.

Stinky and the production company limped along for a few years, making some money and losing some money. The film industry was a tricky, complex, fickle, confusing and aggravating place to be. It was difficult to make a lot of money at first, because limited money was invested into the other films. It was too risky to lose the investment if the movie only broke even or worse, flopped at the box office. The way that the movie industry had evolved over the years is that many smaller production companies invested in major films to limit losses. Many movies were still funded by the big companies, but even the major companies used the little guys when possible.

After finally making a nice profit on a large investment from a movie suggested by Setho, Stinky felt he was ready to make his own film. They built another addition to their complex of buildings that would serve as a movie studio. "The Final Season" was the name of one of the stories handed to Stinky and his 8 friends to read over as a possibility for a movie. Stinky and his friends looked at dozens of stories over 11 months time and finally settled on that one. The story particularly interested Sebastiano, because it was about a baseball player who had been forced to retire after a long time in the major leagues. The player had contracted some illness and could accurately pitch no longer. Sebastiano's uncle had been in a similar situation as a pitcher in the minor leagues. When Sebastian took Stinky aside to discuss the picture with him, the 2 of them cried in each other's arms for the first time in a long time.

"Nine Brothers Productions Inc." hired a casting director to acquire the actors and actresses for the movie. All the characters of the movie were alumni of "Nine Brothers Modeling Inc." It was an easy decision for Stinky to hire all his own people, because the majority of the hopeful profits would be kept in house. Along the way, the organized crime unit that had taken over Stinky's city had heard about Stinky's foray into the movie business, particularly the new independent movie. The chief of the unit requested a meeting with Stinky to discuss the addition of some of the chief's preferred actresses into the movie. Some of the members of the chief's crew had girlfriends who had always wanted to be in pictures.

Stinky reluctantly agreed to allow some of the criminal unit's actresses to audition for some of the parts in the movie. Stinky supposed that as long as the women had some acting ability, they could be placed in small roles with a harmless line or two. As it turned out, all the girlfriends of the criminals were horrible at acting and could barely read their lines. They had heavy accents and spoke like "Valley Girls." One of the women actually had the gall to request one of the female leads. Stinky informed the chief that the girls he sent over sucked at acting and couldn't be in the picture. The chief told Stinky that he was going to make him an offer that he couldn't refuse. As long as 2 of the girlfriends could be in the movie in any role whatsoever, the dance studio, modeling studio and movie studio would remain intact.

127. Mongo's Crew



127. Mongo's Crew

As Mongo sat in the corner of the cave munching on the last bits of marrow from a saber-toothed cat shinbone, he watched as a large hunk of the cave's ceiling fell onto the head of one of his cave mates. The rock landed on the caveman's skull with a thud, but it was a melodious thud. Perhaps the now deceased caveman's skull had been more hollow than a typical caveman's skull. Mongo remarked to himself as he burped that the sound of the rock hitting the skull was indeed musical in nature. It prompted Mongo to attempt to reproduce the process of making a similar sound. He scouted around the cave and found the skull from the saber-toothed cat. The brain had been neatly sucked out of the skull by Cavendish, who was exceptionally good at sucking brains from skulls without damaging the skull.

Mongo then took a section of the shinbone that he had just licked clean and struck the cat skull. It made a similar sound to the rock hitting the dead caveman's skull, but a slightly more hollow and pleasing sound. Mongo reasoned that because the cat's skull was larger, it possessed a greater ability to create a hollow sound when struck. Mongo scurried to an empty corner of the cave way in the back to not disturb the other cavemen. He continued beating on the skull with the bone. He happily realized that by striking the skull on different places and with varying amounts of force, he could generate different sounds. He also noticed that by varying the speed of the strikes, he could develop different tempos depending on his mood. He became so obsessed with his new instrument that he didn't notice how his racket had awakened the remaining cavemen.

Belvedere looked closely at Mongo's device and was fascinated by its capabilities. He wanted to take the bone and skull for himself to try it out, but knew better. Mongo was the leader of the caveman clan and his possessions were his and his alone. Belvedere sat down in front of Mongo and watched Mongo playing with his device. Thoughts appeared to run through Belvedere's head and he ran around the cave looking for something. Belvedere found what he thought he was looking for, a thick section of bamboo that was about 3 feet long. Belvedere had an idea that if he drilled holes in the hollow bamboo, he might be able to make sounds with the thing. Belvedere found a broken piece of flint with which he painstakingly drilled the holes. After 5 hours, he was done.

Belvedere blew into one end of the bamboo while placing his fingers over the holes. He had drilled 8 holes in the bamboo and at first placed 8 fingers over the 8 holes. Initially no sound was produced, but when he alternated the placement of his fingers, a beautiful tone emanated from his instrument. Belvedere continued to play his bamboo for a few days in private until he was confident enough to play next to Mongo who was beating on the cat skull. Mongo and Belvedere played together for a while, but realized how bad they sounded. Mongo played whatever he wanted and Belvedere played whatever he wanted, which resulted in a really jagged overall

sound. It was after months of playing together that they discovered the problem. First Mongo would begin playing the bone and tool and would keep playing at the same beat. Then Belvedere would chime in playing a tune that kind of matched Mongo's beat. Upon hearing the coordinated sound, the other cavemen began tapping their feet and then started dancing around the cave to the best of their abilities.

While attempting to dance to the music created by Mongo and Belvedere, Hargreaves had an insight. The week before, Hargreaves had found a pair of dried out melons that had the seeds rattling around inside. When shaken, the seeds in the melons made an interesting sound. Hargreaves had saved the dried melons for some reason, because he thought they might come in handy someday. After supper one evening while Mongo played his bone & skull and Belvedere played his bamboo, Hargreaves produced his melons and tried to rattle along to Mongo's beat. At first, it sounded terrible, because Hargreaves randomly shook his melons, but after a while, he got the beat and it simply worked. The trio played their instruments together each day as the remaining cavemen danced in the cave.

Marmaduke was the best dancer of the clan and seemed to be the only one who moved correctly to Mongo's beat. As Marmaduke danced, he visualized a way to make a different sound from the sounds that the 3 musicians were making. He saw himself plucking tendons that were strung tightly over the ribcage of raptor. There were no raptors lying around the cave. The clan hadn't felled one of those beasts in a while. In 3 months time, Marmaduke got his wish when they finally apprehended one of the monsters. The clan ate all the meat from the raptor and saved the ribcage area for Marmaduke to play with. The skin was left on the ribcage so that it formed a large container. Marmaduke gathered some of the tendons from the animal and tied them across the opening of the ribcage. He found that tendons stretched across the opening made different sounds if they were of different lengths.

It took Marmaduke a little while, but after 4 months, he was done. It took a longer time than he thought it would, because as the ribcage and tendons continued to dry out, he had to keep adjusting everything. When the tendons and ribcage parts were completely dry, his instrument was finally stabilized. Even though the parts of his device were dry, they still smelled quite foul. The cavemen were accustomed to foul smells, however, due to never bathing and always having various animal parts lying around the cave in varying stages of rotteness.

As Marmaduke practiced on his new instrument, he gained confidence in his ability. After 2 months practicing in private, he joined the band and added a much-needed sound. Once again Belvedere, Hargreaves and Marmaduke waited for Mongo to start playing first to establish the beat and then they jumped in with their instruments. The remaining cavemen danced to the music, which was becoming more and more pleasing to their ears. The better music seemed to make the cavemen dance better or at least they thought they were dancing better. Cavendish

began to grunt along to the music one day, which basically surprised everyone. The cavemen weren't in the habit of using their voices much and mainly grunted and gestured to communicate with each other. When Cavendish chimed in, it was actually beautiful. He couldn't sing any words, because the cavemen had no language, but his grunts were uttered with variations in tone and volume. Cavendish found that the more he grunted to the music, the better he sounded somehow. No one could figure out why Cavendish's grunting sounded so pleasing along with the music, but it did.

Rochester became inspired by Cavendish on one fateful evening and began to grunt along with him. The 2 cavemen sounded incredible and somehow managed to harmonize their grunts to the music. Cavendish grunted in one tone and Rochester grunted in a slightly higher sound so that with some control on their parts, a harmonized grunt was created. The 2 men grunted so perfectly together a passerby would have thought the 2 were brothers. They might have been brothers, but no one kept track of genealogy in the cave. Surviving was more important than keeping track of such matters as who everyone's mothers and fathers were.

Smithers and Wadsworth became so interested in the caveman band over the past months that they wanted to contribute somehow to the music. The only thing they could conjure was farting in different tones. Everyone in the caveman clan had terrible diets, mainly consisting of meat, which was sometimes fresh, sometimes cooked and many times rotten. The men would go out hunting each day and either come home with game that they dispatched or had found already dispatched and decaying. Beggars could be choosers in the caveman clan. Their meat diet had giving all of them serious gastrointestinal issues, which included excessive flatulence, diarrhea, constipation and really smell farts and poop.

Smithers chose to fart in a low tone and Wadsworth chose a higher tone, similar to how Rochester and Cavendish grunted in high and low tones. Smithers had it easier because his low tone farts were produced by more or less natural bowel pressure. Wadsworth's higher tone involved squeezing his ass cheeks together to make a smaller opening for the fart gas to come out, which created the higher tone. Because he had to apply more internal pressure to get his farts out through the smaller opening, he was at much greater risk of accidentally pooping while trying to fart in his higher tone. All the cavemen of the clan were at risk of pooping with every fart, due mainly to their diets, but Wadsworth risked it all for the band.

Smithers and Wadsworth auditioned for the band right after eating a large rotten woolly mammoth that the clan found in a tar pit. The gases were flowing freely in the men and they put on a great performance. Mongo was so touched by the harmony of the fart tones produced by the 2 men that it brought tears to his eyes. The band members weren't sure if Mongo was crying from the beauty of the fart tones or from the stinging fart gas that made his eyes water. Whatever the case, Smithers and Wadsworth were added to the illustrious band. Due to the length of the

audition song that Mongo had played his bone and skull instrument to, both Smithers and Wadsworth pooped out the bottom of their caveman clothing skins 3 times from all the farting. Wadsworth had actually pooped 4 times, but only admitted to 3 of them, because he was embarrassed.

Since Mongo was the band creator and leader and leader of the caveman clan, he decided where the band was going musically. Mongo preferred to play his bone and skull instrument with a simple steady beat. Belvedere was fine with Mongo's simple beat, because of his limited lung power to play his bamboo instrument. Hargreaves has such massive arm strength that he could play his melons all day long at any speed if necessary. Rochester and Cavendish basically grunted simply along to Mongo's beat. When Smithers and Wadsworth joined the band with their farts, they wanted to mix things up a little. They pulled Mongo to the side and showed him some of the new stuff that they had been working on and Mongo was impressed. The 2 farters emphasized that Mongo would have to play a little faster and occasionally vary from his single steady rhythm.

Mongo decided to be flexible with decisions related to the band. The remaining 18 caveman clan members who weren't in the band were happier than ever. When the band got into full swing, that cave was really rocking with all the dancing going on. Because of the extra fart gas in the cave produced by Smithers and Wadsworth during music sessions, the cave members had to be sure to stay away from the fire as they danced. Some of the cavemen had suffered flash burns when Smithers and Wadsworth accidentally farted into the cave's central fire during rehearsals. Mongo gradually increased and varied his beat on his bone and skull instrument, which enabled the other band members to stretch their wings. The band got better and better. The 2 farters were managing to control their fart-induced pooping to only one accidental pooping each per rehearsal session.

When the caveman clan went outside the cave to hunt for food, they were at their most vulnerable. The reason they were called cavemen in the first place, is that they lived most of their lives in the cave. They hunted for only as long as it took to dispatch literally a small animal or 2 or as long as it took to find an already dead rotting animal that was partially eaten. As disgusting as the carcasses were that the cavemen found and ate, they were safer than attempting to fell larger animals such as raptors, saber-toothed cats or woolly mammoths. When the clan went out on a particular Saturday morning, Belvedere decided to bring along his bamboo instrument with his spear. He thought that when they stopped while hunting, he might practice a little. He was able to carry his bamboo on a sling over his shoulder. Mongo's bone and skull were too bulky to bring along hunting. Hargreaves' melons were way too noisy; the rattling would have given them away to any potential prey from a mile away. Marmaduke's tendon/ribcage device was way too big. Rochester, Cavendish, Smithers and Wadsworth were able to take their grunting voices and farts anywhere they wanted, which was nice.

The clan walked along for about 47 minutes that morning after accumulating 2 squirrels, 3 rabbits, a turtle and about 1/4 of a rotten saber-toothed elk. They stopped to eat some of the bounty for brunch. The men always seemed to be hungry and had ravenous appetites. They had to restrain themselves from not eating all the meat in one sitting. They always wanted to bring food back to the cave, in case it might pour rain on the next day, which would prevent them from hunting. The cavemen never hunted in the rain for superstitious reasons. As the men gorged on the various fresh and rotten meats, Mongo burped and farted. The other men laughed at the sound of Mongo's fart and also burped and farted. Burping and farting seemed to be favorite pastimes of the cavemen.

During the ruckus of the burping and farting, no one heard the sound of the saber-toothed lion sneaking through the reeds. As the lion got closer and poised itself to strike, Belvedere began playing his bamboo. Even without Mongo setting the beat, Belvedere was able to produce a nice sound. Rochester and Cavendish began grunting to Belvedere's sound. It was beautiful. As Smithers and Wadsworth moved into position and prepared themselves to begin farting to the music, the lion appeared. The thing was enormous, with 11-inch long yellow tusks hanging down. When the lion landed on the ground with the thud of an 800-pound bag of dirt being dropped from a truck, it had its eyes on Mongo. As Mongo raised his spear, the lion stopped its assault and suddenly had a different look on its face. It turned its head in the direction of the cavemen playing their instruments.

The savage animal's ears twisted back and forth and it began swaying to the music. The lion seemed to enjoy what it was hearing. Since the men were so surprised by the sudden appearance of the lion, they hadn't stopped playing. Mongo immediately urged the men to keep playing and grunting. He nodded and gestured to Smithers and Wadsworth to commence farting to the music. As the lion appeared to enjoy the music even more, it rolled around on its stomach and began purring loudly as if it were a smaller cat. The men were amazed at the effect that their music had on the great killer animal. Mongo gestured to Hargreaves and Marmaduke to gradually make their way toward him. The lion was on the ground happily rolling around in front of the other men with their instruments, grunts and farts.

Mongo whispered something to Hargreaves and Marmaduke. As the musicians continued playing to distract the lion, Mongo readied his men to move in for the attack. With their spears ready, Mongo, Hargreaves and Marmaduke sneaked toward the lion. The clouds overhead instantly became dark, which resulted in small, then large drops of rain to begin falling. As the raindrops fell on the musicians, they absentmindedly forgot themselves as their ingrained superstitions took over. The men stopped playing, grunting and farting. Their tiny instinctual brains told them to run back to the cave. At the sudden sound of silence, the lion leaped to its feet. Mongo, Hargreaves and Marmaduke stood there with their raised spears, shocked and gasping, as the lion growled a bloodcurdling sound that none of the cavemen had heard before.

128. Fred's Chums



128. Fred's Chums

After Fred entered the tall office building, he walked through the lobby toward the bank of elevators. It was early, wasn't rush hour yet and the elevators were usually empty when entered from the ground floor. Since Fred always arrived at work early to avoid the crowds, he usually entered an empty elevator. At least he would have some privacy for the 12 feet up to the 2nd floor, when the people would begin filling the elevator on his way to the 79th floor of the building. One thing that drove Fred mad was that no one used the stairs in the building, always choosing to ride the elevator up or down one floor. How lazy people were, Fred thought. He always used the stairs when going up or down 1, 2 or even 3 floors. He felt it was faster than waiting for an elevator.

It was probably the antisocialness of Fred's persona that caused him to opt for the stairs whenever possible. Fred wasn't exactly a misanthrope, but he simply disliked the idea of being forced to be in contact with total strangers. He felt that it was his right as a human being to have his own personal space at all times. People had no right to touch him against his will. He avoided the crowded subways like the plague, choosing to walk to his office building from his apartment building. His apartment building only had 4 floors and he always used the stairs to ascend to his fourth floor apartment.

When Fred entered the empty elevator, he heaved a sigh of relief that it was empty, knowing that it wouldn't remain empty for long. It was just one of those stupid little things in life that gave him satisfaction. To a single guy like Fred who had no significant other, little things like being in an empty elevator for a few seconds each day, sometimes went a long way toward maintaining his frail sanity. Fred wasn't insane, but it didn't take much for him to get nervous and jerky, although he never outwardly appeared to be upset. He was well known to his office co-workers as being as cool as a cucumber under stressful situations.

Fred had been born to work in high stress employment and had been promoted many times to his status of district manager. He was capable of handling any situation; he could multitask with the best of them. Fred could be in the middle of a tense phone conversation and pause momentarily to make a quick decision for a troubled co-worker who couldn't wait for him to get off the phone. Fred's office atmosphere was so intense, that the turnaround was higher than normal. The people who managed to continue working at the necessary pace were amply rewarded. It seemed that Fred could handle anything, except being touched by people in an elevator.

To Fred, it was bad enough that he was forced to share the same limited air with strangers. Why did strangers feel that they had the right to make contact with him? He hated that. He always moved over when people entered the elevator and tried his utmost to avoid making contact with them. Why did people feel so free to touch him? The elevator was typically pretty full of people. It was rarely full to the point that people should have to make contact with him, however. They

didn't exactly live in a crowded city like Tokyo where workers were paid to pack people tightly into subways, trains and elevators.

Fred firmly believed in his inalienable right of liberty, which in his mind meant the freedom to have his own personal space in public. No one had the right to bump into him on a sidewalk or to step on the back of his shoes. No one had the right to brush against him in the hallways. No one had the right to make contact with him in an elevator! No one! Obviously, in a crowded city, people had to get along with each other in a civilized manner. Those people were never civilized enough for Fred. All Fred asked for was a little elbowroom. Please!

As the elevator slowed to stop for the 2nd floor, Fred became nervous with anticipation as to how many people were about to crowd into his formerly empty elevator. As the door opened on the 2nd floor, a husky woman entered and reached for the 3rd floor button. Of course! There was the typical example of a person who was too lazy to walk up 1 flight of stairs! No wonder she was so husky, thought Fred. The woman wasn't familiar to Fred, which was no surprise, since thousands of people migrated in and out of the building each day who didn't work there. People were always going to meetings, interviewing for jobs, or doing other things during their temporary stays in his building.

Since Fred had been working in the building for 17 years, he referred to the building as his building. He had the most years at his company, except for the owner of the company and the CFO, who were old-school business types. Those 2 guys worked 7 days a week, 10-12 hours per day. They were wealthier than Rockefeller and had more money than most people. The motto of the company owner was, "There's no such thing as having too much money!" To an extent, Fred appreciated the motto, but not to the point of working 7 days a week. Fred put in his occasional long days, but never worked more than 5 days in any week. He worked on most holidays, but never worked a 6 or 7-day week.

After the husky woman entered the elevator, the cleaning woman entered with her mop and bucket. Great! The cleaning woman apparently was very good at cleaning the building but not efficient at cleaning her body, which reeked of body odor and chewing tobacco. Fred always recognized the smell of chewing tobacco, because he went to college with a couple guys who chewed and he found the smell repulsive. Fred was an exceptionally neatly-dressed and hygienic person and he found body odor more repulsive than chewing tobacco. The cleaning woman used a soda can to spit her tobacco juice and apparently missed occasionally as evidenced by the spittle on the front of her blue cleaning uniform. The cleaning woman wheeled her squeaky-wheeled bucket to the back of the elevator next to Fred and grunted something to the husky woman. Fred couldn't decipher the meaning of the grunt and said nothing. The husky woman asked which floor the cleaning woman wanted and she grunted louder the 2nd time. Fred still couldn't understand what the cleaning woman had said, because as she grunted, she spat out some

of the tobacco juice that was slurring her speech. A tiny puddle of tobacco juice landed on the floor in front of the cleaning woman, who acted as if nothing happened.

The cleaning woman probably figured that she was helping one of her co-workers to have job security by cleaning the floor of the elevator. Apparently the cleaning woman had grunted the number 37, because that was the number the husky woman pressed. The cleaning woman grunted something that was probably "Thank you" to the husky woman. The husky woman said, "You're welcome." Fred sighed to himself at the thought of being trapped in the elevator with the cleaning woman for another 20 minutes. Due to the number of floors that the elevator was forced to stop at in the antiquated elevator system, it took about 30 - 40 minutes to get to the 79th floor from the ground floor on a typical day. More modern buildings with modern elevator systems had elevators that only traveled through a limited number of floors, to prevent such long rides.

The husky woman got off at the 3rd floor and a woman entered with her service dog. Fred couldn't determine the woman's need for the dog. All Fred knew was that the woman wore way too much perfume and unfortunately, no one had ever informed her of the fact. Oh no! Fred sighed to himself. Now he must suffer through a cleaning woman who smelled like chewing tobacco and body odor and a woman who smelled like a cheap perfume factory. One would think that the perfume from the woman with the dog would have squelched the stench of the tobacco and body odor, but it didn't. In fact, the smells morphed into a completely new smell that made Fred queasy. The woman with the dog had pressed the 66th button. When Fred saw that, his eyes rolled into the back of his head. He outwardly remained calm, as he was known to, but inwardly, he was shuddering.

On the 5th floor, a man entered who smelled as if he just smoked a cigarette in one of the designated smoking areas. In fact, as the man entered the elevator, he exhaled some of the smoke. The woman with the dog instantly began coughing and choking from the smell of the smoke, which Fred felt was actually miniscule. Apparently, the smoke had bothered the woman so acutely that her service dog began barking in an alarmed manner. Fred thought that perhaps the woman had some type of COPD related ailment and the dog was there to assist her in some way. The guilt-stricken man hastily exited the elevator on the 6th floor, even though he had pressed the button for the 23rd floor. The woman stopped coughing and the dog stopped barking. Fred only stood there in silence. He never wanted to get involved in things going on around him when the things involved other people. As long as no one was in any great peril or harm, Fred always chose to remain as anonymous as possible like a fly on a wall.

The foul-smelling cleaning woman grunted something to the woman with the dog. The woman with the dog said that she was fine and thanks for asking. The cleaning woman grunted again and then she spat tobacco juice into her soda can. The woman with the dog gave Fred a dirty

look, most likely because he hadn't inquired as to her status. Fred felt justified by his silence and certainly would have assisted the woman if it had been required. On the 11th floor, a rotund man entered the elevator and Fred winced. The trouble with the really fat people such as the 400-500 pound behemoth was that they knew they needed more space and everyone with whom they interacted knew the same. Fred hated to have to adjust his location in the elevator to make room for the large people, but didn't want to make contact with them, so he moved farther into the corner of his elevator. The rotund man wedged himself between the cleaning woman and Fred, avoiding contact with Fred, but touching the cleaning woman's bucket.

The fat man pushed the button for floor 44, which was a ways off. There were 2 reasons why Fred feared being in elevators with obese people. The first reason was that there was an increased chance of making contact with someone who didn't necessarily know the boundaries of their large bodies. Fred had noticed that for some reason, really overweight people didn't care or couldn't feel where their limits bodies were. It was like those extra-wide loads on the highway that occasionally drifted across the double-yellow line or into the shoulder with equal unawareness. The second and worse reason that Fred feared the fat people was the above average tendency to fart in public. Fred had smelled people's farts while walking on the sidewalk to and from work everyday. At least, when a fart was emitted outside in the open air, it was only a matter of seconds before the smell had dissipated.

When a fart was let go in an elevator or in a confessional booth, may the creator strike down the sinner. Fred had hoped that the rotund man could wait until the elevator reached the 44th floor. It wouldn't be that long; he should be able to wait. Fred had held farts in for a record 44-minute ride to the 79th floor on one eventful morning. The fat guy should be able to hold it in for the limited time that he was on the elevator. Wait! What was that sound? Oh No! It was the sound of a fart squeaking out that was trying to be held in. Did the fat man fart? That fiend! The cleaning woman grunted something. The dog woman looked at her with a grimace. The obese man looked at her with a similar grimace. Even the service dog looked at the cleaning woman with a dog grimace. The cleaning woman had farted and had excused herself, as if that was any consolation! Fred could never understand a word that the cleaning woman was grunting, but figured it out and he also grimaced his best grimace at her.

As one would expect, the smell of the cleaning woman's fart was enough to make everyone's eyes tear up a little. The air became so acrid in the elevator that the woman with the dog began coughing and choking again, as she did when she had caught a whiff of the wisp of smoke from the smoking guy. The woman's dog began barking in alarm. The rotund man pushed the button for the 20th floor in order to stop the elevator. He shuffled out as fast as he could and the coughing woman pushed the door-open button in order to air out the fart stench. The cleaning woman grunted something and the coughing woman nodded to her. When the fart cloud had been sufficiently ventilated from the elevator, someone scurried on and the woman with the dog

pushed the door-closed button. A Rastafarian entered the elevator with the longest hair that Fred had ever seen. It almost touched the ground. For some reason, the man didn't have his dreadlocks balled up in a big hat the way the Rastas usually do it. Maybe he lost the hat or just felt like showing off his long hair. The man had pushed the 60th floor button.

The hair was so greasy-looking and smelling that when the door closed and the hair smell began to concentrate in the elevator, Fred felt queasy again. Fred thought that the hair smell didn't seem to bother the woman with the dog, because she was fine. The cleaning woman appeared to be able to tolerate all forms of stink, so she didn't really count. Fred had heard that the Rastafarians didn't wash their hair as part of their religion or something and it smelled as if it might be true. On the 24th floor, 2 people entered with wheelchairs and one of them pushed the 78th floor button. The elevator was really getting crowded.

On the 30th floor, a really large guy who looked like the previous fat guy forced his way into the elevator. When he pushed the button for the 77th floor, Fred thought he was going to have a heart attack. The people in the wheel chairs occupied a large amount of space in the elevator. When the woman with the dog was added to the cleaning woman and Rastafarian, there wasn't much free space remaining for Fred and the fat guy. The new fat guy was even more bulky than the previous fat guy and probably weighed between 500-600 pounds. Why me? Fred asked himself. The rotund man wedged himself between Fred in one back corner and the Rastafarian, with the cleaning woman standing between the Rasta and the other back corner. The fat man's arm flab was pressing embarrassingly into Fred's arm. The fat man's thigh flab was pressing embarrassingly into Fred's thigh. It was almost more than Fred could bear. Fred had tolerated close encounters in his elevator many times before and he had always lived through the events.

It wouldn't be much longer and the stenching cleaning woman would exit on the 37th floor, the filthy-haired Rastafarian would be gone on the 60th floor, the woman and her dog would exit on the 66th floor, the fat man would be gone on the 77th floor and the 2 people in wheelchairs would exit on the 78th floor. Then Fred would be all alone in his empty elevator for the remaining 12 feet up to his beloved 79th floor. All Fred had to do was hold on for another 15 or 20 minutes and it would be over. It certainly wasn't going to kill him to be in contact with a fat man's arm and leg. Unfortunately, the fat man reeked of Ben-Gay ointment, which Fred didn't smell when the man first entered the elevator. The ointment had that smell to it.

Fred shuddered and thought that by the time he got off the elevator at the 79th floor, he was probably going to smell like the fat man's Ben-Gay and be forced to listen to his co-workers' stupid comments about being sore for whatever reason and needing the ointment, etc. Huh? What was that grinding sound? The elevator jolted to a stop! The lights went out! Fred smelled something electrical, and then he smelled smoke! Fire? The woman coughed and choked! The dog barked! They were trapped in the elevator!

129. Emerson's Badges



129. Emerson's Badges

Emerson needed 21 merit badges to become an Eagle Scout, which included the 13 mandatory from the list: Camping, Cooking, Swimming/Hiking/Cycling, Citizenship in the Community, Citizenship in the Nation, Citizenship in the World, Communication, Lifesaving/Emergency Preparedness, Environmental Science/Sustainability, Family Life, First Aid, Personal Fitness, Personal Management. For the remaining 8 badges, he chose: Archeology, Dentistry, Fingerprinting, Horsemanship, Railroading, Shooting, Trucking and Veterinary Medicine.

He was really anxious to get started on the merit badges, because it was going to take a while to acquire all of them. Boy Scouts were slowly becoming a disappearing entity and he was encouraged by the local wealthy people to succeed. He had unlimited funds at his disposal, which were donated by the rich and famous of the area. When Emerson tried for his Camping badge, he decided to rough it and was flown to the Sahara Desert, where he would have to survive on his own for 14 days, without clothing, food or water. He parachuted down to the desert at about noon one afternoon completely naked, with his parachute as his only possession.

Emerson had fully researched the concept of living in the desert and he knew all the tricks beforehand. Since the parachute was old Army surplus, Emerson wasn't worried about food, because the chute was made of cotton, which he could use as his food supply. He wasn't hungry yet, so he tore out a section of the chute to use as a poncho covering for his entire body. Another section of the chute was draped over a large sloped hand-excavated hole in the ground to catch condensed water in the mornings. He decided to stay where he was for the entire 14 days, to minimize energy expenditure. He realized that it was going to be a boring 2 weeks, so he began singing. If singing were a merit badge, Emerson would have never received one, because when he attempted to sing, it was more of a howl than a voice.

It wasn't long before the local jackals had heard Emerson howling to them and they immediately beat a path to him. Before Emerson had finished singing the end of "Take Me Out to the Ballgame," 3 drooling jackals had surrounded him. Emerson was fully prepared for animal attacks and had a long thin strip of parachute ready to snap like a whip at the jackals. Emerson's whip cracking was so effective, that he knocked one of the jackals unconscious, which prompted the remaining 2 to dispatch and eat the fallen jackal.

For Emerson's Cooking merit badge, he had to cook a 5-course meal in a fancy restaurant in Paris, France for some snooty French dignitaries. He decided on the following courses: First - Mixed Green Salad with Roasted Shallot & Truffle Vinaigrette, Second - Lemon Curry Tilapia with Cherrywood Smoked Bacon, Roasted Fingerling Potatoes and Sautéed Asparagus, Third - 5 Spiced Chicken Breast with Sweet & Sour Slaw, Fourth - Cabernet Braised Beef Short Ribs served with Twice Peppered Skinny Pasta & Fresh Herbs and for dessert, Emerson served Brie & Raspberry Puff Pastry. Most of the meal had been greeted with thumbs up from the dignitaries.

except for the Cherrywood Smoked Bacon, in place of which the French people prefer Mesquite Smoked Bacon. Emerson realized that he had slipped up with the bacon, but after he shined the French President's riding boots, all was forgiven.

For Emerson's Swimming merit badge, he had to swim the 100+ miles from Florida to Cuba in any amount of time necessary. Luckily for Emerson, he had always been an avid swimmer and he wasn't too concerned about completing the feat. His body was greased from head to toe with heavy axle grease and he walked out into the ocean from a beach in Florida. He had numerous close calls along the route from shark attacks, electric eels, stingrays, manta rays, jellyfish, dolphins, barracudas and pelicans, but after 31 days of swimming, he made it to Cuba. When he arrived, he was at the lowest body weight of his life and his skin was blue and wrinkled. When his parents greeted him on the beach in Cuba, they barely recognized him and thought he was Diana Nyad.

For the Citizenship in the Community badge, Emerson wanted to volunteer at a nursing home. He easily found one located just down the street from his home residence. He was put to work within minutes of walking in the door. The primary use for the volunteers who worked at the nursing home was to change the soiled diapers of the old men. For liability purposes, the old women who soiled their diapers had their diapers changed by the nurse's aides who worked at the nursing home. Emerson thought he was capable of anything, but when he opened the diaper of the 96-year old man, Emerson fainted from the overwhelming smell. The old man laughed with glee at the sight of Emerson lying on the floor at the foot of his bed. The old man pulled the fouled diaper out from under his ass and threw it onto Emerson's face, which was pointing up to the ceiling, due to Emerson lying on his back when he fainted.

After a few minutes, one of the nurse's aides walked into the room, to check on Emerson's progress. She saw Emerson on the floor with the filthy diaper on his face and said to the 96-year old man, "It looks like you've been a bad boy again, Leo!" The old man laughed even harder. The aide removed the poop-filled diaper from Emerson's face, cleaned the boy's skin with a wet rag and gently slapped his face to arouse him. Leo leaned onto his side in his bed, looked down at Emerson on the floor and pissed on the boy's face. The aide slapped Leo's peepee and scolded him again. Leo laughed harder still, farted and fell asleep.

For the Citizenship in the Nation merit badge, Emerson traveled to the huge VA hospital in Washington, DC to volunteer with the veterans. As luck would have it, the primary need for the volunteers at the VA hospital was to change the diapers of the old male veterans. Nurses changed the diapers of the female veterans. Emerson reluctantly made his way into one of the rooms, where an old man was lying on his bed in his diaper. Because of the traumatizing diaper-changing incident at the nursing home with Leo, Emerson requested a nurse's aide to help him. The old man seemed passive enough, but looked at Emerson with a mischievous twinkle in his

eyes. As the old man lay on his back waiting for his diaper change, Leonard as the aide called him appeared to be getting excited in a romantic way, as evidenced by the ever-increasing bulge in his diaper. The aide said to Leonard, "I see what you're doing Leonard; you're such a teaser!" Emerson looked at the rising diaper and shuddered.

The aide told Emerson that it was ok to proceed. As Emerson, removed the diaper, Leonard's peepee sprung out and he began pissing a stream of yellow piss that caught Emerson in the right eye. The piss stung Emerson's eye like a scorpion. "Now, Leonard, you devil!" said the aide. Leonard chortled. Emerson cried.

For the Citizenship in the World badge, Emerson traveled to the United Nations building annex in NYC, which had the temporary housing for visiting world leaders and their guests. At the time of Emerson's visit to the annex, some world leaders were visiting from Russia, India and Barbados. The volunteers at the annex were mainly necessary to tend to the minor needs of the guests of the world leaders. The President of Barbados was staying at the annex with his grandfather and grandmother. Everyone had their own rooms in the spacious building. The grandfather's name was Lenny, according to his traveling nurse. The nurse always took advantage of the volunteers by having them change the diapers of the elderly grandfather. She knew what she was doing.

Emerson was led into Lenny's room by the nurse and was handed a diaper. The nurse said, "Well, what are you waiting for?" Emerson was surprised at the terseness of the nurse and had hoped for more assistance from her. Lenny smiled at Emerson with his few remaining yellowing teeth. Emerson bit his lip and proceeded. When Emerson removed the diaper, he found that it was empty and didn't need changing. The nurse wanted a new one put on anyway. As Emerson prepared to put on the new one, Lenny pooped onto the new diaper and some of the poop smeared onto Emerson's hand. Emerson wondered what type of food that Lenny was eating; whatever it was, it smelled rank. Emerson gagged slightly and almost barfed from the fetidness. Lenny laughed.

Part of Emerson's Communication merit badge was to attend a public meeting and engage in the activities. He went to a town meeting in his locale where an emergency meeting was taking place. As with all his merit badges, he had done research prior to attending the town meeting. The issue of discussion concerned allowing a new Walmart store to move in, which would eliminate numerous smaller stores that have been in operation for years. Emerson decided to be on the side of Walmart. That turned out to be a mistake. Even though Emerson had researched the Walmart plan, he had missed the part where most of the existing businesses didn't want the Walmart to be built. The people who wanted the Walmart were the consumers who would shop there and didn't work in the small stores or know anyone who did. When Emerson rose to speak in favor of the Walmart, the crowd grew angry with him. He went on and on about how the

Walmart would create a certain number of jobs and that the consumers would benefit greatly from the great selection and low prices.

As Emerson stood there orating in the middle of the audience in his Boy Scout uniform, people behind him began shooting spitballs at the back of his neck. He looked back at them as he spoke, hoping they would stop, but they didn't. He stubbornly continued to speak as one irate local shop owner and then another stood up and yelled at him to sit down and shut up. Emerson yelled back at them that it was a free country and he had every right to voice his opinion. A stocky man, who was the local butcher rushed at Emerson, picked him up and hurled through the air toward the front of the town meeting room. Emerson landed on the long table at the front of the room where the town elders were sitting. He crashed onto the pitcher of water in front of the town supervisor and shards of glass hit the supervisor's face and the face of the minutes keeper, who screamed.

For the Lifesaving badge, Emerson flew to California to be a lifeguard for a week. Since he was already an accomplished swimmer, he easily passed the qualifications tests and was given his red suit and emergency flotation device. On the first day, he rescued 14 people and had to give mouth-to-mouth resuscitation to 3 of them. He didn't mind swimming out to the waves and dragging the victims to shore, but the mouth-to-mouth was a little difficult. The first kid he performed it on had been eating excessive amounts of hot dogs, candy and other nutritional foods when he started drowning. The lifeguards never knew what the victims had been eating or drinking before they began drowning, so that they were sometimes unpleasantly surprised.

As Emerson began mouth-to-mouthing the kid, the kid's stomach spasmed and the kid barfed in Emerson's face, which made Emerson barf on the kid's face. Another lifeguard dragged Emerson aside to finish reviving the kid. The 2nd victim was an old man, whose dentures had fallen out of his mouth and into Emerson's mouth as Emerson applied the mouth-to-mouth. The horrendousness of the old man's teeth in Emerson's mouth caused Emerson to barf on the man's face. Emerson was surprised that he still had something in his stomach after barfing on the kid's face earlier. Another lifeguard dragged Emerson aside to finish reviving the old man. The 3rd person whom Emerson attempted to save was another lifeguard who fainted while being barfed on by a victim. Even though the lifeguard was a veteran, sometimes getting barf in the face was simply too much for anybody to handle without fainting.

For Emerson's Environmental Science merit badge, he visited a dairy farm that had 300 cows. The cows generated tons of manure in the form of cow flops in the grazing fields. Emerson had concocted a way to use the dried cow flops as a source of sustainable energy by the farmers. Since the farm was located in the northern US, the cow barns needed to be heated in the winter by various means. Emerson had discovered that by using efficient woodstoves of the proper design the dried cow flops could be burned in the stoves to heat the barns. The farmer was amazed that no one had thought of the idea sooner. It turned out to be more cost-effective to

burn the cow flops in the stoves in place of wood, instead of using the cow flops as manure in the cornfields. The Go-Green foundation awarded a monetary gift for college to Emerson for his efforts.

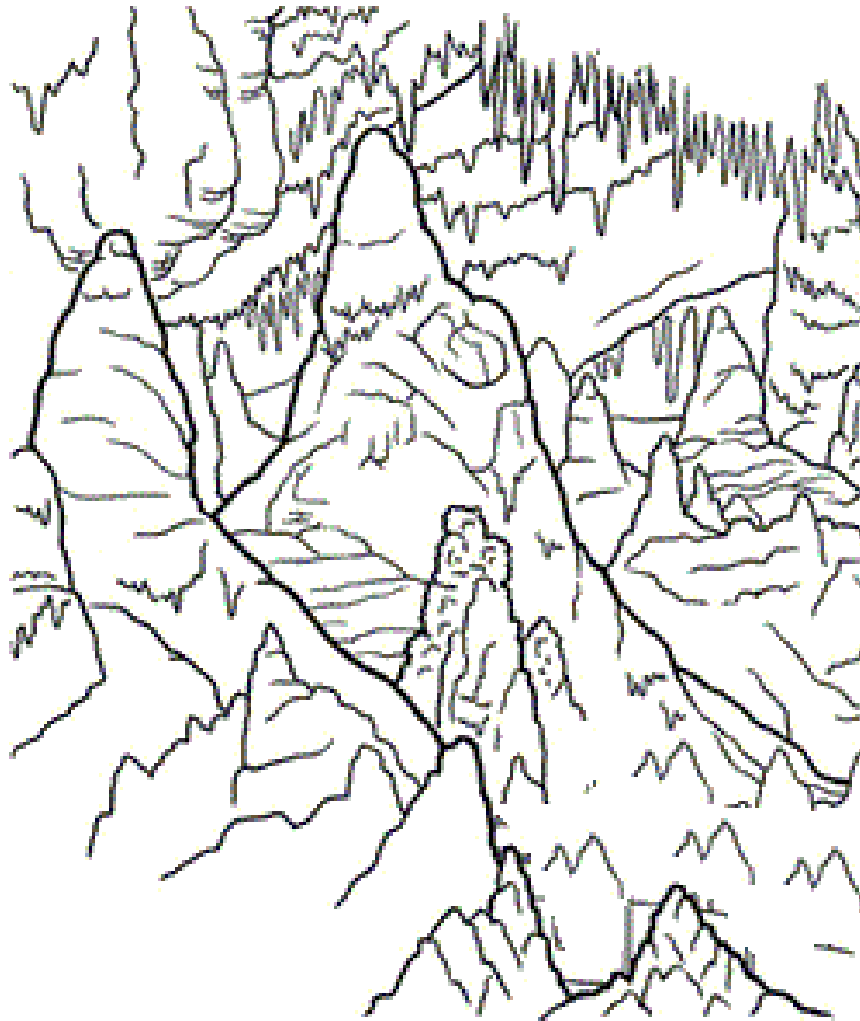
For Emerson's Family Life badge, he lived in an urban household as a foster brother to 3 at-risk kids. Even though Emerson was younger than the 3 kids, he was able to act as a role model for them to a small extent. It's true that some of Emerson's belongings turned up missing while he stayed in the apartment with the mother, the mother's mother and the 3 kids, but to Emerson, those lost items were but material objects that could be easily replaced. That's probably the way the urban family looked at it as well. Emerson had to admit that the food was some of the tastiest he had ever eaten, although on the first 2 days of his stay, he suffered from rampant diarrhea. Since Emerson never traveled anywhere without his trusty bottle of Pepto-Bismol, he managed to quell the cramps at least. While walking down the street with the 3 urban boys, Emerson had been accosted by 3 other boys and was dragged into a back alley and beaten up slightly. The beating was prevented from becoming too serious by a passing police officer who was fortunately walking his beat at the time. Emerson didn't begrudge the boys who had beat him, because he knew they were probably just having a little fun in their own city way.

For Emerson's First Aid merit badge, he had been put to work in a sawmill, where he participated in the bandaging of the fingers of 23 workers. Some of the fingers had simple cuts and others required Emergency Room visits. Emerson never realized how dangerous some jobs could be. He noted that people take it for granted when they buy lumber somewhere that a lumberyard worker might have lost all or part of a finger while trimming and sanding that wood product.

For the Personal Fitness badge, Emerson participated in a number of events, including running a marathon, swimming, and bicycling. Since he was so physically fit, he found that merit badge to be little challenge. The Personal Management merit badge was a piece of cake, since he was already incredibly organized and had been using to-do lists for a number of years. For Emerson's Archeology merit badge, he traveled to Egypt to participate in one of the many digs that were perpetually going on over there. He had always been fascinated with history and how history was continuously being augmented by the findings of the important digs. Emerson found himself in the bowels of a tomb under one of the Great Pyramids.

He felt important as he carefully assisted the archeologists with their meticulous removal of the dust and sand. He had been fortunate to be there at that place and time, because they were in a tomb that had only been written about in the books, but not yet discovered. The archeologists had looks on their faces like little kids; they were wide-eyed and breathless from anticipation. It was really hot down there and the air was thick. Emerson spotted pebbles and grit falling from the ceiling. Everyone else in the tomb was too excited at seeing the top of the sarcophagus that had just been revealed, to notice the rapid decay of the ceiling above their heads.

130. Ingeborg's Grotto



130. Ingeborg's Grotto

Ingeborg loved all things cave. When he was still working in his office job and made mistakes, his co-workers would say, "Were you born in a cave?" and Ingeborg would reply that he wished he were. He was just that into caves, caverns grottos or whatever else they were called. Every minute that he spent underground caused him to wonder how nature was able to create such marvels. By no means was Ingeborg alone in his love of caving, because it was a popular hobby of many folks, young and old. It was Ingeborg's obsession with caverns that made him different. He spent most of his life researching, exploring and then writing about caves. He earned so much money from his writings, that he was able to quit his day job and explore caves full time. His favorite f

Thing about caving was communicating with other cavers around the world to discover the unexplored and lightly traveled caves. Nothing gave cavers more satisfaction than discovering a new cave, which was sometimes only a tunnel that could barely be traversed. Sometimes, the extreme cavers got themselves into trouble from which it was impossible to extricate themselves. Ingeborg never feared anything when he was underground. He planned to live in a cave someday, once he could save up enough money to buy the property on which a truly spectacular cave existed. Once he found that super cave and was satisfied that it met his needs, he would buy the land.

A cave that met his specific needs was a rare one indeed. Ingeborg craved a cave that had it all - tunnels, large openings, small openings, running water, pools, animal life and a full catalog of mineral structures hanging from the ceilings and mounding on the floor. He had found caves of such immenseness, but none of them was located on available land. The greatest known caves were trapped in State Parks and other such public property. Ingeborg thirsted for the ultimate cave that he could call his own. He without fail, caved alone and never informed anyone of his whereabouts when he explored underground. He was so greedy that he didn't want anyone to discover a cave in his presence and somehow steal it from him.

He had no problem exploring caves discovered by other people, but never revealed any of his own discoveries. He often went back to caves to penetrate deeper into them to possibly find new avenues or missed passages. He loved being underground in the dark, moist and occasionally unbearably hot atmosphere. The deeper caves were hotter due to their proximity to the magma beneath the earth's crust. Ingeborg enjoyed the danger of descending deeper and deeper, possibly being a little subconsciously suicidal, which most thrill seekers were. When he communicated with cavers, very few enjoyed the underground heat as much as he did. The gases underground rarely bothered Ingeborg, even though he had fainted countless times and awoke hours later.

Ingeborg had explored caves all over the world and would go anywhere that there might be something explorable. When he slept at night, he dreamed about the darkness and mystery of the

underground world. The potential hazards the lay around every corner really turned him on. He wished that he could explore a new cave each day of his life, but the caves were spread out too far apart. He often went days and weeks without being underground, due to the long distances traveled to get to the cave locations. He often thought that if he ever did find his perfect cave and could buy the land, would he be satisfied. He didn't think he would be, but he would worry about it later.

One of Ingeborg's favorite locales for caving was Argentina. He had explored so many wondrous cavities and crevices under the surface there. That it became his Shangri-la. He decided to re-visit a favorite cave there that had been sticking in his head. He had obtained info about the cave quite by accident actually. While communicating in a form on the internet, one of the fellow cavers had slipped out the approximate location of the cave. That was 3 years ago. After quite a bit of legwork, he finally located the cavern. It was an immense creation, one of the most spectacular he had ever seen. A rancher owned the property above the cave, but there were adjacent properties for sale.

Ingeborg hoped to find something in the area that could end up being the one. As Ingeborg located the known cave, he noticed that it had been raining quite heavily recently as evidenced by the wetness of the foliage and indications of erosion on some of the slopes. When it rained, sometimes it really rained, at a rate of an inch or two per hour. He found the entrance to the beautiful cave in the midst of a great shrubbery. The entrance was invisible to an unknowing passerby, due to the way that the greenery sags to cover depressions in the ground.

He entered the cave through a narrow jagged opening of about 3 feet diameter. He was chilled and soaking wet from traipsing through the wet foliage and welcomed the warmth of the interior of the cave. As he made his way into the grotto, he remembered a few things about it. The walking surfaces were perpetually covered by slippery slimy growths of some kind. It was difficult to walk on the surface without falling, which he did 3 times. As the tunnel widened, the ground dried out a little, probably from the moisture on the ground being able to drain away. He adjusted the light on his helmet to brighten things up a bit. It was indeed as incredible as he remembered. Magnificent structures hung from the ceiling in varying lengths and colors. Statues stood everywhere on the floor. Nature had been very busy in the cave over the millennia. There was no evidence in the form of footprints, indicating that no one had been there for some time.

The cave was all his for the time being. He explored the cave for many hours and walked deeper and deeper into it. He always kept a large supply of batteries for his helmet light, which could supply about 2 days of continuous illumination if he utilized all the batteries in succession. Except for the helmet and batteries in his backpack, he traveled extremely light. He waited as long as he could to drink any water, which he obtained from the underground streams that were

always present. The streams had typically comprised the force of nature that had created the cave in the first place. Even though the water had a savagely mineral taste, it was always clean and cool.

After approximately 12 hours in the cave, he made his way back outside to the daylight, which was fading. As he always felt after being underground, Ingeborg was supernaturally invigorated and buzzing from the sensation of the sights and smells of the grotto. He headed in the direction of the dirt road, which led back to the sleepy little village. He instantly realized that he had stayed underground longer than he had planned, but didn't care. It had been worth it. It was getting dark and difficult to walk, but at least he had his helmet light to assist him. It was a clear night and the moon sliver helped to light his way a tad.

As he rambled through the heavy still-wet growth, he thought about how lucky he was to have found a hobby that satisfied him so immensely. Nature was the greatest sculptor to Ingeborg. Those stalactites and stalagmites down in that cave were so precious to him that he wished they could be in a museum somewhere for more people to behold, but that would ruin it. Those creations were for him to view and briefly own. As he grew older, his quest to find the ultimate cavern and own the land above it began to make him crazed. He wished that he could own the land on which he tramped along at the moment. Unfortunately, that wealthy rancher owned it. He was getting to the point in life that the cave that he had just been in might be the cave of his dreams. It indeed had everything that he loved in a cave.

He pondered about the idea of owning one of the adjacent properties and that perhaps one of those properties might have an entryway into the cave. If he bought one of those properties and it didn't have an entryway, he would still be able to use the one that he just came out of, if necessary. It wouldn't be the same though. He wanted to own land and have the exclusive right to enter the cave. The entry that he just used was known to a few other cavers who would be able to get into that particular part of the grotto. That wouldn't work for Ingeborg. He needed to own the land that contained the entry to the cavern. That was the only way. It had to be. Once he decided to go underground and live in a cave, he needed to be able to monopolize the cave and prevent entry by others.

What was he going to do? As he continued in the darkness, he felt the ground under his feet becoming squishier. It must be in a low spot. His hiking boots began to stick in the muckiness and walking was becoming more labored. He didn't remember the ground being so difficult on the way in, but it didn't matter. He would soon be at the dirt road and headed to the village. As he gazed up at the bright white of the moon sliver, he bumped his head on a fallen tree. He backed away from the tree in order to go around it. On the 3rd step backward, his footing dissolved and he slipped downward. His body became swallowed by the ground around him. He went down into the ground so quickly that he couldn't prevent being sucked in completely. He

slid straight down and then at a slight angle as if he were on a water slide at an amusement park.

He continued sliding and momentarily enjoyed the sensation. Then he crashed and landed hard on his ass. Wow! That was a rush! Except for the pain that he was feeling in his butt, he felt exhilarated. Where was he? He didn't recognize any of the formations in the view illuminated by his helmet light. He wondered if he was in the same cavern that he had just explored, but it couldn't be. Ingeborg had a tremendous memory for remembering all his cave explorations and the cavern he was in was definitely unfamiliar. As he rose to his feet and began walking around, he couldn't believe his eyes. This was it! This was his cave! He had found it. The natural features in the grotto were the most beautiful that he had ever witnessed. He was home!

He looked up to the hole in the ceiling and noted that it was approximately 40 feet away. He must have fallen 100 feet or more from the surface up there. Wow! The cave was a real beauty. He must have it! All he had to do was find the way out and research how to buy the land above. Yes! His search was over. He couldn't believe how lucky he was. He was just thinking about buying one of the adjacent properties to gain access to that other cave. Lo and behold, he had discovered the greatest cavern of all. He was home! He couldn't stop saying it. He turned up the intensity on the helmet light to scout around for a side tunnel or opening of any kind in the wall of the cave. The hole in the ceiling through which he slid was too high to reach. Some stream had carved out the cave, which means a stream had to be on one end of cave leading in and on the other end leading out. That was the typical scenario anyway. Nature didn't always play by a hard set of rules.

Sometimes caves were etched by underground streams and then the cave ceilings collapsed at the entry and exit points of the streams, reducing the stream passages to mere slits. Ingeborg searched for a way out. He wasn't panicked. He had been in many difficult situations before in his caving travels, much worse than his current one. He had survived them all and would survive this. All he had to do was find a narrow passage to slither through to the surface. It might take some time to squeeze thorough, but almost anything was possible. He walked to the wall of the huge cave, which was about 200 feet from his location. The cave was huge! He estimated the cave to be 450 feet across the floor! The ceiling varied in height from 40 to 50 feet. What a monster! He was indeed home! He couldn't stop saying it.

He continued around the perimeter of the cave, following the wall, looking for a hole, anything that would provide a way out; anything would do. Anything that he could squeeze through, that is. He noted a few small openings that were only small hollows and too small to be passages. As the hours passed, he found nothing. There were ponds of water on the floor of the giant cave, but no obvious streams trickling into or out of the ponds. Maybe the ponds were formed by the water trickling from the many ceiling stalactites. That had to be it. Ingeborg soon encountered a collapsed section of ceiling and wall. A stream trickled through the bottom of the pile of stone

and rubble. After a few more hours, he encountered another collapsed section. It appeared that he might have found the entry and exit points of the stream that had created the cave. Unfortunately, the passages were sealed off.

He continued around the perimeter of the cave until he had completed the loop to his starting point. He was unable to find an obvious way out of the cave though the wall, at least. He continued traversing the floor of the cave in gradually smaller concentric circles. He might be able to find an opening in the floor somewhere that would lead out of the cavern. There had to be something; there always was. As Ingeborg searched, he began thinking about how most of the caves in the past had been discovered by someone else before him. He merely explored known caves. He had only actually discovered new passages and tunnels in caves. He had never been in a virgin cave, unpenetrated by a human.

He stalwartly continued investigating the cave and tried to concentrate on what he was going to do when he got out. He thought about the processes involved in buying property in Argentina. He wondered how much the property would cost and how long it would take to acquire it. He became thirsty after a while, from the heat down there. He stopped at one of the ponds to have a drink. To his surprise, the water was more mineral tasting than he was accustomed to. It must be because there wasn't a properly flowing stream to freshen the ponds with new water. The water in the ponds was semi-stagnant. The water trickling from the ceilings wasn't fresh and flowing the way an active stream would be.

After 20 minutes, he felt sick and vomited. The pond water wasn't fit for consumption. As he walked along, he noted that there was no life in the ponds. He thought back to all his other caves and how there was always something swimming around in the fresher bodies of water that were fed by active streams. His beautiful cave had no active stream to provide fresh water. He stopped at another pond that was deeper than the one he drank from before and he had another drink of water. In a short time, he barfed out that water. As he walked and searched, he continued sampling water from the ponds until he had sampled water from all the ponds. He barfed out all the water from all the ponds in the cavern.

He began to grow weak from hunger and wished that he brought something in his backpack besides batteries. He reasoned that if he had brought something to eat, he would have barfed it out anyway because of the foul water. His years of cave exploring had toughened his body and made him physically fit, but he required some kind of sustenance to keep moving efficiently. His vision began to get blurry. Weariness from thirst and hunger affected his walking ability and he began staggering on the craggy floor. He fell and got back up and then he fell again. His knees were skinned by the falls to the harsh cave floor. He got back up again and continued stumbling around on the enormous unfriendly floor of the cave in search of the way out. There had to be something; there always was.

131. Larry's Lunch



131. Larry's Lunch

Larry loved the process of eating; the food that he ate was only part of the experience. From an early age, he had been allowed to sit unsupervised in front of the refrigerator, build his Dagwood sandwiches and eat them. He remembered sitting on his little stool in front of the opened door; those were the days. Larry's favorite time of day was approximately lunch time. He didn't label his meals as breakfast, lunch and dinner. He labeled the time of day between 11:30 am and 12:30 pm as lunch time. He loved lunch time.

Larry couldn't wait to wake up in the morning so that he could get something to eat; he couldn't wait to go to bed at night, because he knew he would be waking up soon and could start his day of eating again. Larry had discovered years before that his body didn't need the vast quantity of food that he consumed; it was his brain, as with many obese people. A person's body only required 1,000 to 2,000 calories to run efficiently and healthily. After that, a person's brain wanted the sensations of eating and experiencing the food intake. Larry's brain savored the color, texture and fragrance of food. Since Larry and his brain were essentially the same entity, it was Larry who enjoyed the way that the pasta felt on his tongue as he rolled it around in his mouth. He lusted for the way that food eased down his throat and into the eager stomach that never felt full, no matter how much he ate.

Larry was fond of how an apple looked so perfect and shiny and when he bit into it, it was crunchy, crisp and juicy. After a few enjoyable chews, down it went. Carrots were beautifully colored and hard. Bananas were soft and savory. Peaches were fuzzy and fruity. Plums were smoother, but tangy and pears had their own thing going on. Larry liked eating them when they were still green and firm, but also waited for them to yellow and sweeten and juicify. Pineapples were so sugary sweet to Larry, that he would begin drooling the moment he put them on the cutting board to remove the tough outer hide. Strawberries intrigued Larry the way that they could be huge and swollen with water or smaller and more tart and piquant.

When Larry bought the oversized bland California strawberries, he dipped them in melted chocolate for an added sensation of color, flavor and decadence. Larry participated in eating the gamut of orange pleasures, including freshly peeled orange sections, orange juice and the different orange smoothies available. Larry could eat a bushel of grapes in one sitting. He liked them all - green, red, with and without seeds. He ate grapes as fast as someone swallowing wieners at a hot dog eating contest. He swallowed them whole; he crunched them; he loved the round and semi-round beauties. Dark cherries, red cherries and yellowish cherries were all on Larry's menu, depending on the time of year. He always had gallon jugs of maraschino cherries in the refrigerators for emergencies when he couldn't get the fresh ones in time to satisfy his craving for cherries.

Larry's kitchen had 14 refrigerator/freezers, which were in a state of continuous restocking by his

home delivery food service. Larry liked the sourness of grapefruits and lemons and sometimes squeezed special drinks with grapefruit, lemon, orange and lime juices together for a zesty summer refreshment. When mangos, kiwis and melons were available locally, Larry waited with bated breath for their arrival to his doorstep. When he was a few years younger and could still get around, he picked blackberries and blueberries, but currently had to rely on someone else to pick them for him.

While he gorged on a while watermelon, Larry would think back to those days, when he would eat 4 or 5 quarts of berries for every quart that he paid for. The farmers didn't care, because Larry was such a good customer. Back in those days, Larry would hit every farm and orchard to pick produce and eat himself into oblivion. On so many different occasions, he would pick and eat so much fruit that he would pass out in the field to be discovered by the farmers at the end of the day. Larry would get so many mosquito bites as he lay there under the blueberry bushes that it was pitiful. His skin was so thick and fat layered that he claimed he didn't feel the bites, but everyone knew he was lying. Larry missed those days of picking his own seasonal fruits, but he managed to get by with his food delivery services.

Larry had contracts with every local supermarket and grocer who would deliver food to him. Outside of restaurants, Larry was the best customer for the smaller produce merchants. He ordered that much food. Larry savored meats more than fruits. His favorite was filet mignon. He could eat the entire filet from the beef cow, which weighed 5 pounds. On some days, Larry ate a 5-pound filet at breakfast time, a 2nd one at lunch time and a 3rd filet at dinner time. Some days were designated as beef days and he would cook himself something from all the cuts. He would prepare sirloin steaks, flank steaks, rib eyes, t-bones, standing rib roasts, strip steaks chuck steaks, brisket, round steaks, skirt steaks, rump steaks, flat iron steaks, tri-tips, short loins, short ribs, flap steaks, Delmonicos, hanger steaks and every other steak and cut imaginable by a chef.

Since Larry had contracts with all the local butchers, he bought entire beef sides, which were then processed and packed into their respective cuts. Since Larry gave the butchers such a great business, they always reserved the finest meats for him. Larry ate only the best meat in the country. To his beef side purchases, the butchers added complimentary pork products, chickens, lamb products, ducks and turkey packages. Since Larry outright hated fish and anything labeled as seafood, he gave the fish mongers none of his business, which was too bad for them. For a while, Larry had a chef working for him who would expertly prepare all the meat dishes for him. Larry had the chef write down every recipe for every meal and then Larry let the chef go. Larry saved himself a lot of money by cooking for himself. He felt that he had to save money somewhere, since his weekly food bill was hundreds of dollars. The least he could do was cook his own meals.

Larry dreamed about eating. When he woke up at 8 each morning, he started by eating an

omelette made from a dozen eggs, a package of thick-cut bacon, 3 onions, 3 green peppers, 3 potatoes, mushrooms, a pound of sausage, a pound of cheese, a pound of butter and pork lard from his butchers. To Larry, there was nothing as necessary to an omelette as pork lard. He wished it were more available in the supermarkets. He hated that vegetable shortening garbage. He toasted an entire loaf of freshly baked bread with one of those large commercial toasters. The bread was delivered early each morning through a special slot in his back door. He juiced a dozen oranges and poured a quart of milk in a nice tall glass. Larry believed in a balanced breakfast time.

While he was preparing the feast, he mentally prepared himself. He smelled and listened to the bacon sizzling in the pork lard in one large iron pan. The sausage was sizzling in the pork lard in another large iron pan. The onions, peppers, mushrooms and potatoes were sizzling in pork lard in another large iron pan. The air in Larry's kitchen was so fragrant with meats and vegetables cooking in their pans that it was almost maddening to him. As some ingredients sizzled, the bread was toasted. After a half hour of cooking, he whisked the eggs. He had a gigantic iron pan into which he placed the butter and he poured the bacon, sausage, vegetables, potatoes and lard. He poured the eggs onto the sautéed ingredients, added the cheese and put the huge iron lid into position on the masterpiece. After another half hour of slow cooking, it was ready.

As Larry consumed the meal fit for 3 Kings, he drank the milk & juice and savored each and every mouthful and food fragment. To Larry, there was nothing like eating. His brain kicked into overdrive when the first section of bacon contacted his tongue. The eggs, cheese and butter went together so well. The sausage, vegetables and potatoes were a marriage of culinary decadence. The pork lard was always in the background, gently enhancing as only genuine pork lard could. The morsels of heavily buttered toast created from the bread baked only hours before, perfectly complemented the meal. It was a large amount of food that Larry managed to make last for 70 minutes. Larry enjoyed cooking his food and loved to make the session of devouring last as long as possible.

When Larry was younger, he didn't savor his food as much as he currently did. When he was younger, he ate everything too quickly. He swallowed before the food was tasted properly. He regretted those foolish younger days of eating for fullness. He woke up one day and decided to make every forkful of every meal more meaningful and not just a pile of nutrition to stuff into his gut. From that day onward, Larry's life found new meaning. By approximately 10:30, Larry had completed his daily breakfast time feast and was ready for the breakfast time dessert. The morning desserts varied from day to day, obviously depending on Larry's mood. He always had freezers full of gallon containers of the best ice cream. He had those special storage displays for his freshly baked cakes and pastries, which were delivered each morning at about 10:30. Larry rose from the feasting table, as he called it, just as the cakes and pastries arrived. The delivery person was a friendly woman who delivered the baked goods that were prepared by her parents.

She had delivered the bread earlier in the day, while Larry was still sleeping. She asked Larry how the bread was and Larry told her that it was fresh and delicious as always. Larry liked to have a different bread variety delivered each morning and the woman's family bakery was only to glad to oblige. On that morning, the woman presented Larry with 2 large 5-layer chocolate cakes, a dozen croissants, a dozen fancy donuts, and 3 dozen other assorted fancy pastries. Larry began drooling at the sight of the chocolate cakes. The woman placed all the fresh cakes and pastries into Larry's special display case and departed.

Larry was beside himself with anticipation at wolfing down the cake. He grabbed one of them from the display case and sat down at the feasting table with a quart of milk poured into a tall glass. Larry told himself that he would only eat one of the large cakes. As he began eating the first bite, he knew that it would be impossible to stop at one cake. After an hour of gobbling down one of the cakes, he poured another quart of milk and set about eating the other cake. He felt bad that he wasn't able to save the cake for later, but it was too late. By noon, he had finished the other cake. Since it was lunch time, his favorite time of day, he began cooking again. He gathered meats from his refrigerators, which included 2 whole filet mignons, 3 whole chickens and a small turkey.

Larry put a pound of butter in the giant iron pan and dropped in the 2 filet mignon slabs. He put each of the chickens and turkey into their own high-speed convection ovens, which was easy, since the kitchen had 5 large ovens. As he slowly cooked the beef over a period of time, the chickens and turkey would be cooked quickly in the commercial ovens. Larry prepared gravy, stuffing, mushrooms, mashed potatoes, corn-on-the-cob, potato salad, macaroni salad and cole slaw. Larry really enjoyed cole slaw, because of the crispy crunchiness of the freshly grated cabbage. As Larry's taste buds tingled during his special lunch time, he regretted eating the 2nd chocolate cake. He considered calling the bakery for another one to be delivered, but it would take too long. The lunch time meal would be ready before the bakery could deliver a new cake. He would have to wait for the next day's cakes, which he believed were strawberry and lemon frosted. He couldn't keep track in his head which cakes were delivered when. He had a list of the delivery schedule somewhere.

It didn't matter to Larry that he ate the 2nd cake, because he still had unlimited amounts of ice cream and pastries for the lunch time dessert extravaganza. As the filet mignons cooked in the large iron pan, he couldn't resist slicing off tidbits of the sweet beef. He liked the filet to be cooked medium with butter permeating through and through. Larry liked butter almost as much as pork lard. The pure pork lard was hard to beat, though. Larry had been brought up eating pork lard and had remembered eating lard sandwiches as a 3-year old. He can still remember the sweetness of the lard oozing between his teeth as he bit into those sandwiches. Ah youth! The side dishes were almost ready and Larry assembled them on the table. The timers chimed and he removed the turkey and chickens from the ovens. It was time to eat!

He picked up one of the filet mignons and chomped into it like a rabid wolf. It was so good that he swallowed a large amount of drool along with the butter and meat juices. Larry was a heavy drooler from way back. He loved eating and his brain loved eating. The drool was a necessary part of the digestion process. He downed chicken legs and turkey legs in between the bites of beef and salad. The gravy was succulent on the stuffing and mashed potatoes. Larry liked to submerge the corncobs in a large container of melted butter, so that each corn kernel was soaked with the precious flavor-laden substance. By 2:00 pm, Larry was finished with the lunch time feast and for dessert, he swallowed a gallon of Neapolitan ice cream and a gallon of vanilla ice cream. He ate the ice cream with the dozen croissants, 6 of the fancy donuts and 2 dozen of the other fancy pastries.

He wanted to save the other 6 donuts and remaining dozen pastries for the dinner time dessert. At 3:00 pm, Larry lay down for his daily 3-hour nap. At 6:00, he was awakened by his alarm from a beautiful dream. He had been dreaming about eating the half pig that he had been roasting in the backyard since he woke up earlier that day. He was glad that he had remembered to start the pig early. One of Larry's butchers specialized in pork and always delivered to Larry the primest half hogs available. Larry nervously rushed outside to the succulent 50-pound half hog on the commercial roaster.

Larry removed the hog onto the cart and wheeled it through the back door of his kitchen. Larry's taste buds were trickling saliva as he dug into the pork. He preferred to eat the barbecued hog while standing and as animalistically as possible. He liked to pretend that he was trapped on a desert island with other savages as part of a savage tribe. He was the chief of the tribe and was the first savage to dive into the cooked pig. Since the hog was still hot from the barbecue, he wore those thin chef gloves to protect his hands from the heat. He gouged handfuls of meat from the hog and stuffed his face. He swallowed pound after pound of the juicy pork as he orgiastically feasted.

When Larry feasted on a barbecued hog, he became a wild animal. The drool poured out of his mouth onto his chin. He grunted and groaned strange sounds. His face, hands, neck and hair became covered with pork fibers, skin, gristle and barbecue sauce. As Larry tore out a section of the ribs, a great cracking sound was heard. When he ripped away the back leg containing the ham, a great deal of force was necessary to free the meat hunk from the carcass. When Larry had eaten as much as he could from the hog, he collapsed to the kitchen floor to catch his breath. After a few minutes, he got up and ambled to the display case for the donuts and pastries. The display case still had an apple pie and a cherry pie left over from the day before. For the dinner time dessert, he devoured the donuts, pastries, and day-old pies along with a quart of milk and a gallon of chocolate ice cream. Finally feeling full, Larry stumbled into the living room to reminisce about the day's eating binges. Tomorrow, he was going to try out his new turkey fryer to fry one of those 30-pounders just delivered by one of the butchers.

132. Felix's Aloofness



132. Felix's Aloofness

Felix didn't feel as if he were any more or less aloof and distant than any other cat. He was a typical cat that cared more about its next meal than anything else. It was his instinct; he couldn't help it. It wasn't in Felix's power to overwhelm nature; no one could - human or animal. Instinct was instinct. Actually, as Felix thought about it for a moment, he was actually more aloof than other cats; he simply chose not to show it. He was a cool cat. Factually, Felix cared more for the food given to him than the person who gave it to him. Felix was just as content gnawing on some rotten fish heads extricated from a garbage can, as he was when he ate some Little Friskies on a silver platter. He didn't really have a lot of experience eating food from a silver platter; it was just that one time with the Baldwin sisters.

Those 2 old hens were interesting to say the least. Felix had been milling around in an alley behind the seafood restaurant chewing on fresh fish guts when the kindly women discovered him from the sidewalk. He had been meowing loudly as he ate, which he always did when he was eating something particularly savory, when they heard him. The Baldwins shuffled down the alley to his rescue or what they thought was his rescue. To Felix, the Baldwins were more of an interruption than an answer to his prayer. As he gulped down than last bit of haddock liver, one of the hags scooped him up into her arms. "Oh you poor kitty!" she purred. The other woman said the same thing. Since the Baldwins were 2 spinster sisters who lived together their entire lives, they often spoke in similar phrasings.

Felix meowed his cutest meow at the women and they simultaneously said, "Awww!" Felix then began purring and rubbing his cheek on the woman who held him. The Baldwins took Felix home and smothered him with more kindness than he could bear. As with any human contact, Felix played his game for as long as he could stand it and then moved on. Even though he was eating the finest delicacies that any other cat would dream of eating, he had his limitations. Eating all his food from silver platters had a ginchiness to it, but it always added a metallic taste to the food. After a month of eating off the silver platters, Felix decided that he began to dislike it, no matter what food was on the platter.

At one of the many parties that were hosted by the Baldwins, Felix was allowed to sample some of the special punch served by the women. The ladies were known for their punch, which was formulated from a secret recipe handed down to them by their father. When Felix sipped some of the punch, he became unusually invigorated and started running around the large living room. He found himself more energetic than he thought possible and he started running on the sides of the couches and loveseats. He was running so fast that no one was able to catch him. Everyone thought he was going to run into someone or knock over something valuable. What he ended up doing was falling into the huge punch bowl and he splashed 6 of the people sitting and standing nearby.

Everyone at the party laughed hysterically at the sight of the cat in the punchbowl. After the party, the Baldwins attempted to wash the punch from Felix's fur by placing him in a large washbasin. Felix wouldn't have anything to do with being placed in any kind of water after being soaked in the punch. He preferred to dry off as usual and clean himself the way most cats clean themselves. As the women tried to lower him into the soapy water, he leaped from their wrinkled hands and bolted out the back screen door. He ran down the street and dried out most of the way in the warm air. When he reached the home of the Waltons, he was greeted by a bunch of bratty kids who all wanted to pick him up and hug him.

Felix wasn't the most huggable of cats, but in the current situation, he tolerated it for a while. As long as food was in the offing, he would put up with almost anything. The Waltons fed him well, very well. When they milked the cow in the morning, they gave him some of the fresh creamer milk before he ate breakfast. They always gave him tons of food scraps from the table, from breakfast, lunch and dinner. He ate so much that he began to get a little bit fat. The grandmother of the family always took extra care of Felix and gave him extra food. Felix underestimated the generosity of the grandmother on one day however, when he ate one of her blueberry pies that had been cooling on the windowsill.

The grandmother saw Felix standing over the empty pie pan with blueberries on his face and chased him around the house with her broom. Felix managed to stay one step ahead of the old lady for most of the jaunt, but ran into the grandfather who grabbed him by the tail. Felix bit the grandfather's hand and managed to escape and started running again, with the grandmother in hot pursuit. Felix ran into the kitchen and slid across the kitchen floor on some of the blueberries that fell from the windowsill while he was eating the pie. The grandmother was so concerned about shooing the cat with her broom that she didn't see the blueberries on the floor. She slid across the floor and smashed into the icebox. The icebox door flew open and a huge block of ice plummeted toward her face. Felix reacted just in time to deflect the ice chunk with his foot.

The ice smashed on the kitchen floor next to the grandmother's face. Some of the other family members rushed to the scene to see Felix licking the grandmother's face. The grandmother immediately forgave Felix for eating the blueberry pie and allowed him to eat the apple pie that was cooling on the windowsill. The grandfather thought that the grandmother spoiled the cat, but she didn't care. After 2 months with the Waltons, one of the children started sneezing and coughing for an unknown reason. The child's eyes got red and teary whenever she was petting Felix. The doctor determined that the child had an allergy to cats. The family was heartbroken but Felix had to go. The Waltons gave Felix to the Cleavers who lived down the road. Beaver Cleaver was the younger of 2 brothers and the cat became his pet to take care of.

Felix didn't care who his owner was as long as he was fed regularly. Since he was still fat from eating too much At the Waltons' house, Beaver was told to limit how much food he gave to

Felix. Since Felix had been used to eating so much at the Waltons' house, he wanted more food than Beaver was giving him. Felix expressed his disgust with the reduced food quantity by making a point of pooping next to the food dish if Beaver didn't put enough food in it. In 3 days, Felix had trained Beaver into giving him as much food as he wanted. Even though he ate as much as he wanted, Felix began losing weight. Beaver only fed Felix actual cat food, which was lower in calories than the rich milk and table scraps given to him by the Walton family. Beaver brought Felix to school one day for Show-and-Tell. The cat was well behaved at first, but when one of the other kids introduced their pet badger to the class, things got ugly.

Felix didn't know why, but he hated badgers. He had never seen a badger before that day, but he just knew that he didn't like it. Felix had no problems with most other cats and dogs, but that badger was a bother. There seemed to be an unspoken conversation between the badger and Felix and when the 2 animals were close enough to each other, they went at it like Frazier and Ali. Felix scratched the badger's face and the badger bit Felix's ears. Felix bit the badger's eyebrows and the badger bit Felix's tail. Beaver and the badger owner tried to separate the animals, but became scratched and bitten during their failed attempts. The teacher yelled at the students to separate the fighting animals, but no one could do it. After 11 minutes of attempting to split the badger and the cat, every student in the classroom had been bitten or scratched by the badger or the cat or by both fighting demons.

The teacher ran screaming down the hallway to the Principal's office for help. The Principal was allergic to cats and didn't want to get near Felix. The Principal called the Animal Control Officer, who didn't show up for another 22 minutes. In the meantime, Felix and the badger were starting to get tired from their brawling. When the animal guy walked into the classroom with his burlap bag and snare, Felix bolted out through the doorway, down the hall and outside. Felix ran and ran until he met up with little Cindy Brady who was playing hopscotch on the sidewalk in front of her house. It was 2:00 pm and she had just gotten home from school. Cindy fell in love with Felix at first sight and scooped him up into her arms. Since Felix was hungry, he began purring and rubbing his cheek on Cindy's face. He was irresistible.

She ran into the house and asked the maid if she could keep the cat. Cindy said, "Can I, can I, oh please can I?" The maid told Cindy that it wasn't up to her if Cindy could keep the cat or not. The maid said that Cindy would have to ask her mother or father. Cindy's father was at the office, so Cindy ran upstairs with Felix to ask her mother. Cindy's mother took one look at Felix and said that of course Cindy could keep the cute kitty. Cindy would have to feed and water the cat and clean the litter box. When Cindy heard that, she paused to think for a moment. Felix looked at Cindy with his cutest expression and Cindy agreed. Cindy took Felix to the kitchen and gave him a saucer of milk. Felix loved milk, especially if it was whole milk like the Waltons gave him. Since the Brady family was diet conscious, they only used fat-free milk. Felix reluctantly drank the lesser milk, because he was so thirsty from fighting with the badger.

Since the Bradys didn't have a cat, they had no cat food, litter box or litter. Cindy's mother instructed the maid to go buy the necessary items. Along the way back from the store, the maid stopped at the butcher shop to chat with her boyfriend the butcher. The butcher loved cats and gave the maid an assortment of meat scraps for the cat to snack on. When the maid returned home with the cat supplies and the box of meat scraps, she put the stuff on the counter and exited from the kitchen. Felix caught a whiff of the meat scraps and leaped from the floor to the counter in one movement. Cindy had been in the kitchen drinking a glass of milk and eating cookies and she walked over to pet Felix. Felix began wolfing down the meat scraps as fast as he could. There was some choice food in that box.

Obviously, since the butcher was the maid's boyfriend, he had been overly generous with the amount of meat that he had given to his girlfriend for the cat. Felix ate too much too quickly and as Cindy attempted to pick him up from the counter to pet him, he vomited partially digested meat pieces on her face, hair, shoulders and down the front of her pretty little dress. Before Cindy was able to put Felix back down on the counter, the cat had barfed on her pretty little patent leather shoes. Her shoes must have been almost new, because they were really shiny. Cindy began screaming and as she dropped him onto the counter, Felix knocked the box of meat onto the floor. He jumped down from the counter and resumed wolfing down the meat scraps that had spilled out onto the kitchen floor. Cindy screamed and screamed.

The maid ran into the kitchen and laughed when she saw all the meat barf covering the spoiled little brat Cindy. The maid had waited a long time for that moment. The maid always felt that those Brady kids were spoiled. As Cindy continued screaming, her mother ran into the kitchen. When Cindy's mother saw her daughter screaming, vomit-covered and crying, she began crying as well. The fact that Cindy's mother began crying made the maid laugh all the harder. Cindy's mother looked at the maid laughing and slapped her face. The wedding ring on the slapping hand scratched the maid's face. The maid touched her face and noted a trickle of blood, which enraged the maid. The maid jumped on Cindy's mother and tackled her to the kitchen floor almost landing on Felix. Felix was witnessing his first catfight between humans and he didn't like it. He bolted out the back door into the yard and then onto the sidewalk next to the street.

As Felix trotted merrily along with his belly full of meat, a scrawny Deputy Sheriff pulled up next to him in a squad car. The Deputy got out of his car and walked to Felix on the sidewalk. The Deputy picked up Felix and began petting him. Felix started his purring motor and the Deputy fell in love. Felix thought to himself, "It works every time!" The Deputy drove with Felix to the Sheriff station to show the cat to the Sheriff who was sleeping behind his desk. When the Sheriff woke from his nap and saw Felix on the desk, he also fell in love. The Sheriff said, "Wait until Aunt Bea sees this cat; she's gonna love him!" The Deputy looked at the Sheriff with quizzical eyes. The Deputy stated that he had found the stray cat and that the cat was his.

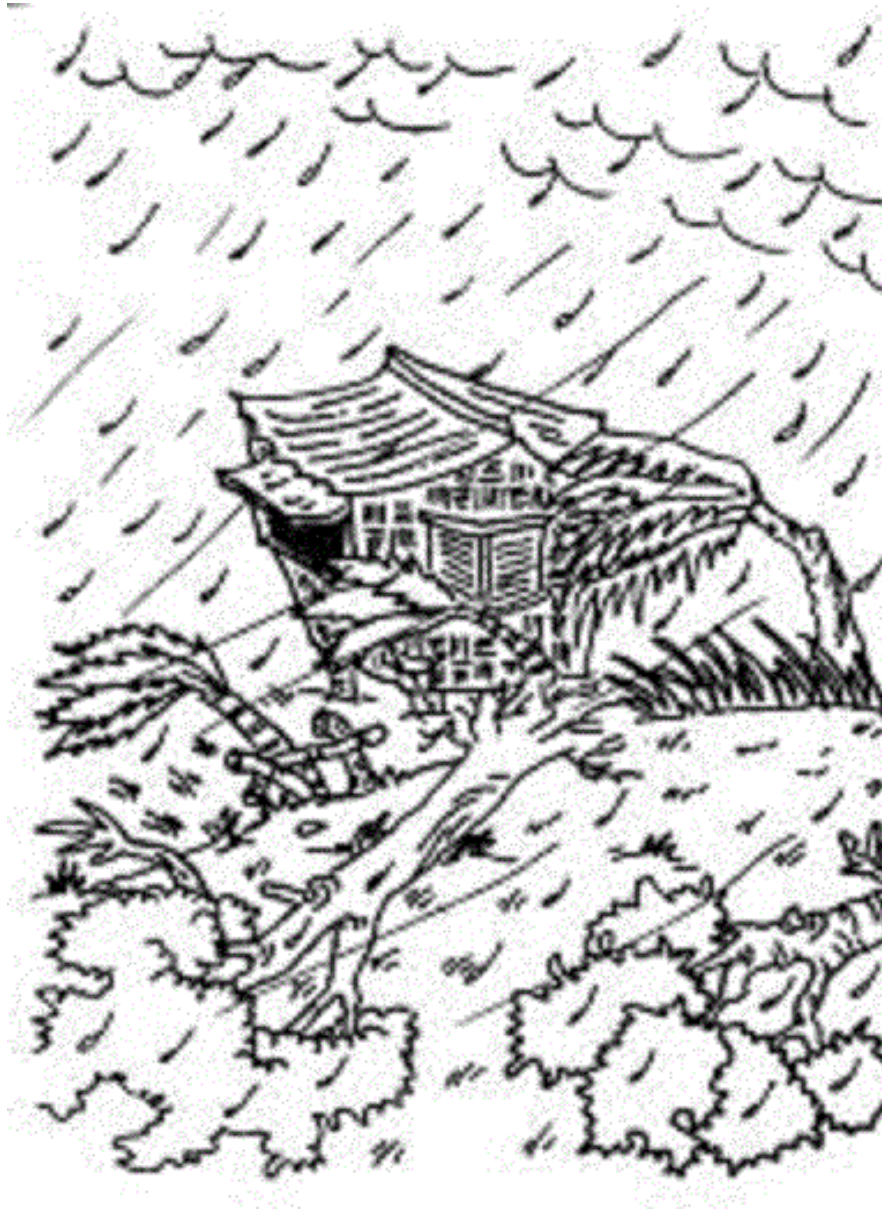
The Sheriff didn't see it that way and told the Deputy that if he wanted to continue working for him as his Deputy, the Deputy would let him have the cat. As the Deputy reached for his gun, the Sheriff smacked the Deputy on the wrist. The Sheriff laughed and reminded the Deputy that the gun wasn't loaded anyway. The Sheriff then slapped the Deputy's face and spat on his face. The Deputy began crying and said that he was sorry for wanting the cat. The Deputy agreed that the cat would be perfect for Aunt Bea. She would take care of it the way it deserved to be taken care of. The Sheriff agreed and said he was sorry for slapping and spitting on the Deputy's face. The Deputy accepted the Sheriff's apology and punched the Sheriff in the stomach. Then the Deputy stomped on the Sheriff's foot. "Now, we're even!" said the Deputy.

When Felix arrived at Aunt Bea's house, the woman had just removed a cherry pie from the oven. Aunt Bea was famous for her cherry pies. As she placed the pie on the counter, she noticed Felix being brought into the kitchen in the Sheriff's arms. Her eyes immediately lit up at the sight of Felix. The Sheriff handed Felix to Aunt Bea, who hugged and kissed him as if he were a baby. Aunt Bea loved all animals, especially cats. Felix had a beautiful fur coloration that gave him a unique appearance that everyone seemed to take a shine to. As Aunt Bea caressed the cat, the Sheriff put some cream in a dish on the counter next to the still-hot cherry pie. Aunt Bea put Felix down on the counter to sample some of the cream. As Felix gorged on the sumptuous cream, he eyed the pie. He must have appeared to still be thirsty, because Aunt Bea poured some more cream into the dish.

The Sheriff went into the living room and as Aunt Bea returned the cream to the refrigerator, Felix began munching on the cherry pie. Even though it was still hot, it was incredibly good. Felix could see why Aunt Bea had such a reputation for her cherry pies. At the sight of Felix eating her freshly baked pie, Aunt Bea began screaming and carrying on. The Sheriff ran into the kitchen to check on the noise. Felix managed to finish most of the pie before the Sheriff reached him. Felix darted down the counter toward a vase filled with flowers and water. He knocked the vase over and it crashed onto the kitchen floor with a splash of water. As Felix continued scurrying along the counter tops, he continued knocking things onto the floor.

Felix knocked over the toaster, toaster oven, blender, mixer, microwave oven a set of ceramic canisters and another vase full of flowers and water. The large amount of debris and water on the kitchen floor caused the typically agile Sheriff to slip and fall. He fell onto the bottom of the shrieking Aunt Bea's long skirt, knocking her to the floor. As the Sheriff and Aunt Bea voiced obscenities at Felix, he decided that he had already worn out his welcome. Felix ran out the back door into the yard, down the path and onto the sidewalk next to the street. As he scampered with his belly full of cherry pie and cream, he encountered an ornately painted school bus with the words "The Partridge Family" painted on it. The bus stopped next to him and a redheaded kid emerged. The kid's name was Danny and he picked up Felix into his arms. Felix's purring was too irresistible even to Danny, who really was more of a dog-person than a cat-person.

133. Mikhail's Tempest



133. Mikhail's Tempest

There are so many emotions that an innocent child has to deal with from the moment of birth. Additional emotional challenges attack the little kid as he or she ages, learns and struggles to survive. Acceptance is something that most people want and sometimes never get. Being accepted by one's peers as part of the gang or group drives many people to the brink of insanity as they attempt and usually fail to become part of the crowd.

Admiration affects almost all of us when we foolishly admire someone simply because they are taller or prettier or stronger, etc. So many kids admire people of their same age and older for all the wrong reasons. If only babies were given a book of understanding that would explain the world to them, things could be great. It's always funny how a kid will admire a gang member who became a superstar sports celebrity, without ever knowing the celebrity's background. How many times have inner city youth pressured their parents to buy them those latest basketball sneakers, for the only reason that the ex-gang banger was wearing them in a commercial on TV?

Probably the easiest thing for any average person is to be angry with someone for some reason. Sometimes, usually all too often, somebody irks you for the littlest thing. Mikhail always hated it when someone arbitrarily put on extra melted butter onto the microwaved popcorn. It can throw unexpectedly unstable individuals into a blind rage to the point of damaging another person, for the seemingly innocent reason of putting too much butter on the popcorn. Understandably, some people like butter on popcorn for the creamy milky taste, but along with the good stuff, sometimes comes the excessive saltiness. How many times have we all seen on the local news how someone damaged someone else because they put too much butter on the popcorn? Why does that uncaring paper deliver person insist on throwing the newspaper at the end of the driveway or worse on the lawn? Mikhail explicitly stated in the delivery contract that he wanted the paper placed in the little holder thingy under the mailbox next to the front door.

As probably many people can attest, there aren't many things more exciting than the delivery to your door of that thing you ordered online. You set up the delivery notifications with UPS and/or FEDEX to email/text or notify you of the goings on of the transportation of the precious product. They said it was going to be delivered on Tuesday and all of a sudden, some weather thing happened and the demons had an excuse to deliver the product at a later date. Let's face it; those delivery companies always wait in Earnest for weather to get ugly, just so they can say that the product will be delivered later than expected as a result of weather.

Anxiety plagues us while watching a bird feeder with the chickadees, titmice and cardinals ravenously feeding and then along comes the evil hawk, swooping down on the innocents for a quick afternoon snack. Why do those pesky hawks have to harass the songbirds? Don't those menacing prey birds have anything else to eat like mice, crows, snakes, rats and other hawks? Give the birds a break already. Nothing irks and aggravates a birdwatcher more than the

possibility of a prey bird snatching one of the innocents on the feeder. Even though the little feathered creatures attempt to be vigilant against the evil hawks, sooner or later, a chickadee becomes a hawk meal.

Mikhail was astonished that Mrs. Kravitz brought him that plum pie the other afternoon. Obviously, he was grateful and thankful for the treat, because he loved plums. Mikhail often wondered after that event of many months ago exactly why the old hag even brought him the pie. Mikhail was never one to turn down free homemade pies. Who in their right minds would? However, there was something especially odd about the way that Mrs. Kravitz winked when she handed over the pie. Mikhail dismissed any weirdness related to the incident and hungrily devoured the pie with the assistance of a quart of whole milk. Normally Mikhail drank fat-free milk, but for some odd reason, the milkman mistakenly delivered whole milk on that day.

Mikhail remembered being so calm when the doctor gave him those dreaded results. The results were dreaded for the only reason that they seemed to be so important at the time. It's funny how things are important at the time. Sometimes, we hear about people in distress for one reason or another and we only elicit the recommended amount of care for the person. However, the tide turns when a similarly distressing situation happens to us. Now all of a sudden, the thing matters, if for no other reason than it was happening to us and not to someone else. Life is funny that way, in too many ways. Mikhail was calm when the doctor gave me the results because he had been researching my ailment for a while on the internet. Apparently, the disease that afflicted Mikhail only bothered about 1 in 973,634 people. Mikhail laughed when he heard that result, because it was typical for a scientist to be so exacting with their published results. The scientist could have just as easily said approximately 1 in a million people.

Confidence is one of the most necessary emotions that a person requires to get by in the world. Those Olympic athletes who know that they can jump that distance or swim that pool in record time have more confidence than the average Joe can imagine. Mikhail was happy enough to be confident in his ability to complete mowing his lawn without having to go the bathroom. It wasn't easy becoming one of those feeble old dodsters in the neighborhood. Everybody expects everybody else to take care of their own property, no matter how they have to do it. Mikhail was always too cheap to pay some lawn company to cut the lawn and trim the edges, etc. Why should he pay somebody to do it? Mikhail was relatively confident that he would be able to mow the lawn, trim the edges and pick up the debris without too much ado. Lo and behold however, his confidence in his abilities had let him down, when he came down with an unexpected poop attack at the far reaches of his property. Mikhail farted, then pissed and then ultimately and unfortunately pooped in his favorite summer work shorts.

It took a lot of courage to do much of anything in the current times. It seemed that anytime you put on the news or picked up the paper, there was something crazy going on somewhere being

perpetrated by some wacko who had nothing better to do. Either somebody was gypping people out of their due coupon refunds at the Winn-Dixie or somebody else was giving customers the incorrect change at the gas station. It took courage to get onto the highway to go to work or just to drop the kids off at school. Courageous people were everywhere standing in the roads directing traffic and delivering newspapers on their bicycles. It required immense courage for some of those older, sloppy women to go food shopping in their tight pants that were one size too small and stretching at the seams. Sometimes, it was possible to see a bit of wrinkled butt crack peaking out from the top of those tight pants that were beginning to slip down.

Mikhail found it cruel of people to walk their dogs down his street and allow the dogs to piss and poop on the front of his lawn at the road. Even though the friendly fools carried a plastic bag to help pick up the poop pile, there was always piss left behind in his specially manicured lawn. Mikhail had invested a load of time and money in making his lawn into the greenest and thickest lawn in his neighborhood. It was perhaps the jealousy of those cruel neighbors that prompted them into training their canines to befoul his grass. On some days when Mikhail was on his lawn trimming this or that, the cruel neighbors still allowed their dogs to poison his lawn, while Mikhail was in plain view. How cruel can some people be? That poor grass never did any harm to anyone. The last thing it needed was dog piss on it. The owners of the cats of the neighborhood were even crueler in the way that they sneakily let their cats out at night to run around pissing and pooping on the lawns. Everyone knew how cat piss was even more toxic to lawns than dog piss.

It depressed Mikhail when he bought those stupid lottery tickets every day and never won the big prize. He always bought a few of those low prize tickets that rewarded him with free tickets, just to keep him in the gambling game. He didn't want to slip too far down emotionally just because he wasted a few dollars on senseless gambling that never paid off. It was depressing enough to watch those fat guys running up and down his street in the summer with their shirts off. Why couldn't they run with their shirts on? Do they think people want to see their fat jingling and jangling all over the place? Once when Mikhail was retrieving his paper from the end of the driveway, where it wasn't supposed to be, one of those fat guys ran by as Mikhail was bending over to get the paper. The motion of bending increased the pressure on the ever-present gas in Mikhail's bowels and he farted. The fat guy heard the fart, started laughing and farted himself. Mikhail turned his head to see a poop stain seeping through the fat guy's sweaty running pants.

The sight of the fat guy's poop stain so disgusted Mikhail that he screamed out loud. The fat guy turned his head and then turned back again to continue his trot. Mikhail thought how disgusting some people were. He imagined that fat guy continuing to run with the poop staining his underwear and running pants. The guy probably didn't even know what had happened. The fat guy will probably run home, grab a quick drink and sit down in his favorite chair. That action will definitely leave a poop stain on the chair. Then the buffoon will go upstairs to take a shower

and throw the filthy underwear and running pants on the bathroom floor, thus staining the floor as well. Mikhail didn't know why thinking about the disgusting fat guy disgusted him; it simply did. Life surely wasn't easy.

Mikhail envied the guy across the street in the big house who had that fancy sports car along with the pickup truck, camper and boat. Mikhail always wondered if that guy had won the lottery and then was able to buy the house. The house was worth at least twice as much as Mikhail's. The guy always had friends visiting who also had fancy cars. Mikhail didn't know much about the guy except that he was from another state. Mikhail wished that he had all that nice stuff that the guy had, but then realized that if the guy hadn't won the lottery, maybe the stuff was the result of a lot of hard work at the guy's job, whatever that was. Mikhail concluded that if the only way to have a lot of nice stuff was to work hard for it in the first place, he didn't want it. Mikhail was happy sitting back in his humble home, collecting his retirement checks and social security. It seemed that envy was something that was shallow and required more thought.

Mikhail's greatest fear was being bitten again by one of the neighborhood dogs, as he worked in his yard. It had happened twice already and he was becoming more and more nervous about being in his yard. He had adopted the habit of buying one of those long handled cattle prods that looked just like a cane. He carried it with him everywhere outside. It was cumbersome, but it gave him the ability to overcome his dog fear. His job as a letter carrier had exposed him to many a dog and had resulted in a few dog bites along the way, but those bites were minor, nips really. The 2 times that he had been mauled while on his lawn were more serious. The first incident resulted in the loss of the tip of the little toe on his right foot. The 2nd dog bite had resulted in the complete removal of the bunny tattoo that Mikhail had on his left butt cheek. Both dogs were never seen again, because their owners moved away. Mikhail didn't believe in suing people, even though many people had assured him of easy money.

When the hurricane hit Mikhail's area, it was a time of many emotions. At first, Mikhail felt the anxiety of worrying if he would survive the storm. The winds pounded the boarded windows of his house and he could hear branches and other thing hitting the roof. The rain was torrential and it seemed that it would never end. In the middle of the night, the power went out and everything was black. Luckily, Mikhail had a flashlight, but the batteries were weak and only lasted for the 3 hours until dawn. When he stepped outside, he was happy that the storm was gone but saddened by the sights and sounds of his neighborhood. Roofs and sidings were ravaged. Branches, limbs and trees were lying everywhere like Lincoln logs. People were walking up and down the littered street crying and blubbering at their losses. Mikhail was confused why the people were walking down the street in the first place. Shouldn't those people be at their homes cleaning up?

As Mikhail proceeded to clean up the litter from his property, that fat guy came running down the

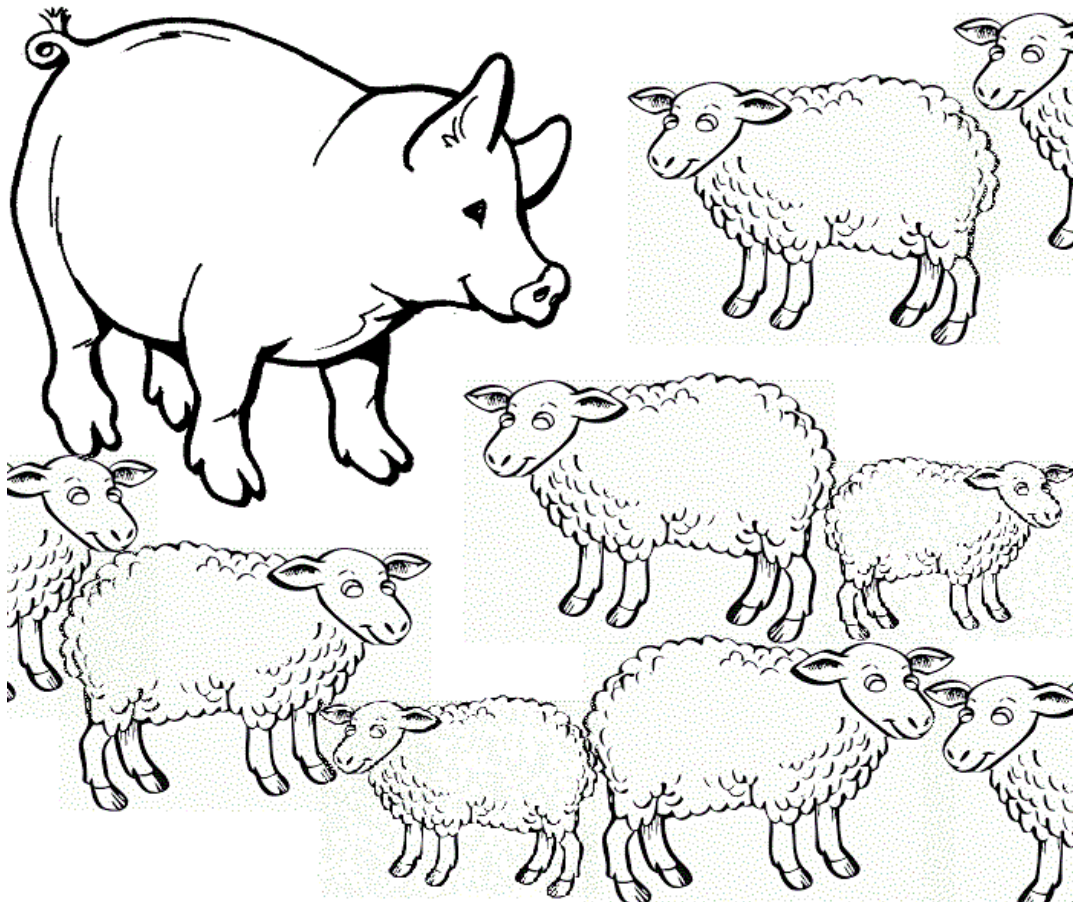
street with his shirt off again. Shouldn't he be cleaning up his digs? What was he doing? Didn't he see the strife and suffering that abounded? What nerve! Mikhail yelled something at the fat guy, which made him redirect his running path toward Mikhail. Mikhail was surprised that the fat guy heard him and then he was afraid that something bad was about to happen. Even though the running guy was fat, sloppy and generally filthy looking, he was younger than Mikhail by at least 2 decades. Mikhail reached down to the ground for a branch. He forgot his cattle prod in the house. The fat guy continued running at Mikhail until he skidded to a stop just in front of Mikhail. To Mikhail's amazement, the fat guy hugged and then kissed him. The fat guy laughed, turned and continued running down the street.

The guy across the street looked with horror at his big house and vehicles, all of which were destroyed by the 3 large oak trees that fell. Mikhail always wondered what would happen if one of those trees ever fell. Mikhail's house and car were untouched by the hurricane. Mikhail saw the guy crying across the street and decided to walk over to console him. As Mikhail crossed the street, the guy went into his house and released his Great Dane out the front door of the wasted house. The dog made a beeline for Mikhail. Mikhail shrieked, turned and attempted to run back to the safety of his house. Mikhail had the cattle prod in there that would make the giant dog bow down, if he could only get there in time. Mikhail continued screaming as he ran, loud enough for the shirtless fat guy to hear from down the street.

The fat guy turned around, increased his pace from a jog to a run and approached the rampaging Great Dane that was closing in on Mikhail. Mikhail was about 30 feet from his front door when the Great Dane leaped into the air for the attack. The fat guy arrived in time to grab the giant airborne dog and knock it to the lawn, just before it reached Mikhail. Mikhail made it into his house and grabbed the cattle prod that was just inside the front door. Mikhail ran out into the lawn where the fat guy and the dog were really going at it. The fat guy was biting the dog and the dog was biting the fat guy. They rolled back and forth across the lawn. The guy across the street yelled in Mikhail's direction to not hurt his dog. Can you believe that guy? The guy ran toward Mikhail's house.

Mikhail inserted the cattle prod into the pile of fat guy and Great Dane, hoping to make contact with the dog, but only managed to shock the fat guy's bare skin. The fat guy squealed from the pain and roared at Mikhail to shock the dog, not him. Mikhail insisted that he was trying, but it was difficult from all the movement. As the fat guy and dog rolled across the lawn, they knocked Mikhail to the ground. The guy from across the street arrived and yanked the cattle prod from Mikhail's geriatric grip. Mikhail found himself in the middle of the fray with the fat guy and the Great Dane. Mikhail began biting anything near his mouth, including the dog and the fat guy. The fat guy did the same. The Great Dane bit both of the men repeatedly and gleely growled with each drooling bite. The guy from across the street chortled and began jabbing Mikhail and the fat guy with the electrifying cattle prod.

134. Paul's Sheep



134. Paul's Sheep

When Paul awoke that morning, he immediately hoofed over to the slop trough, which was overflowing with fresh slop. The farmer who owned Paul, Pasquale, took very good care of all the animals on the farm, especially the 3,000-odd sheep. The 3 dogs that herded the sheep from pasture to pasture were just as valuable as the sheep. Paul was born as the only pig of his litter to a young sow. Being the only pig, Paul suckled all the milk and ended up being much stouter and healthier than a typical pig of his age. Pasquale's wife, Palma, provided the slop each morning, which consisted of all the food scraps and other extra goodies that were lying around.

As Paul ate from the slop trough with his head buried deep within it, he recalled the dream that he had during the night. In his dream, Paul had somehow been given the gift of speech. His speech sounded like typical pig squeals, such as, "Ree! Ree!" The humans or animals that heard him squealing somehow understood what he was saying. When Pasquale came to the barn to check on the progress of Paul's eating, the farmer muttered something to the cow. He said, "Good morning Daisy!" The cow mooed back at the farmer. Then Pasquale said hello to the mule. As Paul gorged himself, he listened to what Pasquale was saying to the other farm animals. Paul felt that he could somehow say the same words as in his dream.

When Pasquale approached Paul and said, "Good morning Paul," Paul said, "Ree! Ree! Ree!" A stunned Pasquale said to Paul, "What?" Paul repeated his phrase. Pasquale stuttered and said, "Are, are y-you t-talking Paul?" Pasquale heard Paul's, "Ree! Ree! Ree!" as, "Good morning Paul!" Paul had simply repeated the words that Pasquale had said to him. Pasquale couldn't believe his ears. Pasquale again asked Paul, "Are you talking Paul?" Paul said, "Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree!" "Holy Smokes!" exclaimed Pasquale. Paul said, "Ree! Ree!" As Paul continued gorging on the slop, Pasquale ran to the house to fetch Palma. Pasquale returned to the barn with Palma and instructed Palma to ask Paul a question. Palma asked Paul, "How much is 2 plus 2?" Paul said, "Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree!" Palma fainted and fell face first into a pile of horse poop. Pasquale was too flabbergasted by Paul's talking to help his wife.

Pasquale asked Paul more questions and determined that Paul could only imitate what people were saying. It didn't seem that Paul was capable of uttering his own words. Pasquale ran back to the house to get the family bible. Pasquale returned to the barn with the bible and found that Palma had awakened from her fainting spell. She had horse poop stains on her face, but didn't seem to notice. She continued saying things to Paul. Pasquale told Palma to pause from her line of questioning for a moment, because he wanted to read to Paul from the bible. Pasquale reasoned that if Paul knew more words of English, he would be able to speak independently. Palma agreed with Pasquale's idea and the 2 of them read to Paul for the next hour. Pasquale was correct in his assumption, because when Pasquale and Palma stopped reading to Paul from the bible, Paul said, "Ree! Ree! Ree!" which Pasquale and Palma heard as "Please keep reading!"

Upon hearing Paul, Pasquale and Palma both fainted to the ground. Paul merrily kept on eating his slop as fast as he could get it down. At the moment that Paul finished the remnants of the slop that spilled out of the trough onto the dirt, Pasquale and Palma simultaneously became conscious. Paul barked to them, "Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree!" which they heard as, "Give me more slop!" Palma ran to the house to fetch more slop. Pasquale stood there looking at Paul, who looked back at him. The 2 stared at each other silently until Palma returned with a 5-gallon bucket of various food entities. Pasquale poured the slop into Paul's trough and the pig resumed consuming the succulent morsels of slop.

Pasquale and palm returned to the house with dazed looks on their faces. They talked about Paul for the remainder of the day. The next day, Pasquale visited the barn with extra slop for Paul. When Paul was done eating, Pasquale decided to take Paul with him to the sheep flock where the 3 dogs were already at work. The enormous flock of sheep that Pasquale tended required many acres of grassy land for the sheep to eat. Since the sheep mowed the grass down so short, they had to be moved from pasture to pasture to prevent them from killing the grass. Pasquale had Paul standing next to him at the edge of the flock. Pasquale yelled out commands to the dogs and Paul paid attention to the goings on. Paul found it curious how only 3 dogs were able to control and herd so many sheep. Paul reckoned that the sheep were timid creatures that could be easily manipulated.

After 30 minutes or so of watching, Paul figured that he could probably do what the dogs were doing. Just as Pasquale was about to instruct Paul to join the dogs, Paul was already off and running. Paul couldn't believe how fast he was able to run. He had been cooped up in the barn for the entire 2 months of life and never truly stretched his legs. Paul's only pig of the litter strength and gusto amazed both Pasquale and the 3 sheep dogs. Paul was a running fool! Initially, Pasquale thought it was hilarious to see that little pig sprinting around the pasture dodging in and out, but then he became awed by the spectacle. Paul worked flawlessly with the other 3 dogs and was actually faster than they were! The hooves on Paul's pig feet made it easier for him to dig into the ground and utilize his momentum without ever slipping. Paul was approximately the same size as the sheep dogs, only more solid.

Pasquale continued to feed Paul heavily and use him in the fields to help with the sheep herding. As time passed, Paul grew larger, faster and stronger. In a month, Paul had doubled in size and was larger than any of the dogs. After another month, Paul had become a mass of 300 pounds of solid running fury. On one herding occasion, Paul accidentally ran over one of the sheep dogs and knocked it unconscious. On the next day, Paul ran over another one of the dogs. As Paul got bigger, his agility suffered slightly, even though he was still capable of outrunning any of Pasquale's horses. After another week, Paul had run over the 3rd sheep dog and they all had to rest in the house to recover with their concussions. By that point, the sheep were so petrified of Paul in the pasture that Paul was able to fully control the flock of 3,000 single-handedly.

Paul liked to mess with the sheep when he was herding them by saying, "Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree! Ree!" which the sheep heard as, "Hey you with the curly hair!" Of course, all the sheep had curly hair and they all looked over at Paul to see what he wanted. Pasquale got a big kick out of that bit of Paul goofing around. Sometimes though, when the sheep all turned their heads at once, they collided into each other and went tumbling all over the pasture like a bunch of bowling pins. When that happened, Paul laughed hysterically at the sheep, which he found to be far inferior to him. Pasquale didn't find it as funny as Paul did, because occasionally the sheep sprained their ankles or sustained other minor injuries. It was all in a day's work for Paul, though. The way Paul saw it, if he was going to be out in those fields all day, he had to have some entertainment, even if it had to be at the expense of the lowly sheep.

By the time Paul had reached 400 pounds, he had injured all the sheep dogs repeatedly, to the point that they were doing more time recuperating in the house than helping with the sheep. The dogs banded together one day and had a serious discussion about how Paul had ruined their lives on the farm. That huge pig had essentially taken over their jobs and injured them to boot. The dogs decided to do something about putting Paul out of their misery. Since Paul was so massive and dangerous, the dogs as individuals wouldn't stand a chance against him in a fight. The dogs came up with a plan of somehow disabling Paul to the point that they and the sheep would possibly be able to trample him into submission. The dogs wanted to convince Paul to stop being a sheep herding pig and to go back to being a big fat pig that just happened to be able to talk.

On the day that the dogs planned to go into action, Pasquale rounded them all up and sold them to 3 different owners to use as house pets. The dogs were dumbfounded and generally upset that Pasquale had obviously favored Paul over them. Pasquale acted as most farmers in his neck of the woods and treated sheep dogs as tools and if the tools became useless, he had to get rid of them. Paul chuckled when he saw the dogs leaving the farm and was glad to see them go. Paul and the sheep dogs never really got along very well from the first day that Paul went out herding with them. The dogs always resented the fact that a pig was taking their jobs as sheepherders. Paul never got very friendly with the dogs, because he felt they were inferior to him. To Paul, the dogs were just one-step above the sheep in the hierarchy of the farm.

As time went by, Paul grew to 500 pounds and was eating vast quantities of slop each day. He had to eat more food than a typical pig of his size, due to the amount of energy that he expended chasing the sheep flock all day, every day. Even though the sheep respected and feared Paul, Paul still had to do a lot of running around. Pasquale felt that Paul's upkeep was approximately equal to the upkeep of the 3 previous sheep dogs that he had sold. The money that Pasquale spent on dog food was converted into Purina Hog Chow, which Paul ate by the bagful. Pasquale was no fool, since he had been farming sheep for so many years and fully realized the added value of using Paul to herd the sheep. Since Paul was able to talk to the sheep, the sheep appeared to listen to him better than they listened to the barks of the dogs. Paul seemed to have a

way with the sheep, of which no ordinary sheep dogs were capable.

When Pasquale sold the dogs to the other families, they all asked why he was selling the formerly prized herding animals. When Pasquale told them that he had a huge speedy pig herding his sheep flock in place of the dogs, they all wanted to see Paul in action. In no time at all, Paul became the talk of the town in those parts. People soon came from all over the county to observe the spectacle of the enormous fast-running pig chasing after the sheep. Many sheep farmers offered to buy Paul from Pasquale, even offering many times Paul's value in pork. A typical hog sold for about \$1 per pound on the open market and farmers were offering the equivalent of 3-5 times that amount for Paul, to be used as a shepherd, in place of their own sheep dogs.

Pasquale knew the true value of Paul to be at least \$10-20 per pound, especially because of his talking ability, which no one knew of outside Pasquale's family. Palma had been instructed by Pasquale to never reveal Paul's talking ability to anyone. Somehow, Paul instinctively knew to be quiet when anyone other than Pasquale or Palma was watching him. Paul felt that his talking ability needed to be kept a secret at all costs. He was right. If anyone knew that Paul could talk, he might be stolen from the farm. As much of a spectacle and amazement as Paul was at herding sheep, Paul's ability to talk would make him a priceless creature. Pasquale grew to appreciate Paul more and more as time went by, even though Paul's appetite kept growing. Paul was at the point of eating twice the amount of food that a typical pig of his size would eat. It was the fact that he required the extra food to supply him with the energy for chasing the sheep around.

Each morning, Paul would ask Pasquale for more and more slop and Pasquale could barely keep up with Paul's demands. When Paul was done eating an entire huge trough full of slop, he would immediately ask for more, causing Palma to scrounge around the house for something edible. When Paul tipped the scale at 600 pounds, Pasquale was beginning to think about how to feed the beast. As valuable as Paul was, the giant pig's feeding bills were continually increasing. Pasquale began to add more and more milk to Paul's daily slop, which Paul didn't notice at first. After a week of eating the newly diluted slop, Paul began getting excessively flatulent and started to get diarrhea. Pigs typically had poop of variable consistency and Pasquale wasn't too concerned about the runniness of Paul's poop. Paul complained one day that he was getting intestinal cramps and he thought it might be from the slop. Pasquale pretended that he didn't know what Paul was talking about.

Paul's flatulence and diarrhea continued and Paul finally spoke up about it. Paul contended that Pasquale was intentionally watering down the slop with milk and that the extra milk was upsetting his gastrointestinal tract. Pasquale wondered where Paul had heard the word "gastrointestinal" before, but figured that Paul must have heard a visiting farmer say it. Pasquale reluctantly admitted to Paul that he had been adding extra milk to Paul's slop, simply because he was having a hard time coming up with enough food to feed him. Paul laughed and demanded

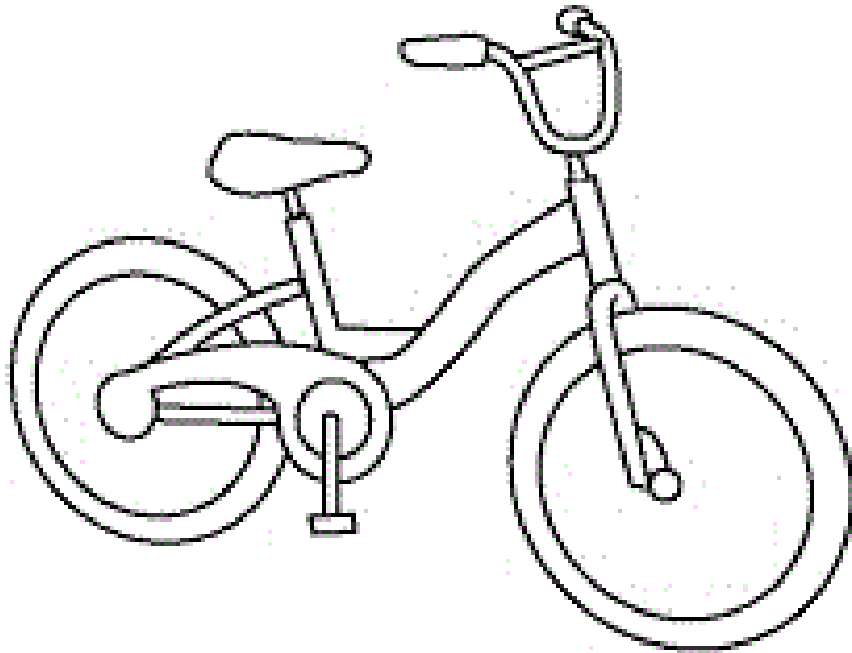
more real food, such as meat. Paul was tired of eating the remnants of food and other animal type processed foods such as the Purina Hog Chow. Paul wanted meat. Pasquale never imagined that an animal like a pig would ever think of eating meat, because it didn't seem natural. Paul wanted to eat meat and that was all there was to it. Paul threatened to leave Pasquale's farm and go to live at another farm where he would be appreciated and probably be able to eat all the meat he wanted.

Pasquale thought about it for a little while and concluded that maybe Paul was correct. It might be that because Paul was so large and needed so much energy to run around all day, he needed more protein to supply his daily energy requirements. The typical diet fed to hogs might be insufficient for Paul to be happy. Typical hogs just stayed in their pens all day, gaining weight and expending little energy in the process. Since Paul was so big, his protein intake wasn't keeping up with his energy output. Pasquale immediately went into town and bought a processed boneless half-cow from the butcher. Paul licked his lips when he spotted the beef being barrowed over to him by Pasquale. Before Pasquale could even dump the wheelbarrow full of beef onto the ground, Paul began devouring the meat.

Pasquale had never heard such guttural sounds emanating from a pig before. Paul sounded like a pack of wolves chomping on an elk. Pasquale became somewhat concerned when Paul finished eating the 300 pounds of meat in only 45 minutes and wanted to eat more. Pasquale told Paul that he would have to wait until tomorrow for more meat, because the butcher was already closed. Paul reluctantly agreed to wait. In the meantime, Pasquale went back to the house to discuss the matter with Palma. How were they supposed to keep feeding Paul huge amounts of beef each day? Even though the beef was less expensive when bought in bulk form, it was still more expensive than the slop that they were previously feeding to Paul. Pasquale and Palma decided to sleep on it and revisit the discussion at breakfast the next day.

After breakfast, Pasquale headed out to the barn to discuss the situation with Paul and he ascertained that Paul was nowhere to be found. Did Paul carry out his threat and actually leave the farm? Pasquale marched out into the pasture to look for Paul and to his horror, he discovered that 3 of the sheep had been eaten. It was evidenced from the remains of the carcasses that whatever had eaten the sheep wasn't very neat about it. Did Paul eat the sheep? That crazy pig! Pasquale looked around the pasture to locate Paul, but to no avail. He headed back to the house to tell Palma about the loss of the sheep and about the apparent disappearance of Paul. As Pasquale approached the house, he noted that the door was wide open. They always kept the door closed to keep out the bugs. Pasquale increased his pace. Why was the door open? Pasquale broke into a trot. Did Palma rush out of the house and forget to close the door? Pasquale began running. Pasquale called to the house to see if Palma was inside. There was no answer. As Pasquale skidded to a stop in the doorway, he heard the same guttural sounds uttered by Paul the day before. What was going on in the corner? Paul was eating Palma!

135. Barry's Bicycle



135. Barry's Bicycle

Barry searched and searched at the junkyard for hours until he finally found what he was looking for, his new mode of transportation and what would eventually become his dream bike. It was only a rusty bike frame with pitted handlebars, shabby seat and empty rims, but it possessed the rudiments of what he needed. He started with that precious bike frame and he planned to add each piece in succession, until he had created his dream bike. He was just a young and somewhat dimwitted kid, but he had an unusual unction for pursuing his right of happiness. The frame was the essence of the bike. All he needed was the tires and tubes, etc.

Barry was a boy possessed. He wanted nothing more in life than building the bike of his dreams. His friends had ambitions of becoming great sports athletes and Eagle Scouts, but Barry craved nothing more than his 20" rimmed bike with the banana seat, high-rise handlebars, sissy bar, rear slick tire, 3-speed gearing, cabled brakes and fake antenna with the banner flapping in the breeze. Obviously, it would take some time, but it was Barry's short-term goal in life to construct his dream bike. Nothing would be able to stop him. It would be a lot of work and deprivation, but he committed himself to the task. The problem became how to obtain the money to buy the necessary parts for his machine. He needed a way to acquire money.

The first obvious choice was to ask his parents for the money and they said no. They said that the best way to become successful in life was to struggle and learn how to do things the hard way. Barry thought it was ridiculous for his parents to tell him such a thing, since they had both inherited great sums of money from their respective parents. Barry resolved that parents only wanted the best for their kids and if he had to earn all the money for the bike parts, then that was all there was to it. He located a food company that sold products door-to-door and he started by trying to sell meat. Since he didn't have his bike yet, he had to walk around the neighborhood on foot and only had a placard, which listed the various meats available for sale. The first person he visited across the street from his house said that they bought all their meats from the supermarket. They asked him why he didn't ask his parents for the money instead of demeaning himself by selling door-to-door.

The next house over was a little more responsive and asked if they could just buy one hamburger or one hot dog. Barry told the old guy that he would have to buy hamburgers in quantities of a dozen and the old guy spat on Barry's face, pushed him to the ground and slammed the door. Barry always thought that the old guy was a bit of a cantankerous fool and he was right. House after house rejected Barry's meat sales attempts and after a week of canvassing the neighborhood, he gave up on the meat. The next item on the list was socks. When he visited the old guy who spat on him, the old guy apologized and asked Barry in for some milk and cookies. Barry had been explicitly told by his parents to never enter the house of a customer unless they offered money beforehand. When Barry informed the old guy of the policy, he offered Barry 50 cents for

one sock. When Barry insisted that he had to sell the socks in pairs, the old guy slammed the door in his face. Barry was glad that the old guy didn't spit that time or push him to the ground. The next house over offered to buy 3 socks and when Barry demanded that the person buy 2 pairs instead of 3 socks, they slammed the door in his face. After 5 days, Barry managed to sell 5 pairs of socks for a total commission of 25 cents, which was just enough money to buy an inner tube for one of the tires of his bike. He was excited to be on his way!

After 10 more days of selling no socks, he quit the sock=selling business and switched over to books. Barry thought for sure that since so many people pretended to be religious by the way they judged each other for their actions, that he would be able to sell bibles by the boatload. He skipped the old guy across the street on that go-round and started with the house next to the old guy's. The old lady next to the old guy claimed to already have a family bible and Barry tried to convince her that the bibles he was selling were better. The old lady became really huffy and puffy and scoffed at Barry for thinking any bible could be better than her family bible.

As Barry continued from door-to-door, he met with the same story that everyone already had a family bible and nobody needed a new one. The last person on Barry's list was a nun and even she didn't want one. Barry thought that if a nun wouldn't buy a bible, who would. He quit attempting to sell bibles and tried selling dish detergent. He thought for sure that somebody would want to buy dish detergent from him, even the old guy across the street. The old guy apologized for slamming the door in Barry's face and said that he would only buy dish detergent if Barry would come into the house for milk and cookies. Barry asked for money and the old guy refused, so Barry left. Barry noted that the old guy had a strange look on his face. The nun ended up buying a gallon jug of dish detergent, which netted Barry a commission of 10 cents, which wasn't enough to buy anything bike related, but Barry added the money to the glass jar.

Luckily, when Barry decided to sell ice cream door-to-door, it was July and people were in the mood for something cold. Most of the people Barry solicited had air conditioning in their houses, but were too cheap to actually use it. Almost everyone bought an ice cream sandwich or other icy treat from his cooler. Even the old guy bought something. The ice cream sales stopped rather abruptly, when a cold spell hit the area, leaving Barry with a total of 75 cents for his bike parts. He bought another inner tube and a tire for the front wheel. Barry's mother gave him a recipe for lemonade and he carried around a gallon of the stuff in his cooler. The old guy bought a glass of lemonade and ate cookies with Barry on the front steps. That old guy had a thing about those cookies.

The nun bought 2 glasses of lemonade and chanted various prayers in whispered tones as Barry stood watching her in confusion. Barry never understood how women could become nuns. It seemed like such a waste to Barry, who was still much too young to understand anyway. A really sweaty guy came to the door and was actually very grateful for the lemonade. He bought 3

glasses of the sweet-tart liquid. Barry had the nerve to try to sell lemonade to a parent whose kids were selling lemonade on the front lawn. As Barry knocked on the front door of the house, the kids ran over to him and demanded that he leave immediately. Barry told the kids that he had business with their parents and that they should go away. The kids ran back to their lemonade stand, brought their pitcher of lemonade and poured it on Barry. When the mother of the kids finally answered the door and saw how the kids' lemonade had been wasted, she grabbed Barry's jug of lemonade and told him to leave.

Barry returned home with 15 cents, a sticky body and the loss of his mother's jug. Barry's mother made him go back and retrieve her jug the following week. He added the money to the glass jar. He was almost ready to buy another tire and was getting more excited about the bike prospect. Barry's mother suggested that he try selling Avon products and he reluctantly gave it a go. Barry knew all too well that the Avon stuff was usually sold by women and he felt ridiculous trying to sell it, but he had to give it a whirl. When he knocked on the old guy's door and chirped, "Avon calling," the old guy just stood there and laughed at him. The old guy turned around, ran into his house and returned with a large chocolate chip cookie, which he threw at Barry, hitting him in the forehead. Barry picked up the cookie and threw it back at the old guy, but the old guy ducked. Barry sold a bottle of moisturizer to a wrinkle-faced woman who appeared to be feeling sorry for Barry. Barry then managed to sell 2 tubes of Chapstick to the dry-lipped nun and some dental floss to someone who had no teeth. Barry determined that the floss was definitely another charity purchase. Barry shrugged his shoulders and told himself that he would accept all the sales he could get, charity or otherwise. He was on a mission to construct his bike.

Barry's next item for sale was house numbers. Every house needed numbers on it and most people had old, Rusty or smallish numbers. The emergency-related entities in town had recently requested citizens to ensure that their house numbers were present and readily visible from the street. It seemed like a logical concept to Barry, but when he knocked on the old guy's door, the guy laughed and hit Barry in the forehead with another cookie. The guy yelled that he had numbers on his house already and would never buy new ones, at any price. When Barry offered the new numbers to the old guy at a great discount, to Barry's surprise, the old guy bought the new numbers. Barry surmised that everybody indeed had their price for things.

When Barry tried to sell house numbers to the spinster woman down the street, she told Barry to wait a second at the doorway, because she was in the middle of cooking something on the stove. Barry waited for 5 minutes and then 10 minutes and the spinster never returned to the door. When Barry yelled into the house for the woman, she came running and was covered from head to toe with what appeared to be spaghetti sauce. She claimed that she was stirring her sauce when Barry yelled and she nervously dropped the spoon into the sauce and splashed it. The sight of the spinster covered with sauce made Barry burst into laughter and with that, the spinster smacked Barry's nose with the large sauce-covered wooden spoon. The pain of the spoon hitting

Barry's nose was so surprisingly intense that it made him start crying. He had never experienced such stinging agony before. The spinster felt sad that she had struck Barry and apologized. She went on to buy a set of house numbers from him at double the cost. That made up for the discount given to the old guy. Barry sold 2 more sets of house numbers, which gave him enough money to finally buy the other tire and duct tape to repair the ratty seat on his bike.

Barry had been born with mechanical ability and was able to assemble the tubes, tires and wheels for the bike with no assistance. He taped the seat with the black duct tape so efficiently that the seat looked like a new leather seat. The seat wasn't a proper banana seat with room for 2, but it would do. He oiled the chain, tensioned the coaster brake and took the beast for a ride around the block. Some of his friends saw him riding the slipshod bike and poked fun at him. They hurled the typical jibing statements that all young boys hurl at each other. Barry was unperturbed by the taunting, because he knew that one day, the bike would be the envy of his buddies. As Barry circled the block, the golden retriever owned by Mrs. Howell came charging at him. The dog must have leaped over the 4-foot fence of its yard. Barry peddled faster, but not fast enough. The dog caught up to him and bit the brand new rear tire of his bike. The dog's teeth punctured the tire and tube and made the air gush out at an alarming rate. Barry peddled as fast as he could with the flat rear tire, until the dog relented in its chase.

Barry wheeled his bike back to his house to fix the damage. He went back a different way in order to avoid the sneers of his friends. One of his friends did manage to see him and laughed at how the bike was broken already. Barry maintained his silence and marched to his garage. It was possible to patch the tube, but not the tire. He had to buy a new tire, which meant that he had to return to the door-to-door sales, since he was out of money again. He decided to sell Girl Scout cookies. Even though he wasn't exactly a Girl Scout, he thought he might be able to pull it off. He borrowed the cookie list from a friend of his sister. When he knocked on the old guy's door with the cookie list, the old guy's eyes lit up like a Christmas tree. The old guy ordered 2 boxes of each variety, which netted Barry a profit of \$2.37, which enabled him to buy a new tire and tube to replace the dog-bitten parts.

Barry put on the new tire and tube and took another ride around the town. He wanted to ensure the road-worthiness of the bike, to enable him to get a paper route. With a paper route, he would be able to make enough money to fully customize his bike, the way he wanted. When he was done, his gleaming, fully-optioned bike would be the envy of all his pals and he would have the last laugh as he rode by them. He planned to ride by each summer day, when everyone was off from school and playing in their front yards. He could visualize himself riding wheelies, riding with no hands and charging his friends to ride his super bike. None of his friends could ever imagine what he had in mind for his bike and they would all want one. He planned to customize his bike to the point that it would look like no other bike in the stores. His bike would be special. His bike would be his creation. As Barry rode, he imagined himself riding down the street and

looking over at his envious friends on their lesser bikes in their driveways. As he daydreamed, he should have been paying more attention to the street in front of him. He drifted toward the curb and smashed into it. He went flying over the handlebars and landed face-first on a huge pile of dog poop in front of the golden retriever's yard.

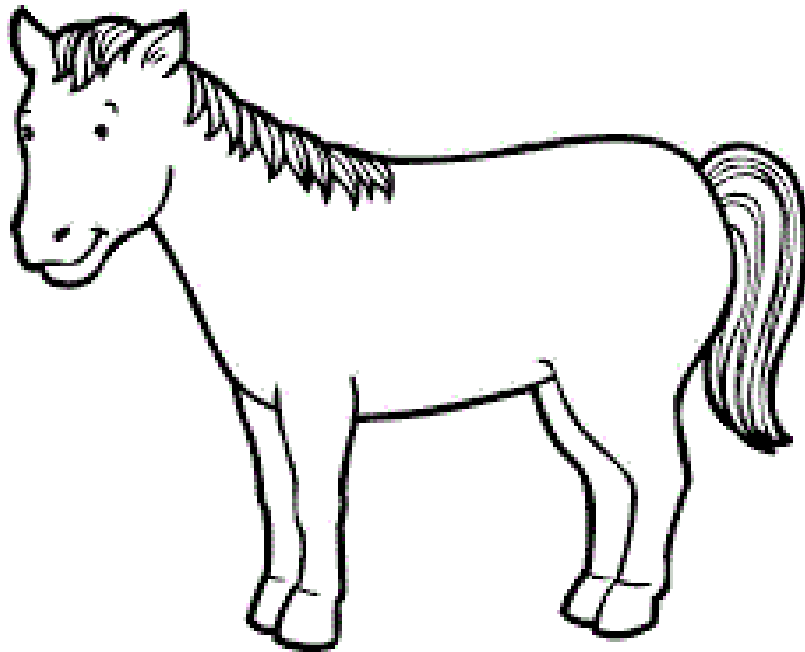
Luckily, the dog wasn't in its yard, because it probably would have leaped over the fence and attacked Barry again. That stupid dog. Barry lifted his poop-stained face from the mess and looked over at his bike. The front wheel was bent; the front tire was flat; the handlebars were twisted and bent. What a mess! Barry got up, took off his t-shirt and used it to wipe the dog poop from his face. He walked over to his wrecked bike and lifted the front to be able to wheel it home on the back tire. As he began to wheel it home, the front door of the golden retriever's house burst wide open and the dog came flying out at full speed. Barry dropped his bike and ran like the wind. He was glad that he was always on the track team at school, because he was able to outrun the savage canine. As Barry looked back, he saw the dog chewing on the back tire of his bike. A loud pop was heard as the back tire exploded and went flat. The dog leaped back over the fence of its yard and disappeared from Barry's view.

Barry sneaked his way back to his damaged bike and slowly transported it home. Since the back tire was flat, it took about 20 minutes to get the bike home. Barry looked at the wreck of his bike and felt that he had learned a lesson. From that point on, he would pay attention to where he was riding and not allow himself to daydream again. The bike was too valuable to be taken so lightly. He had been putting a lot of effort into making the money to build the bike and he had to take things more seriously.

Barry had gotten into trouble with the Girl Scout cookie endeavor and had to pay the old guy his money back, because of the cookies that Barry wasn't allowed to sell. According to the laws of the Girl Scouts, only actual Girl Scouts were permitted to sell Girl Scout cookies. Barry thought that was a stupid law. Why couldn't the Boy Scouts sell cookies? He would gladly become a Boy Scout if he could sell cookies. Now, he needed money to pay the old guy back and money to rebuild his bike again. Barry's patience was wearing thin.

Barry took his father's lawn mower from the garage and wheeled it over to the old guy's house. Barry made a deal with the old guy that he would mow his lawn for 2 months in exchange for the money from the Girl Scout cookies. The old guy pledged to agree only if Barry would come into his house and have some milk and cookies with him. Barry reluctantly agreed. He could see no other way out of the situation. The old guy also promised to pay Barry money for the lawn mowing after the 2-month period. The deal was too sweet for Barry to turn down. He had to remedy the money situation as soon as possible, in order to resume his ultimate bike construction project. As Barry entered the old guy's house through the front door, he glanced at the old guy's face. The old guy had a strange expression that Barry had never seen before.

136. Harry's Heroes



136. Harry's Heroes

Harry had been a therapy horse for people with stress-related issues for many years and in his mind had seen it all. He had helped countless men and women cope with their issues and most had gone on to lead happy and productive lives. However, Harry was tired of having to be so serious all the time. He had been a fun-loving and boisterous horse from an early age, but had become pigeonholed as a therapy horse, because of his owner. Harry fully acknowledged that he was superior to every other horse on earth in all the most important respects, but he had regretted being stuck doing the same job, day in and day out for years. It was time for him to lighten up a little and pass on the lightness to his clients. Harry didn't care what his owner thought about the whole thing, but they didn't really know the full extent of his powers anyway. When Harry helped people, the communication was solely between him and the patient.

Patient A was brought to Harry on a sunny Thursday morning, without a cloud to be seen in the sky. The birds were chirping and all seemed right with the world. Patient A had been in combat and was emotionally broken and depressed. Harry had been considered the last resort by the VA. Harry's powers of healing were almost supernatural, because nobody could figure it out. Somehow, horses were capable of drawing anxiety out of humans and allowing them to heal emotionally. Harry's powers had developed over the years to the point that he could not only draw things from patients, but also push things back into them. Harry allowed Patient A to get a little closer and then allowed the patient to touch his horse face. Harry went to work on the patient and sensed a great deal of stress in the person. Harry didn't know what had happened to the patient, but it was definitely traumatizing.

After Harry felt that he had lessened some of the patient's burden, he tried his new thing of making the person do something lighthearted and funny. In a few moments, Patient A removed all of his clothes and began running around the pasture next to Harry's barn. The patient began singing and laughing hysterically. The patient sang a really bad version of "The Rain in Spain Stays Mainly on the Plain." The patient even attempted to imitate the instruments. The patient ran back and forth through the grass and dirt and worked up quite a sweat in the process. The patient then began rolling around on his back in the dirt and became filthy from head to toe. Harry thought the scene was hilarious and laughed the whole time. The guardian from the VA had a hard time restraining Patient A and taking him to the facility. Harry felt that he had done a great job with Patient A and hoped that the patient would be able to live a happy new life. What Harry didn't realize is that Patient A had to be taken back to the VA hospital for treatment. Patient A's doctor wasn't pleased.

Patient B was brought to Harry on the following morning. The patient had been in a car accident and had become scared to death of driving. The patient's former job had involved a lot of driving and the patient had been unable to work for months. Harry went into his usual trance with the

patient and in a few moments, the patient ran off to the facility's golf cart storage garage. The patient jumped into one of the golf carts and drove away as fast as the cart would go. Harry felt pleased that he was able to get the patient behind the wheel of a vehicle again, even if it was just a golf cart. Harry reckoned that it would be just a matter of time that the patient would be driving their car again and be back at their job. Harry watched with glee as Patient B's guardian ran off after the patient in the golf cart and they both disappeared behind a grassy knoll. What Harry didn't realize was that Patient B had sped down the steep slope of the knoll and had crashed into the pond. The patient's guardian reached the patient just before the golf cart went under the water. The guardian had to drag the patient to shore and administer first aid to the non-swimmer.

Patient C arrived the next morning with a tremendous fear of snakes. It seemed that the patient had been bitten by a snake while crawling on the lawn as a baby and had a deathly fear of serpents ever since. The patient wasn't able to walk on grass, for fear of being attacked by a snake. The patient needed Harry's help immediately. Harry hypnotized the patient and they both stood in each other's presence for a while. Gradually the patient began humming, first quietly, then louder, and louder. Harry hummed along with the patient and harmonized note by note. The sound made by the horse and human was a beautiful thing to hear. The patient climbed over the gate to Harry's stall and Harry allowed the patient to climb onto his back. Harry walked out into the pasture next to his barn and slowly inched along the grass. The patient gradually broke out of their trance and looked down at the grass. The patient felt safe on Harry's back. Harry stopped walking suddenly and the patient slid from Harry's back onto the ground. The patient suddenly realized that they were no longer afraid on being on the grass.

Patient C walked along and dragged his feet in the grass as if to mock the green fibers. Harry returned to his barn and watched the patient traversing the pasture, apparently without fear. The person walked around the barn to the back out of Harry's view. Confident that he had performed another great deed, Harry took a nap in his stall and was done for the day. He only saw one patient per day so as to not wear out his powers. While Harry was napping, Patient C had discovered a large flat rock next to the barn and lifted it to see what was under it. A rattlesnake had been sleeping under the rock. The patient fearlessly reached for the snake and was bitten 3 times in the neck by the viper. Harry was awakened from his nap by the sound of ambulance sirens. He briefly wondered what all that was about and resumed dosing.

After a few weeks of his new style of healing, Harry decided to provide something more for himself. He theorized that if he was able to mentally project concepts into the minds of his patients, why not try it on his handlers as well. When one of his handlers showed up in the morning, Harry thought really hard and put the person into a trance. After a few moments, the person was vigorously brushing Harry's coat with the firm brush. Harry was in heaven. He loved when his handlers brushed him; it was one of his favorite sensations. The handler then switched

to the softer brush and then back again to the firm brush. After about 2 hours of brushing, Harry had enough and moved onto the next phase. Another handler came along and Harry influenced both of them into giving him a luxurious sponge bath. It couldn't get any better, thought Harry. He was typically brushed a couple times weekly and washed monthly, but there was currently a new Sheriff in town. Harry now demanded to be brushed and bathed daily.

After 3 weeks of the new luxuries, Harry thought of something else. After the brushing and before the bathing, he forced 4 of his handlers to give him a belly rub out in the pasture. He trotted to the nice grass and lay down on his back. The handlers approached with various scented oils and began the rubbing and massaging. Harry couldn't believe how good it felt. Why hadn't he thought of it sooner? They rubbed and massaged and caressed him until he fell asleep. There he was, all oiled up in the morning sun, sleeping like a baby in the grass. The 4 handlers continued massaging Harry for another hour, until they had all fainted from exertion. It required a sensational amount of energy and stamina to massage a body as large as a horse and none of the handlers was accustomed to the strain. When the facility manager walked to the pasture to check on things, they saw the 4 handlers sprawled across Harry's shiny oil-slicked brown body. They were all sleeping fitfully. The manager took a picture of the scene with her phone and posted it on her social media connections.

The next thing Harry demanded was to have his butt hole thoroughly cleaned after he pooped. He always hated the way his butt hole felt after pooping, because sometimes it became itchy and unscratchable. There was nothing worse for a horse to have an unscratchable itch. It became part of Harry's new doctrine on the farm to always have one of the handlers on hand to clean and moisturize his butt hole after he pooped throughout the day. Since he was a rather large horse that ate constantly, he pooped many loads in a day's time. The facility manager had been coerced into building a shed next to Harry's barn for handlers to sleep in. Harry had a specifically designated butt hole cleaner assigned to him 24 hours a day. The different cleansers, moisturizers and fragrant oils were rotated on a regular basis, so that Harry wouldn't get bored by the same scent every day. He particularly liked the smell of the jasmine and gardenia oils. There was something so refreshing about a fragrant clean butt hole. Harry couldn't figure out why he liked it so much, he just did. Harry felt that some things in life were better left without too much analysis. The best things in life were free.

Harry had the facility to change his water supply to Perrier. He had grown bored with the well water that he had been forced to swill down over the years. He wanted a taste of how the other side lived. The facility manager found a source of the Perrier that could supply the water in tanker trucks, to make it more convenient. Harry's drinking water system was connected to the tanker, to enable him to suckle on the fresh overpriced water all day long. He was surprised how much more water he was drinking, now that he had the good stuff on tap. The premium water was another thing that he wished that he had thought of sooner. The next thing in line was

obviously a more succulent food supply, but that was limited by what was growing in the pasture for him to graze on and the quality of the oats supplied. Harry did manage to force the facility to procure an especially tasty variety of oats. The facility manager was hypnotized into calling around to all the local oat growers to find the best and freshest supplies of the grain for Harry. They were able to locate 7 different varieties, to provide Harry with a different oat variety for each day of the week. Harry was definitely living the life.

One fine morning, Patient L was brought to Harry. The patient had an excessive gambling problem that had resulted in the patient throwing away all their money, including the selling of their house, car and all their worldly goods. The patient was essentially homeless, but was living at a concerned friend's house at the time. Harry looked deeply into the patient's eyes and made the patient count on their fingers and then their toes. The patient had to take off her shoes and socks to count her toes. As the patient counted, Harry compelled the patient to increase the volume of their voice with each round of counting of the 10 fingers and 10 toes. The process went on and on for approximately 2 hours and 20 minutes. By the end of the counting, the patient's voice was hoarse from yelling so loud while counting. By the end of the counting Harry was struggling to contain his laughter. As the patient's voice eventually disappeared entirely, Harry began doing that horsey mumbling that horses do. He realized that his primary purpose in life was to help people and he had to maintain some essence of that responsibility.

Even though Harry had forced the facility to cater to his every whim, he still truly and wholly enjoyed helping people. He had been born with a special gift and always gained immense satisfaction whenever he supplied his patients with aid. Patient L was led away and returned to the home at which she was staying. The patient apparently continued to wish to gamble although to a much diminished extent than before. The patient borrowed a dollar from her benefactor to play the lottery on a whim and had won the \$867 million Powerball prize. The patient received a check for \$417 million and donated \$162 million of the money to Harry's facility. When Harry found out about the windfall, he kicked things up another notch. The employees of his facility all received pay raises and many renovations were planned, including the upgrading of Harry's stall.

Harry influenced the facility into providing a poop sweeper in addition to the butt hole cleaner. Harry insisted that there had to be 2 handlers doing the work, not one. He didn't want the same person who was sweeping his poop to also be the person who gently cleaned his butt hole. There was just something about it that Harry wanted it that way. He didn't know why, he simply had to have things that way. He was in complete control at the facility, so he might as well demand everything that he could. Harry always liked the lady horses and appreciated the way they looked. He induced the facility into providing him with 58 of the most beautiful and perfectly shaped mares from around the world. It was a great expense, but the facility had no other choice. The new mares cost the facility so much in fact that all of the recent pay raises had to be revoked, in order to provide Harry with his harem. It wasn't that Harry ever intended to do anything with

the beautiful female horses. He was a gelding after all. He simply liked to prance and frolic with them in the vast pastures of the facility.

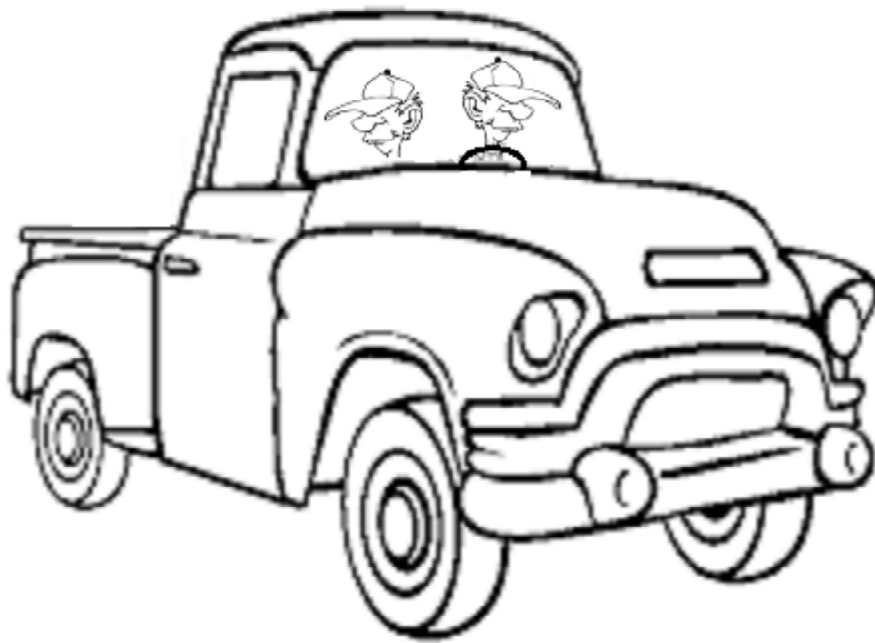
Harry was able to convert most of the new mares into proper therapy horses. It required an immense amount of willpower to complete the task, but he did it. Over a period of 2 months and 17 days, Harry created 49 high-grade therapy horses out of his beautiful mares. Harry loved those mares, because they were so decoratively colored and pleasantly proportioned. He had to give the facility a lot of credit for finding such equine exquisiteness. It obviously cost a great deal of money, but Harry felt that it was worth it. He thought that his current situation must be like the feeling he would have when he was in heaven or wherever horses went when they moved on from their current existence.

After a while, Patient QB arrived for Harry's assistance. The patient was inordinately autistic. Harry immediately felt a bond with the patient that he had never felt before. Perhaps it was Harry's new life of luxury that had weakened his defenses. When Harry psychologically linked up with Patient QB, he felt an atypical transference of passion from the patient into his horse brain. The patient had so much life force emanating that Harry quickly found it difficult to handle it. Where did this person come from? How did they possess so much mental power that even he, the great Harry, was unable to overwhelm it? Harry genuinely desired to help the patient, but if the patient's mind was so great that Harry was incapable of sculpting and molding it to his will, what was Harry to do about it? Harry felt the patient's forces attempting to manipulate his own. What was this patient trying to do? The patient had been brought to Harry for Harry to help the patient. What was the patient's game?

Harry felt a sudden rush of fear, betrayal, anxiety, happiness and hatred. Harry involuntarily pissed and pooped in his stall. Harry derided the goings on, but was simultaneously intrigued by it. Harry had met his match, or more correctly, had met what the patient thought was his match. Harry pooped out most of what was remaining in his large horse colon and began to stomp around in it. Harry immediately noted that patient QB had cerebrally backed off infinitesimally in their mental query. Harry felt that he was gaining on the patient. Harry grunted, whinnied and chortled in as low of a tone as he could muster. He generated all the basic horse sounds of which he was capable. He wanted the patient to believe that he was locked in cerebral combat with just another horse.

Harry bent his head to the ground and began eating some of his own freshly pooped poop. Harry sensed another miniscule slacking in the patient's force. Harry made himself barf and ate some of his barfed poop. He felt another reduction in the patient's powerful will. Harry spat a nice wet blob of the barfed poop onto the patient's face. The patient reached out their strong arms with huge menacing hands, latched onto Harry's ears and applied a horrendously painful viselike grip. Harry began pooping diarrhea like there was no tomorrow. The patient held on.

137. Klete's Brother



137. Klete's Brother

Klete (rhymes with street) and his twin brother Kleet (rhymes with straight) were survivors. They had been on their own surviving together since the age of 13, when the tornado took their parents and the house in which they were born. Klete and Kleet had been shoved into the storm cellar by their father just before the twister hit. Their mother and father were still in the house gathering food and water to take to the cellar when the house became airborne and was never seen again. When the brothers came out of the shelter, they had nothing but the clothes on their backs, the old RV parked over yonder by the oak tree and the rust-colored pickup truck. Fortunately, the boys had been taught to drive by their father at the early age of 8, so that they were immediately able to begin hustling for their very survival. The area of Oklahoma the boys lived in was so rural that no authorities were able to keep track of the boys out there, or even know of their existence. The boys had never gone to school and thus were nonexistent.

Currently in their 30's, the brothers still lived in the RV and drove around the county in the truck doing odd jobs of every fashion. They had a collection of tools to help them perform every manual task imaginable. They had never bought anything new in their lives and got as much use as they could out of everything at their disposal. When the brothers solicited projects from people, they introduced themselves by pronouncing their names in different ways in order for people to tell them apart. It didn't help much, because they were so identical in face, body, gesture and movement that they seemed like Siamese twins who were detached from each other. Klete began to speak in a deeper tone than Kleet to help people distinguish them from each other, but it was still comical. Since the brothers were forced by life to be so frugal, they owned the simplest clothing and both chose the classic blue denim overalls as their work uniforms. They pretty much wore the overalls continuously, so the outfits essentially comprised their all-day clothing.

The boys knew a man named Hoz who was retired from the cesspool sucking industry. The guy owned an extremely used tanker truck with hose and vacuum, which was used to empty septic tanks. The boys had rented the system from Hoz on a weekly basis in order to make the monthly runs on their septic evacuation route, which they had more or less taken over from Hoz. When Hoz retired from the business, he almost left the folks out there high and dry as they say, because he had been operating one of the only services of its kind. The other guy named Roachie worked on the other side of the county. Hoz and Roachie had worked out a system whereby they would both cover everybody and not compete with each other. People in that area tried to survive without stepping on each other's toes. Hoz rented the system to the boys so that everybody involved made out ok, but of course, Hoz got the clean end of the stick. The vacuum hose for the system was heavy duty and expensive when new and original equipment 43 years ago. It would be impossible to replace the hose, so Hoz and the boys repaired it constantly along the way. The hose had so many patched holes and mended sections that it was risky to put into use each time.

Klete and Kleet didn't care about the risks, because they were simple men with simple minds who just wanted to have something to eat and be able to watch their antenna TV from the comfort of their RV each evening, after a 16-hour day of hard work, 7 days a week. At Mrs. Maxwell's, the day started off fine and it seemed to be an easy operation, since the woman's septic tank was so close to the road. It made for an easy cleaning operation, especially since they didn't have to unreel so much hose. The more hose that they had to unreel from the giant spool, the greater was the risk of a puncture in the hose material. As they neared the end of the operation, Mrs. Maxwell decided to head to town to the Piggly Wiggly to do her weekly shopping. The boys had instructed her to wait until the hose had been retracted, but she had her own way about doing things and drove over the hose with her pickup truck. Since the suction was on and there was still contents being removed from the septic tank, the weight of the truck tire had caused a rupture in the hose.

The normal operation of the system entailed Klete holding one end of the hose into the septic tank, while Kleet would stand at the ready at the truck to be able to quickly shut down the system in the event of an emergency. Kleet had been at the truck doing his part for the majority of the operation, until he noticed Mrs. Maxwell backing her truck out of the carport. He ran over to her to tell her to stop, but was too late. The dark brown liquid immediately began to spray from the ruptured vacuum hose in every direction. The septic sludge was vile in every respect. The boys were covered with the poop juice. Mrs. Maxwell was sprayed with the foulness, because she had her driver's side window rolled down. She continued backing out of the driveway to get away from the septic spray and backed down the road as far as she could go, until she backed into the ditch and became stuck there in her truck. Klete screamed at Kleet to shut it down. Kleet was already on his way back to the truck. As he ran, he slipped on the puddle of brown goo that was everywhere in the yard. He fell into one of the many poop puddles that had instantly formed on the uneven ground.

Klete dropped the hose and ran to the truck to try to shut it down. He also slipped and fell into a puddle. The system kept running and spraying septic liquid all over Mrs. Maxwell's mobile home and the large wind vanes that she had created and installed in her yard. A pickup truck drove by on the road and honked its horn. It was the Gentz family on their way to town, probably going to the Piggly Wiggly for their weekly shopping. The Gentz family was the next stop on the boys' list for septic tank pumping. Mrs. Maxwell howled from her stuck truck that she needed help to get out of there. She had to leave soon, before the store got too crowded. She crowed that she hated shopping when there were too many people in the store, because they always got in the way with their shopping carts. Klete yelled to Mrs. Maxwell that they would help her right away. Kleet looked at Klete and started laughing. It wasn't the first time that there had been a leak in the hose and definitely wouldn't be the last. The boys were accustomed to accidents while using Hoz' old system and knew what they would have to do.

Kleet got up from his position in the poop puddle and made his way over to the truck to shut down the suction system. Just then, a flock of crows descended on the yard. For some reason, unknown to Klete and Kleet, crows were always attracted to the area whenever then pumped out septic tanks. Maybe it was the stench that attracted them. As the crows landed, they distracted Kleet on his way to the truck. As Kleet madly waved his arms at the huge black birds, he took his eyes off where he was walking, slipped and fell into another poop puddle. Klete laughed even harder. Mrs. Maxwell continued yelling at the boys to help her out of the ditch. Kleet climbed out of the puddle and managed to get to his feet again. He carefully shuffled his way to the truck and shut down the system. Mrs. Maxwell's squawking became more noticeable with the vacuum system turned off. Klete got up and walked over to the truck where Kleet was applying a thick layer of duct tape to the damaged section of vacuum hose. As Kleet turned on the hose reel motor to reel in the repaired hose, Klete walked over to check on Mrs. Maxwell, who was yelling at the top of lungs. Her voice was beginning to sound really scratchy like a cat that just had its tail accidentally stepped on by somebody.

Kleet turned off the hose reel motor and unreeled the fresh water hose to hose down Mrs. Maxwell's house and yard entities. The fresh water hose was connected to a tank of water between the truck cab and the main poop tank. Klete returned from consoling Mrs. Maxwell and Kleet hosed him off and then hosed himself off. Kleet reeled in the fresh water hose, while Klete sealed Mrs.' Maxwell's septic tank. With everything status quo again, the boys hooked up a chain to the septic truck and to Mrs. Maxwell's truck. After pulling her out of the ditch, the boys received their check from Mrs. Maxwell and went on to pump the septic tank at the Gentz household. It was just another routine day for the boys who always expected the worst to happen, but they were always prepared to obtain the desired result in the end.

Another regular task that the boys had for making money was pool cleaning. It wasn't the typical pool cleaning that people think of, which involved running around a filled pool with a pool floor vacuum and debris net, etc. Klete and his brother cleaned the pools that had been let go by their owners and were laden with murky water, rotted vegetation, algae, dead animals, snakes, frogs and sometimes rabid raccoons. They didn't get the tough pool cleaning jobs too often, but they made a nice enough amount of money on them to make it worthwhile. The jobs usually required several days to perform properly to the satisfaction of the owner. The latest pool was a beautiful in-ground model, 20'x40', with a shallow end of 1 foot depth that sloped to the deep end of 9 feet. There was water in the deeper part from about 4 feet depth to the deep end. It hadn't been maintained for about 11 years, but somehow still held water. The liner must still be ok. The boys rented a dump truck from a guy named Owen, in which they would place the filth from the pool.

They started by draining the water from the pool with a rented water pump that had a special filter on it. The filter prevented the pump from clogging, but required constant cleaning, due to

all the particles in the water. As Klete pumped the water, Kleet began removing some of the chunks of debris with a long handled device that they constructed from their own design. The device enabled the user to scoop as large an amount of junk from the pile as they could struggle to lift out of the pool. Kleet and Klete were both as strong as oxen, since they had worked hard all their lives, so that Kleet was able to rend heavy loads of debris from the pool to be placed in the old wheelbarrow that they actually owned. Kleet wheeled the loads of trash to the dump truck and up the ramp into the box of the truck, where it was dumped. The process took hours of pumping and scooping, but gradually the debris was being removed.

As the water level went down, Klete moved the pump further into the pool toward the deep end. Kleet noticed something lying on top of the pile of pool debris in the deep end that looked like a dead raccoon. When he poked it with his scooping device, the animal reared up onto its back feet. It was alive! It was wet and dirty looking, but alive. The raccoon looked up at Kleet, who was still poking at it with the scoop and then looked over at Klete, who had a startled look on his face. Kleet yelled down at Klete that it was probably a rabid coon, because the only raccoons that were ever seen in daylight were usually rabid. Klete panicked and turned to run away from the raccoon that was making its way toward him. Klete had been in the pool at about the middle and had approximately 20' of slick pool floor to navigate to get out of there.

Kleet tried to scoop the raccoon out of the pool, but it was too late. As Klete began to attempt to run, he slipped on the slimy pool floor and slid down into the muck and mire in the deep end that was still about 4 feet deep. Klete disappeared from sight, probably sliding underneath the pile of decadence. At least he was safe from the raccoon that scampered along the floor to the shallow end and ran out of the pool toward the woods. Not being able to swim, Klete had instantly freaked out when he went under the water and inhaled out of fear. Kleet yelled to his brother, but there was no answer. Kleet dropped his scoop and jumped down into the pile of filth and water in the pool. Not thinking far enough ahead of time when he jumped, Kleet unwittingly landed on top of Klete at the bottom of the pool.

It definitely didn't help matters when it started to rain in torrents. The weather forecast for that day had predicted occasional cloudbursts and bouts of heavy rain, but the boys never paid attention to the weather forecasts. When Kleet realized that he had landed on top of Klete, he dove down into the littered water to retrieve his brother. As Kleet held his breath, he felt around with his eyes closed and grabbed onto the collar of Klete's blue denim jumpsuit. Kleet laboriously dragged Klete from the deep end toward the shallow end of the pool. As Kleet almost had Klete out of the water, he slipped in the same place that Klete had slipped moments before. Kleet slipped down the slimy slope toward the deep end and under the pile of pool debris. As he slid, Kleet pushed Klete's limp body into the deep end with him.

Kleet was just as unable to swim as Klete, but Kleet was driven to save them both. Just before

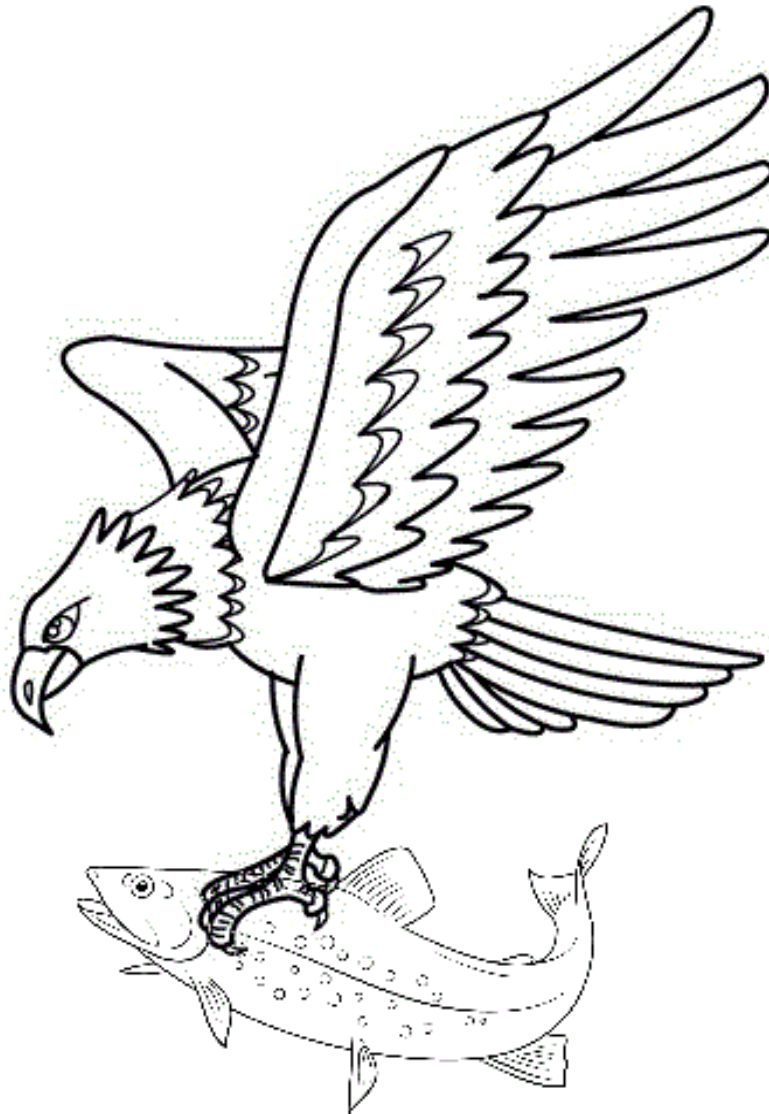
Kleet slipped and went under the water, he fortunately had the wherewithal to take a deep breath, which prevented him from drowning like Klete. Kleet righted himself, grabbed Klete's collar and dragged Klete toward the shallow end again. As Kleet emerged from the water, he was careful to tread carefully on the pool floor. As careful as Kleet was however, the burden of gripping Klete's body caused Kleet to be thrown off balance and he slipped again. Kleet hit his head on the pool floor and momentarily saw stars. Kleet realized that the only way to save himself and his brother was to first save himself. He rose from the pool floor and inched his way toward the shallow end. He managed to walk out of the pool and then he ran around the pool perimeter to where he had dropped his long handled scooping device. He retrieved the scoop and ran to the concrete-walk edge of the pool along the deep end and began scooping the bottom for his brother.

After about 45 seconds, he hit something that had to be his brother's body. Kleet cautiously dragged the scoop with his brother in tow and walked along the concrete-walk edge of the pool toward the shallow end. Kleet dragged Klete's body along the shallow end and eventually out of the pool. Kleet began slapping Klete and screaming at him to wake up. Kleet remembered something from a scene from an old Baywatch episode where someone was resuscitated after being pulled from the ocean. Kleet worked Klete's legs back and forth and then did the same with his arms. In a moment, Klete began choking and breathing. He spat out a couple blobs of algae and what appeared to be part of a dead rotten frog. The frog hit Kleet in the face, which made Kleet immediately vomit from the stink of the dead frog. The vomit landed on Klete and made him vomit from the stink of Kleet's vomit.

Klete slapped Kleet's face and yelled at him for vomiting on him. When Kleet informed Klete of the goings on, Klete said he was sorry for slapping Kleet and that he was thankful for the rescue. Kleet said it was ok that Klete slapped him, because he didn't know what was happening at the time. Kleet then slapped Klete's face and told him that it was payback for his slap. The 2 brothers started laughing at the whole thing and how stupid it all was. As Kleet got up from the ground and reached his hand to help Klete, the rabid raccoon came running out of the woods toward them. The coon was running as fast as a raccoon could run and it was foaming at the mouth, hissing and snarling.

As the raccoon approached, Kleet reached for the long handled scoop and wildly swung at the animal. Klete hastily got himself to his feet and stood behind Kleet as Kleet swung the scoop at the crazed coon. A scared Kleet scurried from behind Kleet's back and ran away in an attempt to get away from the savage raccoon. When Kleet turned to see where his brother was running, the raccoon leaped into the air and knocked the distracted Kleet into the pool. When Kleet landed in the pool, the thud was loud enough for Klete to stop running to see what had happened. Klete saw the raccoon on top of Kleet in the bottom of the pool and they were both sliding down the slope toward the deep end. Kleet screamed for Klete to help him, as the raccoon appeared to begin biting Kleet's forehead. Klete looked around for the long handled scoop.

138. Elmo's Eats



138. Elmo's Eats

Elmo was cruising at about 1,100 feet altitude and was the king of the world. He actually was the king of his bird world. He was the national symbol after all. Elmo loved soaring and floating on the currents more than anything, even more than eating. Elmo was only occasionally hungry and didn't really need to eat every day, but when he did eat, he gorged. Elmo liked all the facets of weather, including rain, wind, snow and hail, etc. No weather was capable of hampering him in flight. In fact, he always required a little bit of breeze or wind to enable him to spread his wings and fly. He typically only flapped his wings on the way up to cruising altitude and then coasted for the remainder of the day, if he was lucky. By nature, he preferred to expend as little energy as possible, because he didn't always know when his next sustenance would arrive.

On one occasion, he had dared himself to see how long and far he could glide through his friendly skies. It had been particularly windy and he was doing great up there after eating a nice fat rattlesnake. Elmo's belly was full and he was feeling fine and cocky. He always felt a certain amount of cockiness, but whenever he ate rattlesnakes, he always felt extra cocky. The winds were continuous and he only had to flex his wings and body a little to the left or right in order to fly for free, essentially for almost as long as he wanted. He decided to test the winds and he set sail. He coasted for 6 hours with only a single flap of his wings and decided to try for longer. After 12 hours, it was getting dark, but he didn't care. He pooped out some of the digested rattlesnake and felt lighter. Then he took a piss and felt lighter still.

He continued floating through the darkness of the night and managed to stay wide-awake. He kept himself alert by scanning the clear night sky for his favorite constellations. He spotted the North Star, big dipper and little dipper easily and challenged himself to find others. He spotted the lights of airplanes flying in the distance. The planes were flying at a much higher altitude than he was gliding at, but he felt the airplanes to be his kin. Elmo considered anything that flew in the skies, whether animal or machine to be his family. He often wondered what it would be like to fly as high as the airplanes or fly even higher up into the twinkly darkness of space. That would be the ultimate.

After 18 hours, it was daylight and he realized that he had drifted miles from his hunting grounds. He was greeted by another bird, a silly hawk. The hawk appeared to be upset that Elmo was flying in the sky over its hunting area. Elmo maintained to the hawk that it was a free country, which included the skies. Elmo screeched that he had every right to be flying in the hawk's hunting area and if the hawk didn't like it, it was just too bad. Realistically, Elmo would have never intentionally drifted so far away from his own hunting grounds, but he had been in the middle of a dare. The hawk began screeching incessantly, until another hawk flew over to join in. The 2 hawks had the gall to badger Elmo and dive at him. They screeched their annoying hawk screeches for about 24 minutes until Elmo had enough. He made a sudden downward dive

that the hawks didn't expect. The maneuver was so ridiculous that the hawks didn't think it was even possible for a prey bird to move in that manner. At the bottom of the dive, Elmo turned upward with such lightning speed that the hawks couldn't sense what had hit them. Elmo tore the first hawk in half and lopped off the head off the second one. He made a quick spin around, navigated to the second hawk's falling torso and tore away a hunk of its breast meat. Elmo swallowed the morsel, feathers and all, as a sign of superiority and might. Elmo always enjoyed a good hawk fight now and then, although it was never really much of a fight. The encounter with the hawks had ended Elmo's glide dare after 18 hours, which was still a long time without having to flap his wings.

He thought back to that long glide session many times and told himself that he wouldn't have changed a thing. He loved being in the sky, where he ruled with iron talons and wouldn't trade his life for anything in the world. As he soared along, he looked all around in every direction. He always watched for potential food sources on the ground or in the water. He always watched for objects ahead with which he might collide. He glanced behind every once in a while to make sure that he wasn't being followed. Elmo hated being followed. He preferred to drift along effortlessly and pretend that he was the only bird in his sky. The birds that followed him were usually those stupid smaller birds that liked to harass bigger birds, simply because they could. Elmo could certainly see why those smaller birds did what they did, because Elmo had probably eaten at least one member of every bird species in the area of his kingdom.

Most birds probably had an issue with him, but that was their issue, not his. Elmo was the king of his skies and they had to deal with it. If he had to occasionally eat one of the smaller birds to fill his belly, those were the breaks. He didn't make the rules; he simply played by them. On occasions that he was followed by pesky birds, he employed one of his sneaky dive down and then up again maneuvers and efficiently dispatched the annoying follower. When there was more than one follower, he executed other trick flying dodges until all the followers had been dealt with to his satisfaction. Whenever he removed interloping birds from his otherwise quiet setting, he rarely ate much of the carcasses. He preferred to let the shredded bodies trickle to earth where they would rot and become examples of his authority for as long as possible, or until the maggots had dissolved the pieces.

As Elmo effortlessly floated along, he regaled himself with stories of his prowess and spotted something while in looking-down mode. It was a rabbit! He loved rabbits, because they were so soft and tender. The rabbit fur always went down his gullet easily and the meat rarely gave him indigestion or worse, flatulence. Elmo hated it when he ate something that gave him gas. He could never fathom why the natural foods put on his earth for him to eat would give him discomfort afterwards. It didn't seem right. It was as if he wasn't supposed to be eating that particularly animal. He always did what came natural to him and had to sometimes pay the consequences. Why couldn't he just eat something and that would be the end of it, with no upset

stomach, farting or diarrhea just around the bend? Elmo eased his wings slightly into diving position and ever so easily descended to the prize. He always preferred to gently swoop down on his prey to minimize noise and energy expenditure. Elmo's instincts perpetually forced him to be frugal with his movements.

As Elmo approached the rabbit, he talked to it in a whispered tone. "That's it, little bunny; don't move now; it'll be over before you know it!" To prevent further detection, Elmo descended from the sky while specifically positioned with the sun so that he cast a minimum shadow. "A little more, little bunny!" whispered Elmo. At about 9 feet above the rabbit, Elmo extended his talons for the quick snatch. When Elmo was about 5 feet above the rabbit, a fox came speeding by and latched onto the rabbit before Elmo got there. The fox ran like the wind across the field with the instantly dispatched rabbit in its maw. "Curses!" screeched Elmo. "Not again!" Those foxes were indeed wily creatures whenever they stole one of Elmo's rabbits. Ordinarily, Elmo relented and allowed the fox to have the meal, but not today. Elmo corrected his swoop and dove straight up into the air like a rocket. He then dove down at a 45-degree angle toward the fox with the rabbit. Elmo had to beat the fox to the woods that the fox was headed for with its great head of speed.

Elmo's speed approached 93 miles per hour as he leveled off his altitude at about 3 feet from the ground. He quickly gained on the running fox that was almost at the woods. When Elmo was 14 feet behind the fox, he screeched an unearthly screech that he typically reserved for special mating occasions. The fox instinctively turned its head to see Elmo's talons digging into the rabbit and ripping it from the fox's mouth. Elmo had wrenched the rabbit with such force that 2 of the fox's teeth came out along with the rabbit. Elmo hastily dove vertically upward and narrowly avoided crashing into a chestnut tree. The fox scampered into the woods hungry again and missing 2 of its teeth. Elmo circled around, landed on the field and ate most of the rabbit. Elmo never ate the feet of the rabbit, because he had always heard that eating rabbit feet would give him bad luck. The fox returned to that location later in the day to eat the discarded rabbit feet.

Two days later Elmo was up soaring again near the edge of his territory when he looked down and saw a salmon flying through the air in an upstream direction. Elmo thought those salmon were so silly the way they did that. Those fish must be really happy or something, because whenever Elmo saw them at that certain time each year, they were always flying through the air. Elmo observed that more and more of the salmon were performing their flying act. When the salmon made their way to a certain point, they became stuck. Elmo didn't understand what a dam was; all he knew was that the salmon kept trying to fly through the air and kept hitting an obstruction. Elmo noted on that particular day how there were tons of bears standing in the water all around the sight of the flying salmon. Elmo watched and laughed how the bears would just stand in one position and wait for a salmon to fly into their mouths! Those bears had it made.

That looked like such an easy way to eat. Elmo wished that he had it as easy as those bears. Just for fun, Elmo decided to mess around with the heads of those lazy goofball bears.

Elmo gradually lowered his cruising altitude and reduced the diameter of his soaring circle at the same time. Soon he was floating in a circle over the bear feasting area. The bears were absolutely concentrating on the salmon eating contest into which they all seemed to be entered. Elmo was amazed at the amount of food that those bears could eat at one sitting. He could eat one salmon at the most and those bears were standing there all day long eating one salmon after another. Elmo circled and circled and waited for the right moment. Now! Elmo dove down toward one of the salmon that was flying through the air in the direction of one of the bears' open mouths. Elmo collided with the salmon and smacked it into the face of another bear that was standing next to the first bear. The bear that was hit in the face by the salmon roared at the bear next to him, because he thought that bear had smacked him in the face with the salmon. Neither of the 2 bears had seen Elmo swooping through the scene.

The 2 bears began smacking each other's faces with half-eaten salmon bodies that they found at their feet. Elmo swooped up and out of there momentarily and watched the bears brawling from a safer distance. Elmo laughed and laughed at the stupid bears fighting. Elmo laughed so hard that he began farting and pooping, probably from the muskrat that he had eaten the day before. The poop fell onto the faces of the 2 bears that were slapping each other with the half-eaten salmon carcasses. The bears looked up and saw Elmo flying over them laughing and screeching hysterically. The bears were dumb animals that were unable to put 2 and 2 together and didn't suspect that it was Elmo that had caused them to start brawling. They fully realized that the poop falling on their faces was from Elmo however, because they could see the poop squirting out of his ass as he circled over their heads.

Once bears begin fighting with each other, they continue until one of them gives up and leaves the area or at least backs away a little. The bears were too concerned with getting the other bear to back away and not as concerned with Elmo pooping on them. It was when Elmo had swooped down and snatched a prime salmon from the jaws of the biggest bear of the pack that the intensity became turned up a notch. The big bear was accustomed to having his own way and he had earned it over his 8-year lifespan. He was the biggest and meanest of all the bears of the 30 or 40 bears in attendance. The big bear had an area clear around him of about 45 feet. None of the other bears would even think of getting too close to the huge monster. The big bear was so powerful that he could knock any of the other bears unconscious with one swing of his mighty paw.

When Elmo flew off with the salmon, it was too much for the big bear. The thing jumped up and down and roared like there was no tomorrow. It screamed and drooled and splashed the water. It picked up half-eaten salmon bodies and threw them everywhere. The other bears at the scene

that had known the big bear for years remarked to each other that they had never seen him so angry. The big bear's eyes became inflamed with redness and thunder. The bear roared and howled and clawed at any logs and boulders nearby. He began swatting at the salmon that were flying through the air toward him. The bear was so incensed by Elmo's actions that it had lost its appetite for salmon. The bear obviously wasn't accustomed to being made such a fool of. Elmo flew as high as he could with the salmon and then when he thought that he was directly above the big bear, he dropped the fish. The big bear was so involved with throwing his fit that he didn't think about looking up for any reason. He was stomping around and rampaging to the point of having a heart attack, if it was possible for bears to have heart attacks.

Elmo watched as the salmon plummeted and he whispered to himself, "That's it big boy; stay right there!" Wham! The salmon landed on the big bear's head with such force that it knocked the hairy beast off balance and the behemoth fell into the water. The water was so deep that the bear disappeared from sight for several seconds. Elmo laughed, screeched and laughed. Initially, the sight of the big bear falling into the water because of the salmon smacking it in the head caused many of the other bears to begin snickering and then laughing. When the big bear came to the surface of the water, it began roaring again and scared many of the bears into fleeing the scene. Some of the bears that had laughed at the big bear hoped that the big bear hadn't seen them laughing.

Elmo dove down to the big bear in the water where the bear was more vulnerable to attack from above. Elmo strafed the bear as it maniacally waved around out its immense claws. Elmo's talons were as long as the bear's claws and the bear found out just how long they were. Elmo managed to dodge the bear's weapons and clawed the eyes, forehead and front paws of the big bear. The big bear howled with pain from the fresh injuries. The bear had been in many fights in the past that had granted it its current Royal status. The bear had sustained and survived injuries that were much worse than those inflicted by Elmo. Elmo's damage had caused the bear injuries that were more biting - the injuries of lost respect and authority. How could a simple bird have caused all these things to happen to the great bear? The bear roared, jumped up and thrashed at the water.

The other bears had never seen the big bear so enraged and violent. Elmo continued to have his fun with the giant bear and relentlessly scratched and clawed at it with each flyby. To Elmo, the bear was a lesser animal. It didn't matter that the bear was hundreds of times heavier than Elmo. Elmo was the king of all that he surveyed. The huge bear insisted on making contact with its taunter and swung its sharply clawed paws in vane at the agile bird. Elmo realized that he was enjoying the bear harassment much more than he had originally intended. He planned to add the bear taunting spectacle to his list of regular entertainment. Whenever those salmon decided to do their flying acts again, Elmo promised himself that he would be there. Those bears had to learn who was truly the king of the jungle. It certainly wasn't them.

139. Jehovazath's Seeds



139. Jehovahazath's Seeds

Jehovazath was born a farmer and promised his creator that he would be a farmer until the moment of his passing, which would most likely be while he was merrily working in the field. He loved the richness of the great earth, the warmness of the air, the sumptuousness of freshly-picked produce and most of all, the miraculousness of planting a seed in the ground and nurturing it to fruition. His willingness to work the soil had been instilled in him by his father, who had received the calling from his father. Jehovahazath reckoned that the soil was in his blood and when he had been told the story of how he was born, it all seemed to make sense. Jehovahazath's father and mother were working in the field many moons ago, when his mother had begun feeling labor pains. Jehovahazath's mother was as hard a worker as any many in the county and had chosen to work for as long as she was able through the term of her pregnancy.

When Jehovahazath's mother had reached the 10th month of her pregnancy, it was pushing it for her to continue working in her condition, but she chose to labor on. While walking behind the plow horses in the process of breaking new ground for a cornfield, Jehovahazath's mother went into labor. She tried to keep quiet as all the birthing mothers did back then, but the pain was too much. She began howling like an old coon dog that had just treed the biggest raccoon of its lifetime of hunting raccoons. She howled and howled, until after about 17 minutes, Jehovahazath's father finally heard her. He had been in the root cellar of the house attempting to rid the house of the family of raccoons that had sneaked in during the night. The raccoons had scratched him so many times that he looked like a sailor that had been keelhauled.

After he had managed to lure the raccoons out of the root cellar with some bacon, he locked the house down and ran toward the howling sounds of his wife. When he arrived at the scene, he immediately fainted at the sight of his wife lying on her back on the freshly plowed earth with her dress hiked up to her chest. He had never seen such a sight, even while he was in the family way with her. Back then, marital friendliness took place under the safety of the covers and the darkness of the bedroom. Jehovahazath's mother crawled her way over to her husband and proceeded to smack his face with a large rock that she found in the freshly plowed earth. After 16 smacks to the face, neck and forehead, Jehovahazath's father finally came to and was ready to become a midwife against his will. The man was just a simple farmer and had become forced to see things that weren't meant to be seen by anyone other than a doctor or nurse.

When Jehovahazath finally fell out of his mother's womb onto the freshly plowed earth after 17 hours of labor, he instantly sensed his oneness with the soil. It might have been that the soil had gone into his nose and mouth when he landed in it. He didn't remember. When his father told him the story of his birth in that field for the first time, Jehovahazath cried like a baby. Every time he was in the field toiling, he replayed the story in his head so as to instill the solidity of his oneness with the earth. Throughout Jehovahazath's upbringing, he never knew anyone else who

had been born on the very field that they worked each year for their existence. Naturally, Jehovahzath had many different fields to work each year and practiced crop rotation and other soil preservation methods, so that he definitely didn't always work the same field each year in which he had been born. It was a great story though.

Jehovazath was an old-school farmer who chose to do everything by hand, the same way that he had been taught. Actually, his father and mother had used plow horses in the early days, but times had become so difficult one year after the disappearance of his father and mother that Jehovahzath had to eat the plow horses. Since then, Jehovahzath had chosen the time-honored method of digging the fields by hand with a shovel. Obviously, it involved much more work than using horses to plow the fields, but Jehovahzath never really liked using those horses in that manner. He felt that animals weren't necessarily put on this earth for humanity to exploit. In Jehovahzath's reasoning, animals existed to procreate on their own and exist on their own as if humans didn't exist. It was when the humans came along and made the decision to exploit the animals of the earth that humanity had taken a turn for the worst. The humans began with the exploitation of the animals and then proceeded to exploiting and exhausting the earth's natural resources. It was obviously just a matter of time that humans would begin exploiting each other in the form of slavery and other such violations of the creator's inalienable rights.

It was difficult to imagine to farmers passing by Jehovahzath as he toiled in his fields with his many shovels that Jehovahzath could actually be enjoying any of it. The local farmers had all been employing horses for field plowing for years, as had Jehovahzath's parents. The possibly insaneness of Jehovahzath digging his many fields with a hand shovel, had baffled everyone who had be-speckled the spectacle. Jehovahzath had been laughed at by everyone he knew to the point that he had distanced himself from everyone. Jehovahzath didn't care about people; he only cared about and revered the soil. The particles of earth that had been passed down to him via his forefathers from the creator, were more precious and holy to Jehovahzath than anything. When his few remaining friends had queried him about his obsession with working his huge fields by hand, he only laughed at them and proceeded with his labors.

Jehovazath hated that he had somehow become obligated to explain his actions to people. He didn't care what anyone thought about the way he lived in his great world. He didn't have to anything in any manner that other people did things. Jehovahzath felt that he was actually the true individual, not them. It was for his resistance to conform to the norm that people questioned and harangued him. Jehovahzath felt that the norm was something intangible that people used as a reason to be lazy and exploitive. There was absolutely nothing wrong or abhorrent about doing things the hard, laborious way. People just didn't get it and definitely never would. The lazy, greedy, fat people of Jehovahzath's day had forgotten how things used to be in the olden days, when everyone struggled to survive, but loved the struggle.

Jehovazath had seen so many people become complacent, lazy and fat from not laboring. Those people had put themselves at risk for inevitable heartbreaks and failures, not to mention health problems.

Jehovazath had been rightfully raised on the credo that humans were engineered by their creator to perform physical labor and utilize their bodies while in an upright position. Why else would humans be born with legs? The age of exploiting animals for profit had created an age of lazy humans who were doomed to expire from heretofore-unknown reasons. Whenever passersby harassed Jehovahzath for digging his fields by hand, he only laughed and continued whistling and singing. One of Jehovahzath's favorite songs to whistle to and sing while working was "Whistle while you work." After not too long a time, Jehovahzath began painting the words of the songs on billboards that he installed along the roads in front of his fields. After some time, Jehovahzath became known for his many billboards. Unbeknownst to Jehovahzath, he had been given an artistic ability. He began decorating his billboards with scenes from the countryside. His billboards began to create a buzz.

It wasn't long before people began driving from great distances to view Jehovahzath's beautiful billboards. He began to construct larger and larger billboards that would contain his incredible paintings. Against Jehovahzath's will, his obsession had turned from working the fields to creating larger and large billboards on which to paint his meaningful scenes. Jehovahzath couldn't believe what was happening. He didn't know what had taken over him. He had always done what he felt the creator had instructed him to do. He wasn't exactly sure why he had become such an artist, but it was the way that it was meant to be. Jehovahzath went with the natural flow of his life and his creativity. He all too quickly found himself wanting to paint more and more scenic country settings. He became unable to help himself. As he spent his 18-hour days painting the scenes on the billboards, he tried to find the reason why he was doing it.

It seemed to be so against the grain that he had been born with. Why had he turned from a farmer into a painter? What happened to him? After creating dozens of paintings along the frontage of his farm fields and others along the frontage of seemingly every other landowner, Jehovahzath had an epiphany. He had been fighting it without realization. He hadn't been born a farmer; he had been born a painter. It took him a while to realize it, but that's what had happened. The years of toiling in the field had been necessary to free the pureness of his artisticness from his brain. It was only from the raw stress and strain of physical exertion that his real talent had been able to emerge from his soul. It was now out there for all the world to see and he actually liked it. He continued digging and planting his fields by hand, because his physical being required it. Along the way, as he sweated in the dirt, he came up with his ideas for his art works. It was all so real to him that he couldn't stand it or believe it.

How was it possible? Jehovahzath began to wonder how many other people on his beautiful earth

had similar talents within themselves waiting to be released. The only way for the people to release their hidden talents was to become involved in tremendous physical labor. The exertion seemed to be the catalyst necessary to bring out the artistic ability. Was this true? Jehovahzath had to find out. He had to know. Imagine if there were more people like him who had abilities to express themselves in paint, sculpture and other means of expression. Along with his artwork on the ever-increasing number of his billboards, he began to place a few suggestive words of text that asked the observers of the billboards to ask themselves if they had it in them to perform similar feats of expression. The billboards asked people if they wanted to become artists.

It wasn't long before total strangers were approaching the fences that lined Jehovahzath's fields as he worked in the fields. Everyone wanted to know what he was talking about. Most people had talent in some form or another; some utilized their talent and some didn't. Many people were too ashamed to let anyone know of their talents for fear of ridicule. While on water-drinking breaks, Jehovahzath talked to the people and answered their queries. When some people heard that by simply expending a little effort they would be able to become great artists, they scurried home to mow their lawns. Others went home and took bike rides. A few played golf. After weeks of trying out their new advice, none of the people had seen any results. The unsuccessful people returned to Jehovahzath and scoffed at his ideas. When Jehovahzath asked the scoffers what they had been doing and they told him of the puny efforts that they had expended, he laughed.

When Jehovahzath informed the people of the way to righteousness, he meant that it required a lot more physicality than most people were willing to involve themselves in. The people who mowed their lawns rode on their mowers. The bike riders only rode around the block. The golfers used golf carts. When Jehovahzath had explained to the people about the effort necessary for true revelation, he meant that they had to get out into the farm fields and work like horses. He thought it was obvious at the time that he had explained everything, especially since he had been struggling in his fields in between explaining his theory. It was a sign of the times that people had become lazy and wanted easy work and slackness. The lack of real exertion had morphed people into loaves of uncooked bread dough. There wasn't enough oxygen circulating in humanity's bloodstream to get the creative processes going deep within people.

Jehovahzath gave up on the lazy people and painted over the suggestive text on his billboards. He increased his amount of daily field labor to 18 hours and worked until he had almost exhausted himself. He fainted in the field on one hot afternoon and fell in the freshly plowed earth precisely where he had fallen out of his mother years ago. He lay in the field from about 1:00 pm until 7:30 pm, awoke briefly to piss in his pants and passed out again. He stayed in that dirt until 9:15 am the next morning and awoke with an epiphany. He dragged his weary body home and found an old plain sleeping shirt that his mother used to wear. The shirt was long and stained, but would suit his new purpose in life. Jehovahzath stripped down to nakedness and donned the sleeping shirt. He gathered up his painting supplies and walked over to one of his barns. He sat

down on the ground in front of the barn cross-legged for a few hours until the vision had struck him.

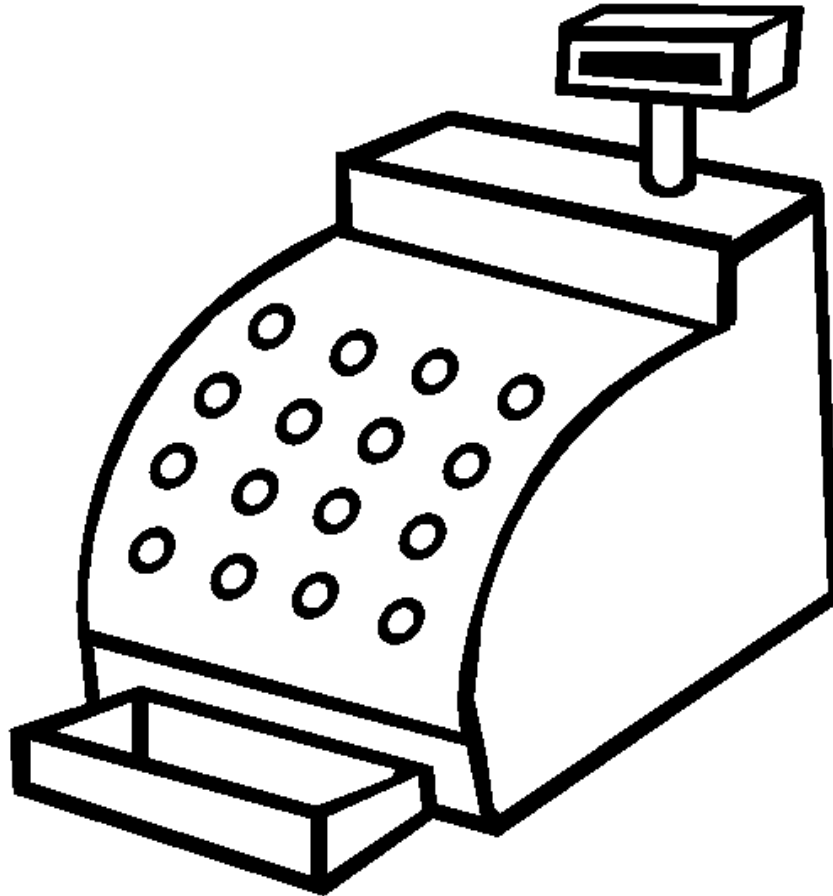
He jumped up and began feverishly painting one side of the barn. He gathered ladders and constructed scaffolds to paint the barn all the way up to the roof. The painted scene was spectacular and awe inspiring. He painted the other 3 sides of the barn until the entire barn was wrapped in a single scene. There was a breathtaking blue sky, fluffy white clouds, birds in flight, a shining sun, lush green grass with cows, goats, horses and sheep grazing, a stream meandering through the middle, stately trees, large shrubberies, flowers blooming in many bright colors, cute kitty cats searching for mice, frisky dogs chasing each other, foxes sniffing for moles, robins poking the ground for worms, dragonflies buzzing, mosquitoes flitting, horseflies nibbling and a multihued rainbow placed delicately so that it hindered nothing, while at the same time tying everything together. After 3 days of continuous effort, the barn painting was complete and he stumbled over to his next barn to begin a new masterpiece.

The townsfolk began to wonder what had happened to the farmer they had seen in the fields, day in and day out. Jehovahazath had vacated his fields and had become a full-time painter. When he was done with his 3 barns and the word finally got out about what he had been up to for the past 10 days, the people flocked to view his artworks. No one had ever seen such painting. The scale of the paintings was like no other. The canvas on which Jehovahazath painted was hundreds of times larger than the typical canvas used by the artists of the day. His barns were mind-bogglingly magnificent. Where did it come from? How did he do it? Why did he do it? Was Jehovahazath ok? Why wasn't he in his fields working? Why was he painting his barns? Was he crazy? The people wondered and ask themselves many questions. When Jehovahazath was asked any questions, he ignored the questioners as if they weren't even there.

When Jehovahazath had worked himself into exhaustion and had fallen in the field into the very dirt in which he had been born, his mother had reached out to him from the heavens. His mother had been blessed with the talent of artistry, but had never revealed it to anyone. She had passed on her talents to Jehovahazath. When Jehovahazath awoke to the epiphany, all he could think of was donning his mother's old sleep shirt. At the instant that he donned the shirt, he was struck with the urge to paint the barns. He was unable to explain it to himself or to anyone else for that matter. Along with the insatiable desire to paint the barns also came muteness. Jehovahazath had become a mute. He could no longer speak, but didn't care to. He only needed to paint. He could understand when people spoke to him, but couldn't answer them with ordinary words.

When Jehovahazath had put the finishing touches on his 3 barns, he was asked by a neighbor to paint his barns as well. Without saying a word, Jehovahazath gathered up his painting supplies, walked barefoot down the road to his neighbor's barn and sat down in the dirt cross-legged in front of it. After 17 hours of meditation, Jehovahazath began painting.

140. Kadge's Register



140. Kadge's Register

A double package of extra-thick cut bacon, "Beep!" a half gallon of extra-creamy chocolate ice cream, "Beep!" a 2-pound tub of butter, "Beep!" a gallon of whole milk, "Beep!" a 6-pack of Diet Pepsi, "Beep!" Kadge tried to hold back his giggle and failed. He was never very good at repressing his emotions. When he found something funny, he laughed; he couldn't help it. When he saw the diet Pepsi on the conveyor belt in front of him, he had to laugh. Here was a 300-325 pound woman wearing excessively tight leggings, buying all her usual high-fat, high-calorie foods and also buying Diet Pepsi. What was the point? When the woman heard Kadge's giggle, she asked him if there was a problem. Kadge shook his head to the left and right, which he hoped would be interpreted by the woman as a "No!" Kadge was unable to voice a response, because he was still attempting to stifle his laughter.

The woman asked again. Kadge choked and said, "No, ma'am!" Kadge continued checking out the items of the woman's order. Porterhouse steak, "Beep!" pork chops, "Beep!" gallon container of lard, "Beep!" a half gallon of extra-creamy strawberry ice cream, "Beep!" whipping cream, "Beep!" chocolate syrup, "Beep!" a 6-pack of sugar-free gum, "Beep!" Kadge snorted and giggled again. The woman asked if something was wrong again. Kadge shook his head as he held back his audible laughter. Kadge was laughing inside. His daily shift at the supermarket as a cashier/stock boy/flunkie was always filled with humorous and interesting events. The store was the only one in town and provided many underachieving people with their livelihoods.

Six large "everything" pizzas, "Beep!" a 3-layer cake from the bakery, "Beep!" a family size bag of chocolate chip cookies, "Beep!" a half gallon of extra-creamy vanilla ice cream, "Beep!" 12 bags of beef jerky, "Beep!" a 6-pack of Diet Coke, "Beep!" Kadge could no longer hold back the burgeoning mirth within himself and he burst out laughing. The woman demanded to know what was so funny. Kadge was unable to answer her or even shake his head from side to side to indicate a silent, "No." Kadge continued to check out the woman's items as he became hysterical. The enraged woman began pounding her fist on the moving conveyor belt as she maintained her indignation at the cashier, who was possibly laughing at her for some unknown-to-her reason. The other cashiers began to look at Kadge laughing and knew why he was laughing. They kept to themselves and silently performed their respective jobs of checking out their customers.

The woman's yelling at Kadge became so loud that the store manager was forced to leave his area to investigate. When the manager arrived, Kadge was still laughing as he checked out the woman's groceries. He couldn't help laughing and wished that he could stop, but he couldn't. It was just too funny to him. The woman picked up a small bag of carrots from the moving conveyor and tore open the bag. She pulled a carrot from the bag, reached across the conveyor and tried to stick the carrot up Kadge's nose. The manager pulled Kadge from behind the register just in time. The woman relented in her assault with the vegetable when she saw that the

manager had come to her rescue. As Kadge stood at the bagging area laughing and bagging the fat woman's items, the manager chatted with the woman. The woman wanted to know why the cashier was laughing, possibly at her for some reason. The manager insisted that Kadge wasn't laughing at the woman. When the manager looked at Kadge, Kadge finally became as serious as he could and stopped laughing. He still smirked as he packed the groceries. The manager finally completed the woman's items, the woman left the store in a huff and Kadge was sent to the warehouse part of the store to do some stocking. The manager called for another cashier to come to the front to take over Kadge's register.

It happened all the time. Every once in a while, someone would come through Kadge's register with a bizarre collection of items that would initiate within him a laughing fit. Kadge couldn't help it. If he found something funny, he laughed. He was human. The manager fully understood why Kadge had erupted into laughter at the woman, but it was unprofessional behavior that couldn't be tolerated. At store parties, the store employees and managers always had fun talking about the antics of the customers, but it was in a safe environment. The customers were never to know how the employees laughed at them; it simply wasn't done in the retail world. If the customers ever found out how funny they were to the store employees, the customers would stop shopping at the store.

Kadge was the youngest employee of the store and was still at the level of doing all the crappier jobs, which included stocking and cleaning up the many spills in the aisles. There were so many spills to clean up in an 8-hour shift that you would think that the primary goal of shoppers in a supermarket was to spill something. Kadge had cleaned up so many spilled products in his 3 years and 2 months at the supermarket that he thought every shopper to be a bumbling fool. At that point, he had decided that everyone who shopped in a grocery store was an idiot on the verge of spilling something onto the floor. It was just a matter of time. Maybe someone would grab a container of orange juice and during an unusual moment of clumsiness drop the container. The odds held that the container would crack open upon impact with the hard floor and spill its entire contents, thus crating a hazard for anyone daring to enter the area.

It was as if supermarkets had become designated as buildings where things happened out of the ordinary. When a typical oaf spilled a container of something in their kitchen at home, it became a simple matter of reaching for the paper towels, sponge or something to absorb the spilled liquid. In a supermarket, when the same oaf spilled a liquid, it became a matter of global importance. The spilling person immediately scurried out of the aisle as fast as they could. It didn't matter if the person had been done shopping in the aisle and had checked off all the items on their list. All that character knew was that they had to get to the next aisle as quickly as possible. If getting to the next aisle as quickly as possible, entailed bumping into the cart of a stranger, so be it.

The grocery store was a strange place where everyone knew that everyone else was there for the same reason. The shoppers in the store were temporarily in a food warehouse that contained the stuff that they wanted to buy. Occasionally, things got ugly and things were dropped on the way to the shopping cart. It was during those moments that everyday people became instantaneous criminals. It was funny how during the instant of dropping some item on the floor that would for whatever reason break open and spill that people would desire to evacuate the area, as if they were living in a tornado-prone zone. People who went to church every Sunday would think nothing of blaming their spill on the person who had remained in the aisle after they had left or the next person who had entered the aisle. People were funny like that.

People would barely stop while transiting stop signs while driving, sneak through just-changing red lights or even drive one mph or more over the posted speed limit. These people would consider the transgressions to be part of survival. When the same traffic law violators would somehow spill something in a supermarket, the rules would change. The last thing that most people ever wanted was to be blamed for spilling a bottle of honey on the floor in a grocery store. That stupid bottle had been crowded in with the other bottles and seemed to have an inborn desire to plummet to the floor. No one could control the desire of a bottle of honey, except the creator, even though that was still a bit of a reach. It was the shopper who had their phone in their hand instead of a shopping list like most people, who caused the trouble. The phone shoppers who paid so much for their phones and the monthly cost to operate the phones were so desperate to justify the luxuriousness of their phone bill, that they used the phones from everything to tracking how many times they pooped each week to controlling their weekly shopping lists.

Those buffoons, whom everyone has seen, were ridiculous. The average person was wholly satisfied with their shipping list, which they might have printed out from a basic word processor. The list would have the items organized in an aisle-by-aisle manner, which sped up the shopping process immensely. There truly weren't too many humans who actually enjoyed being in a supermarket for an unnecessary amount of time, except for the obvious lunatics, which were everywhere and the phone-shopping idiots. The phone-shoppers were people who were determined to justify to themselves paying too much for unnecessary technology and they also wanted the other people at the grocery store to know about it. The average people who managed to force themselves to go to a supermarket to buy the items necessary for living didn't give a hoot about some supposedly technologically better way of shopping for groceries. The average shopper only craved to get in and get out of the store, without spilling anything along the way.

The few idiots who shopped by phone were clearly out of their league when compared side-by-side with the veteran shopping woman of yesteryear who utilized hand-written lists and possessed every coupon under the sun. The phone idiots of the present time were too obsessed with justifying the excessive cost of their phone to go back to the basics and save more money by

utilizing the simple concepts of actually writing something down on a piece of paper and clipping coupons with a pair of scissors. Sometimes the old ways were the best ways. As Kadge thought about and laughed at the idea of the fat woman at the register, he was summoned to aisle 6 to clean up a spill. The supermarket that Kadge worked in was small, but employed an employee contact system, which avoided the general public address system for simple contact needs, such as a clean up. Kadge and the other flunkies were equipped with beeper/pagers that were capable of notifying the employees as needed. Aisle 6 was the juice aisle, so that Kadge expected to be cleaning up something wet and sticky.

As it turned out, one of the phone-shoppers had spilled one of their overpriced 400-calorie candy flavored coffees. Kadge pictured the woman with the Starbucks coffee in one hand and the phone in the other. As the probably overweight woman sipped from the high-calorie "coffee", she touched her phone for the next item on the list and dropped the coffee onto the floor. After Kadge had cleaned up the spill from the overpriced Starbucks coffee, he visited with his friend who worked at the security camera surveillance system. Even though the store was smallish, it was still equipped with a security system with cameras and a security guard watching the cameras. Kadge's friend wasn't the best security guard, but for the limited amount of losses that the store had each month, he would do. The security guard's name was Jepfer.

Jepfer typically spent more time playing with his phone than he did watching the cameras for issues. Kadge tasked Jepfer to rewind the tape for aisle 6 for the timeframe of 20 minutes ago. When the 2 morons viewed the tapes, they discovered the culprit to be a fat man of approximately 300-325 pounds. As Kadge had predicted, the fat man had been sipping his Starbucks coffee and had touched his overpriced phone for the next item on the list. When the goof became uncoordinated, as were most fat people, he dropped the coffee onto the floor. The last thing that any overpriced phone owner would ever do is drop their precious overpriced phone onto the floor. Kadge reckoned that if one of those people who transported hearts or kidneys on the way to transplant operations ever lost their balance while transporting the organ-containing cooler, they most likely would drop the cooler onto the ground before they dropped their phone. It was just the way that some idiots were in modern times. They couldn't help it.

As Kadge and Jepfer watched the film of the fat guy as he dropped the coffee, they laughed harder as the oaf scuffed his fat-footed sandals out of the aisle as quickly as his short fat legs could take him. Kadge and Jepfer hooted and snorted as they clicked the camera system over to the next aisle into which the fat man lumbered, which was the lotions and creams aisle. The obese beast dropped tube after tube of hemorrhoid ointment and other embarrassing potions into his little basket. Then the fat guy walked to the end of the aisle, turned and peeked down the aisle with the spilled coffee. Apparently, the fat phone pig had felt guilty about his crime and was returning to the scene. The overweight demon actually walked down the aisle and ferried his barge like presence past the spill, as if to gain satisfaction from it for some twisted reason. Jepfer

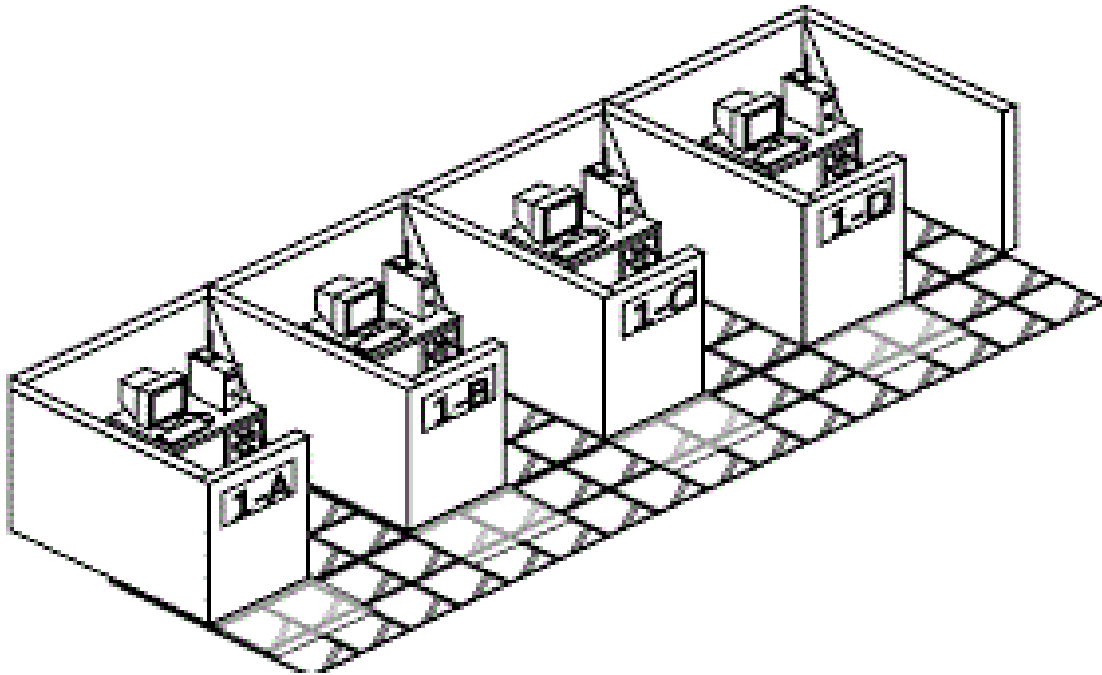
and Kadge decided that the fat pig probably had very little other satisfaction in his miserable life than spilling liquids on the floors of stores, only for the employees to clean things up. It was definitely a twisted form of power, similar to the power felt by top business executives when they fired underlings. Power was power.

Just for kicks, Kadge did a little research on the fat guy and managed to discern the address of the bulky buffoon. After work, Kadge rode his neat bicycle to the obese man's house. Kadge loved his beautiful bicycle. He had crafted the bicycle from junkyard parts and from parts bought while he was a door-to-door salesman. Kadge couldn't believe how incredible the fat guy's house looked. It seemed to be all windows. Kadge asked himself how such a seemingly idiotic overweight hog could possibly have the wherewithal to own such a mansion. When Kadge spotted in one of the large windows the fat guy hugging what appeared to be his mother, the question had been answered. The fat guy was just another fat guy who lived at home and had never been inclined to venture out on his own. Kadge continued surveiling the fat guy and his mother in their mansion for many hours. The sights that Kadge had seen during those hours would have disturbed most people to the point of vomiting. Kadge had essentially grown up in poverty and had seen it all, so that few things could ever bother him if he saw them. That is until now.

Kadge watched in horror from his hiding place as the fat guy applied the ointment from the many tubes that he had purchased from the store, to the bare back of his mother. The mother was on all fours on the floor, walking around and bucking like a bronco. The lardish man then climbed onto the back of his mother as she was in a bucking-backward position. The guy was immediately thrown backward into the fireplace that had contained a roaring blaze of hardwoods. The guy landed in the fire and went up in flames. Kadge reckoned that the guy must have been coated in some type of flammable oil or grease. Kadge wondered earlier why the guy had appeared so shiny. Kadge thought that perhaps the fat man was just really sweaty from over exertion, as most fat people can easily become. As the woman's son became incinerated by the fire in the fireplace, she looked around in all directions with owl eyes. She obviously wore a guilty look on her face and was seeking a way out.

She ran to the window and spied Kadge, who had just emerged from his hiding place. Kadge had crawled out onto the grass to gain a better perspective on the goings-on between the mother and son. As Kadge soon discovered, that turned out to be a bit of a mistake in judgement. The woman thundered out the front door of the largish house, still shiny-backed from the substance applied by her son. She was wielding an enormous fireplace iron. Kadge wasn't positive, but the woman looked as if she was heading right for him. When Kadge had finally determined that the woman had in fact seen him and most likely intended to do him harm, it was too late. The rotund woman was upon him. As the woman rained blows upon Kadge's face, shoulders and neck, he for some reason noted that she looked fatter in person than she had in the window.

141. Zero's Colleagues



141. Zero's Colleagues

Zero couldn't stand it. That Yang was clipping his fingernails again. How could someone be so inconsiderate? Clip, clip, clip, clip, Argh! What was wrong with some people? Zero wouldn't even consider clipping his own fingernails at work, or anywhere else in public, for that matter. That oaf Yang clipped his nails once or twice a week. It was making zero insane. He told himself that maybe it was just him. Maybe he was the only one in the office bothered by Yang's fingernail clipping. He couldn't be, though. Zero thought that most people would have to be put off at least a little, by someone performing noisy personal grooming in their place of business. Now he was clearing his throat! That was even worse than the nail clipping! Zero guessed that perhaps Yang wasn't able to prevent himself from having to clear his throat, because it was a basic human function after all. But why did he have to do it so loudly?

Yang worked in cubicle 1-A, which was adjacent to Zero's 1-B workplace. Wynona worked in 1-C and Veronique worked in 1-D. It was a tightly packed bunch of sardines who worked in that gigantic complex. Zero's group one, was only one of the 26 total cubicle groups in the warehouse turned office space. All the groups were placed adjacent to each other, in front of and behind. It was a potential lunatic asylum for someone to work there, as it was for Zero. He had a low tolerance for the habits of relative strangers. He considered Yang, Wynona and Veronique to be strangers, even though he interacted with them at the office. He never did anything socially with the 3 people and only participated at office parties. He didn't know the people and didn't care to know them. It was all that he could muster to put up with their annoying idiosyncrasies each day at work. There was something about the configuration and design of the 4 cubicles in a group that somehow magnified worker-produced sounds inward toward the center of the cubicle group.

Wynona had those really long expensively manicured fingernails, with which she typed on her keyboard. That unmistakable racket of a plasticky fingernail hitting a key was like nails being driven into Zero's skull. He supposed that in order to work in an office environment, the workers had to be able to ignore or tolerate the noise created by the workers around them. Zero wasn't capable of tolerating unnecessary noises. Yang didn't have to clip his fingernails at work; that was just plain stupid. Wynona didn't have to have such long freakish fingernails. If she had normal-length fingernails, she would be able to type on her keyboard with her quieter fingertips, the way he did. Then there was the smell of Veronique's perfume, which had to bother all the workers in a 20-foot radius around her. Even though she worked 2 cubicles away, Zero could still smell the excessive perfume fragrance all day long. He felt sorry for Wynona, who sat right next to Veronique, but perhaps Wynona liked the smell.

It wasn't that Zero hated the smell of perfume; in fact, he rather liked it, especially if it was one of those more expensive varieties. It was the fact that Veronique applied too much of the

concentrated scent each morning. Zero postulated that it was better for a woman to wear too little perfume than too much. Even though Yang was a continual annoyance to Zero, Yang was as offended by Veronique's perfume as much as he was. At least, Zero had that much in common with Yang, even though he still despised the man for clipping his fingernails at work. Yang had revealed the bit of information about Veronique's perfume to Zero while the 2 of them were at the coffee dispenser on one fateful morning. Zero usually tried to listen closely for the coffee dispenser area to be vacant, before he went to get coffee. Zero was one of those people who could take or leave other people. It was just that simple. He didn't need to involve himself in unnecessary chitchat with other workers, simply because they encountered each other at the office.

When Zero was positive that the coffee dispenser area was vacant, he sashayed over with his cup, just as Yang arrived. Initially, Zero attempted to maintain silence, but then Yang brought up the concept of Veronique's perfume. They talked for a moment and Zero hastily returned to his desk, without putting the milk and sugar in his coffee. He had to get away from his conversation with Yang as quickly as possible. Zero never wanted to be seen idly chatting with his co-workers; it wasn't in his genes. He had a thing about always being busy at work and not wasting company time. Sometimes, Zero thought his co-workers might find him a little weird, but he didn't care. He was who he was and if they didn't like it, too bad for them. He was there to work and nothing more. He did whatever he could, to avoid being trapped in useless conversations with people and being alone at the coffee dispenser was the key. It wasn't always possible.

One day, after he was positive that the coast was clear, he walked to the coffee dispenser just as Wynona stepped out of her cubicle with her cup. Drats! Zero poured himself a cup and then out of etiquette, poured some for Wynona. As he poured, he noticed her long fingernails as she held the coffee cup. They were painted pink with rainbows and white dots on the very tips. Zero thought that they actually looked pretty cool. Unfortunately, he admired them too long and Wynona asked him if he liked them. Zero gulped at the fact that he had been caught looking at her fingernails and was appearing to like them. Maybe he had an admiring look on his face of which he was unaware. Zero had to think quickly. He stuttered slightly and said that he liked them. Drats! He had inadvertently complimented the very fingernails that annoyed him each long day. Wynona thanked Zero for the compliment and his face became beet red. He sensed that his face was red, because it felt hot and he shuffled back to his cubicle without adding sugar and milk to his coffee.

Zero decided that he hated drinking black coffee as a result of omitting the sugar and milk while avoiding talking to people at the coffee dispenser. He bought some of those sugar packets and dry creamer packets to keep in his desk, along with a spoon. He detested the dry creamer, but it was better than having to converse with his co-workers at the coffee dispenser. Anything was better than that. One of the worst things at work was when Yang would talk to Wynona through

Zero's cubicle while Zero was sitting in it. Didn't they ever hear of using a phone? It was usually some work-related information that Yang had to retrieve from Wynona, that only she knew. That's what email was for! On some days, Zero's co-workers drove him to the brink of something. He didn't know what that brink was and he didn't want to know. Everyone had heard about people who worked in offices who went crazy and committed unusual acts. Zero didn't want to become one of those lunatics. He loved his job, because it was challenging and paid good money. He was working at a job that utilized his Bachelor's Degree, which was rare. There was no way for him to make as much money as he was currently making, unless he found another company. The problem was that since he had been working at his company for 6 years, his pay had increased each year. If he considered another company, he might have to start out at a lower salary, which wouldn't work. Zero was still paying off the student loans from his college and had other expenses as well.

Zero was forced to put up with the antics of his co-workers and that was it. He struggled to concentrate at his desk and not be bothered by the fingernail clipping, the fingernails tapping on the keyboard, the perfume cloud, the useless banter and other daily annoyances. It was difficult. Then Yang farted. It had to be Yang, because no woman would ever fart at work. Zero knew women would rather be crucified on a cross than be caught farting at work. It had to be that pig Yang. Man, did it stink! Argh! Yang! You pig! Zero grabbed his coffee cup without first listening for the coffee dispenser clearance signal. He had to get out of his cubicle; the smell was that bad! As Zero passed by Yang's cubicle on his way to the coffee dispenser, the stench cloud poured out of Yang's cubicle. Yep, it was definitely Yang who had dropped the stink bomb. That filthy monster! How could he be so disgusting? That's what the Men's Room was for!

At the coffee dispenser, Zero encountered Veronique, who was wearing her typically excessive amount of perfume. She was standing there drinking from her cup. As Zero stepped toward the dispenser, he looked at Veronique as an acknowledgement of her presence - more office etiquette. She frowned for some reason. Through the smell of her powerful perfume, he managed to detect a bit of Yang's fart. Oh no! Did Veronique think that he had just farted? Is that what she was thinking? Zero's mind raced and he instantly surmised that when he walked past Yang's cubicle through the fart cloud, some of the stench must have clung to his clothing. Now he was standing next to Veronique and she thinks he farted in her presence. Great! Veronique continued frowning as she walked away from the coffee dispenser on the way back to her cubicle.

When Zero went back to his cubicle, he heard Wynona and Veronique talking to each other in whispered tones through their cubicle walls. Zero definitely heard his name being quietly whispered. Zero then unmistakably heard Wynona utter an expression of disgust that was probably related to him. That idiot Yang! Now Veronique thinks I'm a pig and Wynona does as well. Zero thought about some way to change the opinion that the 2 women had of him. That

Yang! Zero spent the remainder of the day thinking about a solution. Of course! The next day at work, Zero waited for Yang to fart again. He didn't. Two more days passed and still no Yang fart was detected. On Friday, Yang farted. Yes! Zero instantly exited his cubicle and invited Wynona and Veronique to free coffees. The coffee dispenser had a metal box for the donations for coffee supplies and each cup was supposed to cost 25 cents, if the person was honest. Nobody turned anything free these days, so the women immediately jumped up and made there way to the coffee dispenser. Zero made sure to walk behind the women so they would smell the stench pouring from Yang cubicle. The women were both fumigated by Yang's fart cloud and they expressed their disgust when they arrived at the coffee dispenser.

Zero made sure to express his disgust at the gall of Yang to emit such a foul stench into the pristine atmosphere of the office. The women agreed and actually revealed that they thought it was Zero who was the office fart monster. Zero giggled and then became embarrassed and red-faced. He wasn't very good about concealing his emotions. The women giggled and they finished their coffees after about 10 minutes. Zero was beginning to get nervous that a supervisor would spot him. Zero had a good reason for being at the coffee dispenser; he was waiting for Yang's stench to dissipate. Sure enough, a supervisor arrived at the coffee dispenser with a cup in his hand. He uttered some typical nonsense about the weather. Zero was panicking. He felt that he had been caught in the act of standing around and talking. Zero was shocked beyond belief when Wynona whispered something to the supervisor.

Zero managed to glean the essence of the whisper. Wynona told the supervisor that the reason Zero, she and Veronique were standing there drinking their coffees was because they were waiting for Yang's fart stench to dissipate. The supervisor giggled and then Wynona giggled. Veronique began giggling, because she knew what Wynona had said to the supervisor. Zero found himself being pulled into the giggle-fest. He began quietly giggling at a similar volume as the other 3 people, but then he lost control. He began chuckling and then laughing. He laughed louder. He laughed louder still. The supervisor stopped giggling and a look of concern landed on his face. Wynona and Veronique stopped their giggling and also donned looks of concern.

Zero couldn't stop himself from laughing. The supervisor walked away and the 2 women did the same. Yang walked over to get some coffee and encountered the still-laughing Zero. Yang asked Zero what was so funny. Zero managed to finally restrain himself from laughing hysterically and gradually toned it back down to a giggle. As Zero giggled, he attempted to voice some words to Yang about how it was all Yang's fault. Yang wasn't able to understand what Zero was talking about, prepared his coffee and walked back to his cubicle. After 2 more minutes, Zero's giggle had been reduced to minor hiccupping. As Zero walked to his cubicle, he saw Yang in the opening of Veronique's cubicle. He was talking to Veronique and Wynona, who was sitting in Veronique's visitor's chair. Zero sat down at his desk and noticed that the 3 people had lowered their voices. They were talking about him; they had to be!

Those fools! There was that pig Yang talking to the women after he had just been labeled as the office farter. Only now, the attention had been turned toward Zero's maniacal laughing fit. Yang had apparently been exonerated and Zero had become the conversational subject of the moment. Those idiots! Where was a supervisor when you needed one? They continued muttering, but Zero couldn't tell what they were saying. He only managed to hear his name mentioned a few times. The 3 buffoons chuckled as they gossiped. What nerve those people had! They had to know that Zero knew they were talking about him. They had to! How dare they! Those 3 gossiping hens were part of the problem with offices. Too few people were wholly dedicated to working an 8-hour shift without wasting company time with their idle chatter and silly gossip.

Yang and the 2 women talked for another 9 minutes and then went back to work. Finally! Zero exclaimed to himself. Now he would be able to concentrate on his work without wondering what his co-workers were saying about him. Naturally, it was partly his fault. He didn't know what had come over him to cause him to break into such crazed laughter. He had never done that before. He never did that while watching TV at home. He reckoned that perhaps he had a buildup of anxiety that had surfaced and been released through the laughter. He wished that it hadn't happened at work. Why couldn't he have burst into crazed laughter while still in the parking lot? People must think he's some kind of a psycho now. Up until that time, he was just the little quiet guy who always applied himself and kept his nose to the grindstone.

Zero had become the office psycho, which was much worse than being the office farter as Yang had been discovered to be. The problem with being a quiet guy, who no one knew anything about and then the quiet guy became a psychotic laugher, was that people became afraid of him. Yang, Wynona and Veronique immediately became indifferent to him and began ignoring him. Zero actually started going to get his coffee when he knew that his co-workers were at the coffee dispenser. They left as soon as he got there, even though they might have been in the middle of an interesting conversation. Zero had become a pariah. He didn't like it. He had inadvertently gained the lack of attention that he had wanted all along. No one would talk to him, for fear of igniting another fit of uncontrollable laughter. He had the invisibleness of an invisible man.

Zero could now go to the coffee dispenser any time he wanted and when he arrived, whoever was there would immediately leave. Of course, the people always nodded to him out of common courtesy. His co-workers acknowledged his presence, but in a tightly limited manner. No one wanted to be trapped in a conversation with him for any reason. His 3 primary co-workers only communicated with him through email and rarely asked him anything orally. Zero had to ask himself to take a step back and to accept that he finally had what he wanted. Sure, he had to tolerate Yang's farting and fingernail clipping, Wynona's noisy fingernail typing and Veronique's perfume cloud, but at least they weren't possibly getting him in trouble by talking to him. The last thing that Zero wanted at his place of business was to be seen by a supervisor while idly chatting with someone. It wasn't his thing.

142. Randy's Rangers



142. Randy's Rangers

Randy had become sick and tired of all the petty crimes taking place in his neighborhood and wanted to do something about it. The Police force was too limited in personnel to have enough of an effect on the crimes. All the little old ladies whom Randy knew from his paper route were getting too afraid to go to the Piggly Wiggly to do their weekly shopping. Randy knew a select group of misfits who were all similar to himself and they all wanted to be a part of a cause. Randy had been thinking about the cause for quite a while. The incident that solidified his resolve took place one morning while he was delivering his papers. Out of nowhere, 2 ski-masked criminals emerged from the morning's limited light and knocked him off his bicycle. One of the hoods claimed to be in possession of a knife that he would use on Randy if Randy didn't comply.

Randy complied and watched the criminals ride off on his bike with the undelivered papers and all his money. The situation had become worse and worse in his town and when he had become robbed by the petty thieves, Randy had finally been prodded into action. He put his boots on the ground, as they say, whoever they are. He rounded up the members of his chess club - Spanky, Sissy, Bud and Missy. They had a special meeting in the clubhouse behind Missy's house. They all agreed that their town's former glory and peacefulness was gradually eroding. They all had been the victims of petty crimes. Spanky was walking home from the bakery with a marble rye bread under his arm and a masked bandit ran off with it, before Spanky could say, "Jiminy Cricket."

The others asked Spanky why he would say, "Jiminy Cricket" and he said that he would probably never actually utter the phrase, but it sounded good in his tale of the crime. The others suggested to Spanky that he not use those strange phrases in the future when he told stories about anything. They all maintained that it sounded a little too "Disney" for their tastes. Sissy was walking home from ice skating lessons at the local ice rink when a masked bandit ran by and swiped the ice skates that were dangling on her shoulder. Sissy said the bandit appeared and disappeared so quickly that she hardly had enough time to say, "Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious." The others asked Sissy why she would say, "supercalifragilisticexpialidocious" and she said that she would never actually say the phrase. In fact, she couldn't even spell it. The others chastised Sissy for using another "Disney" term and hoped that she wouldn't use one in the future. She said that she would try, but couldn't guarantee anything.

Bud related his crime tale of how he had been attempting to buy something with a credit card that he had found on the street. He was trying to buy a pair of those new Michael Jordan basketball sneakers at the mall, when the sales associate informed him that the credit card had been stolen. The associate cut the credit card, grabbed the sneakers from the counter and called for security. Bud ran out of the mall faster than he could say "Rumpelstiltskin." Randy slapped Bud's face

and yelled at him for telling them a story about his own potential crime. Bud insisted to the others that a crime had indeed taken place, the theft of the credit card. In Bud's mind, he wasn't the thief; the thief was the person who had stolen the credit card in the first place and had dropped it in the street. When the others attempted to explain to Bud that he had himself committed a crime by attempting to use a stolen credit card, he pleaded that he didn't see it that way. Bud had become nervous and jerky by that point from Randy's face slap and was speaking in a loud and shrieky voice. Tears began cascading from Bud's eyes as he attempted to defend his actions. No matter how many different ways that Bud told his story, the others had branded him a criminal by misadventure and decided to forgive him.

When they all had made peace with Bud, they asked him why he would consider voicing the term, "Rumpelstiltskin" when they had just warned Spanky and Sissy to avoid using "Disney" references. Bud laughed at the others for their obviously lower level of literacy than his own. He boldly claimed that "Rumpelstiltskin" was from a "Brothers Grimm" story and definitely not "Disney" related. The others were at a loss, because no one was as well-read as Bud. He read every book in the Elementary School library and the High School library. He seemed to be always reading. Whenever the others would call Bud on the phone, he was always in the middle of reading something and would tell them that he would be available when he finished the chapter of whatever he was reading. The others were forced to take Bud's word for his claim and waited for Missy's crime tale to be told.

Missy claimed that while she walked home from the farmer's market with a large pumpkin for jack o' lantern carving, a masked bandit streaked by and yanked the pumpkin from her grip, which she admitted had been weakening, because it was such a large pumpkin. She had debated buying such a large pumpkin for carving, but the farmer convinced her into buying the thing. Missy said the masked bandit flew into and out of her life faster than she could say, "Um Diddle Diddle Diddle Um Diddle Ay." Sissy slapped Missy's face and scolded her for using another "Disney" reference. Missy admitted that she had been carried away with her story when she used the "Disney" reference, but it seemed at the time to be a necessary addition. All the others, except for Randy agreed that some type of outside reference really tended to spruce up a story and make it more interesting. Randy had to remind the group that when he told them his story, he didn't use any "Disney" or "Brothers Grimm" reference; he simply told it the way that it had happened.

The others agreed that Randy's story was the cleanest and without frills, but the other stories with the sugary references were still somehow better. Randy finally relented that the stories with the frilly references were more refined. The group decided that in the future, it would be perfectly acceptable for any of them to add "Disney" or "Brothers Grimm" references to their stories at will. Once the group had heard all the stories and hammered out the rules for future story telling, they were all on the same page again and could get down to the business at hand, which was how

to fight back at the criminals. What the group needed was to form into some type of vigilante brigade. Randy was the first to suggest the term vigilantes, but the others thought the term to be too "Charles Bronsonish" ala the "Death Wish" movies. Spanky suggested that they become a death squad, but the others concluded that they really didn't want to go around killing anyone. All they wanted was to be vigilant citizens on the alert to prevent crimes and bring criminals to justice. If they actually killed criminals for petty thefts of marble rye breads, they would become worse than the criminals. When the others mentioned the word vigilant, Randy immediately spoke up about his vigilante idea. The others assured Randy that being vigilant and being vigilantes were 2 different things. Everyone paused speaking and looked at Bud, who was the most intelligent group member and he concurred that the words vigilant and vigilante definitely meant different things.

Sissy thought they should buy horses and ride around like the "Lone Ranger" except they wouldn't be alone while they were doing it. They would always engage in their crime fighting together as a group. Missy added that there was strength in numbers and the others thanked her for her obvious remark that didn't really need to be said. She insisted that she was only trying to be helpful and there was no need to make fun of her. The others apologized to Missy and she accepted their apologies. The others thought that horses added to the group would drastically complicate matters, because then they would have to feed and water the horses all the time. In addition, the horses would be pooping all over the streets of their fair town and the residents would find it offensive. The group couldn't be wasting valuable time cleaning up horse poop when they should be using their time more effectively fighting crime.

The group decided that the horses were out of the picture. Randy suggested that they utilize the word ranger in the name of their group and adopt the title of "Randy's Rangers." The others liked the idea of a 2-word phrase as the name of their merry band, but Sissy thought it should be called "Sissy's Rangers," because she thought of it first. Spanky thought "Spanky's Rangers" had a better ring to it. Bud naturally thought "Bud's Rangers" would be the most suitable title. Missy had no input on the specific name of the group except that she liked "Rangers" somewhere in the title. Randy stood up at the meeting and demanded the name to be, "Randy's Rangers." He was the person of their group who decided to form a group of crime fighters in the first place. He deserved to have his name in the title of their squad. Sissy jumped to her feet and slapped Randy's face. She said that it was her idea to have "Ranger" in the title and for that reason, the group should be called "Sissy's Rangers." The others agreed that Sissy did have a point.

Randy outright denied anyone's right to have their name in the title of their squad. It was his general idea to form the squad and the fact that Sissy had luckily come up with a cool name had nothing to do with it. The name of the group is secondary to the primary concept of the group itself. Since Randy initiated the primary idea, the squad should be named after him. Missy jumped up and slapped Randy's face. She was on Sissy's side in that the squad should be named

after Sissy, because she came up with the "Lone Ranger" concept. The others agreed that the "Lone Ranger" concept was definitely cool, but also that Randy had initiated the squad concept. The group seemed to be at a stalemate. The group liked using chess terms, since they were still technically a chess club. They decided to enforce their chess club rules in the event of stalemates, which involved no possible winner in a chess match. The chess club rules involved a list of challenges, both mental and physical that would determine the outcome of a stalemated chess match. There were many challenges to choose from and the group settled on the chair stacking challenge.

The group's members would carefully stack chairs on top of each other in a single column and climb the ever-increasing stack higher and higher until the person fell off, the stack collapsed or both. The winner was determined by the highest number of stacked chairs. They had a bunch of old chairs in their clubhouse and they took turns one-by-one. Sissy stacked 3 chairs, before she fell off onto the lawn. The chairs fell on top of her and gave her a blackened right eye. She wasn't hurt too badly and actually liked the black eye, because it made her look tough. Spanky stacked 4 chairs before falling off the top chair onto the lawn. Incredibly, the stack stayed in place, which was unusual. Missy managed to stack 5 chairs, but the entire stack fell over as she was climbing onto the 5th chair. She suffered a mild concussion from the 5th chair that landed on her forehead as she lay on the lawn. Bud stacked 6 chairs, which tied the record for the group. He successfully stacked the 6th chair and climbed onto it, but then jumped off before the requisite 7 seconds had elapsed. Incredibly, the stack stayed in place. Randy successfully stacked the record-tying 6th chair and stayed on the stack for the full 7 seconds.

As Randy attempted to jump off the stack, he slipped and one of the chair legs poked him in the torso and broke one of his ribs. He won the challenge, but gained a trip to the Emergency Room in the process. Later that day, after Randy returned from the hospital, the group met again and named Randy as the winner. The squad was to be called "Randy's Rangers." It was official. The next task on the agenda of "Randy's Rangers" was for the 5 members to create their individual crime fighting personalities and catch phrases, as they would be identified throughout history. It sounded more dramatic than it really was, but the group relished every moment of the escapade. Right off the bat, Randy wanted to be "The Lone Ranger," but Sissy understandably had a lot to say about it. She stipulated that she wanted that title. They already went through this whole discussion. Sissy was the first one of the squad to bring "The Lone Ranger" to the table and had to have that name. The others talked briefly and voted to allow Sissy to have her name and it became final, much to Randy's disgust.

Randy thought about his name for a while and decided on "Captain Marvel." No one seemed to have any objections to Randy's choice so that it became official. Out of seemingly insane excitement, he began shouting, "Shazam!" at the top of his lungs. Over and over again, "Shazam!" "Shazam!" "Shazam!" The others had to restrain Randy and tie him with belts. They

shoved socks into his mouth to make him shut up. Randy eventually calmed down and they removed the spit-soaked socks. Randy belted out one more "Shazam!" and Sissy slapped his face, shouting "Hi-Yo Silver!" The others begged Randy and Sissy to settle down or they would both be tied up and gagged. Spanky shouted out "Up, up and away!" Everyone knew that catch phrase implied that Spanky wanted to be "Superman," which was fine by everybody. Things were going along much smoother than the crew had anticipated, until Missy and Bud simultaneously roared "Cowabunga!" They both obviously wanted to be "Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles." Missy slapped Bud's face and told him to relinquish his choice. He didn't want to and expressed his feelings by spitting on her left ear. Missy slapped Bud again. He spat on her right ear. She slapped him again and he spat on her face. It was beginning to get ugly in the clubhouse.

Randy stepped between the quarreling duo and received a slap to the face and a blob of spit on his chin. There appeared to be another stalemate in the chess club, which required another challenge. Only Missy and Bud were required to participate in the challenge, which was slated to be the challenge of night crawler consumption. Randy went to the refrigerator in the corner of the clubhouse and produced 10 containers of 12 night crawlers each that the group ordinarily used for fishing. The winner would be the person who could eat and swallow the highest number of night crawlers. There would be a time period of 30 minutes afterward to enforce the non-barfing rule of the challenge. Missy and Bud walked to the table, sat down and began eating the carefully counted night crawlers. The worms were removed from the containers and handed to the contestants one at a time, with the non-contestants keeping track of the numbers and the swallowing verifications.

They began in Earnest, with Missy taking an early lead on Bud. She appeared to really want her choice of superhero in the worst way. Bud gained momentarily while Missy caught her breath, but then Missy took off again like a racehorse. They started with a total of 120 night crawlers and thought the quantity to be plenty for the challenge, but Missy and Bud were going to town on the worms, like flies on a rib roast. As the combatants approached the final dozen night crawlers, Missy stopped eating and became green under the gills. Bud paused to watch Missy in the hopes that she would vomit and automatically lose the challenge. When Bud stopped eating, his concentration became diverted from eating his worms and his stomach had other ideas. Bud barfed out his worms. Upon seeing and smelling Bud's stomach contents on the table, Missy vomited as well. Since both contestants had spewed during the challenge, they both automatically lost, irrespective of who barfed first. The number of eaten worms would determine the victor. Randy, Sissy and Spanky attempted to count the number of night crawlers consumed by each contestant, which fortunately were in 2 separate vomit piles. They counted the best they could, because the worms were in pieces and care was necessary to determine the exact number. Inevitably, the smell of the heaved worms became too much for Randy, Sissy and Spanky to bear and they all barfed onto the table, thus obliterating the results of the challenge.

143. Alan's Revelations



143. Alan's Revelations

People told secrets to other people all the time. Sometimes, the secrets were told to friends, relatives or even neighbors, if the secrets were tame enough. People told deep secrets to therapists and psychiatrists that excavated from dark brain caves. Children told secrets to their little playmates. Romantically linked people told each other secrets. People told themselves secrets that were never to be revealed to anyone. There were infinite numbers of secrets being revealed at any given moment in time. The essence of a secret was that it was meant to be shared between 2 people and only 2 people, the person telling the secret and the person the secret was being told to. Secrets by definition were fleeting entities, because they didn't stay true to their definition for very long. Secrets by definition sometimes became undefined and quickly became redefined as common knowledge within seconds or minutes after the telling of the secret. It was human nature for people to enjoy both sides of the secret coin.

Some people liked telling someone a secret, because the teller hoped the information would stay between the teller and the trusted recipient of the secret. Some people liked being on the receiving end of secrets, because it meant that someone trusted them enough to tell them something that was meant to go no further. Some people enjoyed revealing received secrets to other people, because it was human nature to break promises and bonds with people. The question, "Can you keep a secret?" really only has one answer and that answer is "No!" No one can ever be trusted to keep a secret or should be expected to keep a secret. If a person possessed information that was meant to be kept a secret only between the teller and receiver, the information was better left kept to oneself. It was just a matter of time that the receiver of the secret would blab or someone known to the receiver would wheedle the information from them. Someone once said, "To keep a secret is wisdom, but to expect others to keep it is folly."

Alan kept all the secrets that were told to him, because it was part of his job. It seemed funny that a job, career or vocation actually existed, which had secret keeping as a primary function. Nevertheless, it was Alan's job. It went pretty much the same way each time. "Bless me blah blah, my last confession blah blah blah." Alan never tired of listening to people's secrets, because he had been spiritually called to his profession and had been thoroughly trained in its intimate workings. Naturally, Alan performed many other functions during his workday, but his favorite part was listening to the secrets. From the very first time, it always impressed him that people would reveal basic and personal secrets to him that they wouldn't think of telling to anyone else, even to friends, lovers or relatives. What was it about Alan's occupation that made him so special? Who was he anyway? He was just a typical boring person who never really thought too much about romantic encounters with anyone and he had just happened to have his special spiritual calling to duty one morning.

He remembers it vividly as if it had just happened yesterday. He awoke from a restless sleep and

had lain in bed for a few minutes. He had tapped the snooze button on the stupid alarm clock twice already. He had to get up to get ready for his High School graduation. He had just dozed off again and he heard his mother's screeching voice, screaming his name, "Alan! Alan! Get up or you'll be late!" After the 3rd time of her grating voice yelling too loudly into his face, he finally awakened. As she left the room, he rolled over to get out of bed and he fell onto the floor. His bed was one of those oddly high contraptions that were apparently easier to get into and out of, because they were so abnormally high, abnormally high to him anyway. He landed on the floor with a cacophonous crash and hit his head on the oak slats. He was instantly knocked senseless.

During his brief period of mild concussion-induced stupor, he found himself in a dream unlike any other. He was floating along in a standing upright position, as if he was walking, but floating just above the floor, except that there was no floor. Beneath him was a misty, foggy atmosphere. He noted that the mist smelled like gardenias or lilacs or a combination of both. He was happier than he had ever been in his confused life. He felt like he wanted to feel that way forever. He instantaneously had thoughts and feelings of heaven, hell, purgatory and all the other mystical concepts related to organized religion. He wasn't able to concentrate on the annoying details that are too often associated with the mystical concepts, but he didn't care to. He had reached or achieved a nirvana-like state.

He had heard about people who passed away momentarily on operating tables or in other situations of life and death. There were many stories in which those people saw some light, felt completely at peace, imagined that they were weightless and floating. He felt bits and pieces of those feelings during his dream. As Alan floated, he felt that he could determine the direction in which he was floating. He felt that he could determine the outcome. He felt that he was floating toward something that he had perhaps had been destined to encounter. It seemed like milliseconds, but was actually 13 minutes in real time. Alan began to feel a little warmer; the air became a little cooler; the mist intensified; it began to smell like roses; he began to feel nauseated; his body wanted to cleanse itself as if it was preparing for something incredible.

Alan involuntarily vomited and defecated and urinated until his body was empty. As he floated, he passed under a torrential waterfall that was more intense than Niagara Falls. The waterfall stripped him naked. The light became so intensely bright and increasing in temperature that Alan felt like he was Icarus flying toward the sun, except that Alan felt invincible. Icarus was cowardly and weak and had only failed because of his lack of confidence in himself. All anyone needed in life was the confidence in themselves that they could do whatever they wanted. Alan had so much confidence in himself that even though he was naked, he could do anything, even walk on planet Mercury or run a marathon on an Alaskan ice field. Alan was so alive that he could barely stand it. He was at the ecstatic point where he demanded to know what was going on. When he yelped, "What's happening? I want to know what's happening?" he smashed into a

tree and passed out.

Alan awoke again on the ground in what he perceived to be the Garden of Eden of folklore. He was lying at the base of a tree that was so massive, that it didn't seem real. He looked up to the top of the tree at a glowing essence. He could barely make out what he was looking at, but it appeared to be the generally accepted vision of the son of the creator. The average person had been indoctrinated with the way the vision would appear to them, if it ever happened. Alan sat there for a while, naked and confused. He tried to squint his eyes to better distinguish what he was looking at, but it only worked to a point. He could only see what he was supposed to see; he couldn't force it at that instant. He felt his formerly supreme confidence rapidly draining from his body and began to feel colder than he had ever felt. He didn't know if it was because he was naked or because the temperature of the air had suddenly dropped or that he had simply become afraid.

When Alan uncontrollably and violently pooped projectile diarrhea, he realized that it was fear. The glowing essence spoke to Alan without orally spoken words, but with thoughts injected into his brain. Alan thought it was pretty cool. It was impossible to discern any likeness in the essence, but Alan knew who it was. Once he had accepted what was happening, he began to feel more comfortable. He looked down at his body and calmly observed as a frock materialized over his body. He felt better that he was no longer naked. He felt better that it was getting warmer again. He began to feel the euphoria. The essence placed concepts and images in his brain. He passed out again. Alan awoke to his mother pushing on his shoulder saying, "Alan, Alan are you alright?"

Alan regained consciousness and opened his eyes to the concerned look of his mother's face. "Alan, Alan are you alright?" Alan's mother slapped his face 12 times until he finally satisfied her that he was alive, conscious and listening to her. Some mothers are like that. She said, "I'm sorry that I tried to wake you, but it's an important day!" Alan told his mother that he was getting up and that she should leave his room immediately or he wouldn't be responsible for what he might do. At Alan's remark, his mother slapped him 23 times in the face. "How dare you talk to me like that!" she said. Alan told his mother that he was sorry for what he just said. She accepted his apology and left the room.

Alan looked back to that enlightening moment in his life many times. He had been specially chosen by the creator to don the specific clothing and take the specific vows and become the receiver of people's secrets, along with performing his other functions, of course. Alan loved his job and couldn't imagine doing anything else to make his living. He was a special person. He wholly believed that he had been chosen for his job. He loved it as much as he loved the glowing essence that had bestowed the calling upon him. He hoped to continue in his job until his ultimate passing, which was many years away. He didn't think he would ever quit for any reason.

"Bless me blah blah blah, my last confession blah blah blah." Alan noticed through the dimly lit divider that the secret-teller was an unknown woman. Alan knew most of the people who confessed their secrets to him, because they were usually from the weekly masses. He hadn't recognized the woman, but noticed that she was definitely troubled. Her secret revealed that she had some information about someone she knew, who had committed some type of crime. The secret-teller didn't want to tell anyone else and was reluctant to go to the Police. The perpetrator of the crime was the confessor's best friend in life. Alan had heard many secrets, some more serious than others. Some were misdemeanor-type crimes, but most were harmless little lies. The secret that the woman had told him was definitely criminal in nature. Alan had been bound by oath to maintain the trust between the secret-telling people and himself to never reveal the people's secrets. Secrets were secrets.

Alan dismissed the woman with the usual chanting and instructions. At home that evening, Alan was struck with a decision. Should he reveal what he had heard? He didn't know the woman, so that he wouldn't exactly be able to give her name to the Police. He couldn't accurately describe her either. He debated with himself for days about what to do. He thought about consulting with one of the higher-ups in his field, but that simply wouldn't work. He would immediately be labeled as a violator of the oath and possibly face termination. He could never allow that to happen. He couldn't let this isolated case ruin his career. He couldn't. He wouldn't. That was final. Two weeks later, the woman paid a visit to Alan and was even more upset than before. She told the same tale again and added some ugly details. He wished that she hadn't revealed so much to him.

Alan couldn't get a good's night's sleep after hearing the additional ugly details from that woman. What was he to do? Exactly how bound by the oath was he? It seemed that if he had information about a crime, he should be reporting it. The woman returned to him 2 more times and revealed even more details of the crime that her friend had allegedly committed. During Alan's training, he had been thoroughly versed in the concepts that involved someone telling secrets to him that might not have any truth in them. His role was to act as a sort of a free psychiatrist or therapist to people who needed to get things off their chests. Those people might simply be lonely people who were crying out for attention. Alan was aware that it was entirely possible that every secret ever told to him was a lie or fabrication of the truth. He knew that and had to bear that in mind when he considered the woman's crime confession.

The woman never returned to Alan and he was relieved by the release of the burden. It couldn't have been a true crime story that the woman had told him. He never heard about a similar crime being committed in his town or anywhere around his town. Whew! That was over! Now he could get back to enjoying his job again by listening to people's dirty little secrets. "Bless me blah blah blah, my last confession blah blah blah." Another unknown woman entered Alan's secret-telling chamber and to his horror, she had recited the same crime story as the other

woman. There was one difference, however. The new woman had admitted to being the perpetrator of the crime! She went on to describe every ugly detail exactly as the first woman had. The story had to be true! What were the odds that 2 lonely people would fabricate the same story? Alan became nervous and sweaty as the woman rambled. Alan might be face-to-face with a criminal. Now what? When the woman was finished with her story, Alan dismissed her with the usual chanting and instructions. There was no way for the woman to see Alan's face as she talked to him in the chamber, but it would be a simple matter to find out who he was by simply asking around. Alan felt like an accomplice of some kind. The first woman knew of the crime, the 2nd woman committed the crime and now Alan knew of the crime. Factually, Alan didn't know the 2nd woman's name and barely saw her face. He wasn't actually an accomplice. The first woman was guiltier of concealing information than he was, because she knew the criminal. Alan was dumbstruck, flabbergasted and stupefied.

The crime revealed by the 2 women involved the 2nd woman hiring someone to get rid of her husband. The 2nd woman's husband had disappeared and never bothered her again. She was content that her husband would never bother her again, but began feeling more and more guilty about the whole thing. The 2nd woman had revealed her crime to her best friend, the 1st woman, only after the crime had been executed. The 1st woman had no prior knowledge of the 2nd woman's crime, so that technically she couldn't be considered as an accomplice. The 1st woman was still withholding information, however. Alan was at the point where he wanted to speak with a supervisor about the general topic of crime secrets, without being too specific. He thought intensely about it for 3 weeks. The 2nd woman never returned to him, which made it easier on him. He hoped to never see either woman again.

The secret was beginning to eat away at Alan's insides like a hyena eating a dead rotten vulture. He could feel his health deteriorating. He was on little sleep. He was stumbling around in a daze. He still had his duties to perform however, rain or shine. "Bless me blah blah blah, my last confession blah blah blah." An unknown man had entered Alan's chamber. The man smelled of old sweat, cheap cologne, dirty leather and greasy hair. Worse, he had bad breath. When the man began telling the same crime story that the 2 woman had told, Alan gasped. The man asked if Alan was ok. Alan paused for a few seconds, caught his breath and instructed the man to continue. The same crime story! Alan almost fainted when the man revealed the ugliest detail of the story. The man kneeling in Alan's box was the person who had made the 2nd woman's husband disappear! The man admitted it! Alan attempted to remain calm. He was weak, tired and freaking out. Alan wanted to run out of there as fast as he could. He desired more than anything to casually dismiss the man with the usual chanting and instructions. Alan made an excuse to the man that he needed to get some water and would return as quickly as possible. The man seemed agreeable enough and ok'd Alan's request. When Alan opened the door of his secret-telling chamber, he saw the 1st woman and 2nd woman sitting in the pews. What were they doing there?

144. Orville's Folly



144. Orville's Folly

Orville couldn't understand why his seed order had been taking so long to come in. Mr. Ducker at the store assured him that the order would be in within 10 days and it had been 2 weeks already. The plowed field was ready to be planted and was drying out and becoming hard packed again. Orville had endless problems on the farm, one of which was his cantankerous tractor that seemed to have a mind of its own. Sometimes it started easily and sometimes it didn't. Orville's farmhand Eg was in charge of keep the tractor running and hadn't been doing a very good job at it. The old tractor had come with the purchase of the farm and had seen a lot of miles in the field. It was no wonder that the tractor was so unreliable. Eg wasn't much of a help though. Eg had also come with the farm and lived in a shed attached to the barn. He was a simple man with a simple mind and only somewhat mechanically inclined. Eg was as strong as an ox and was helpful everywhere else on the farm where brute strength was necessary.

Orville and his wife Liza had moved from their apartment in the city to the farm in the country after Orville had retired from his job as a phone tech. Orville's company liked to label him as an online Engineer. Orville found it comical, because he didn't have a Bachelor's Degree in any field of engineering. Orville decided that his company liked to make their employees feel more important than they actually were. Some of Orville's co-workers used to go around telling people that they were engineers, which Orville found ridiculous. Liza had never worked and stayed at home looking pretty and maintaining the household to the best of her limited abilities. Mr. Hankey was probably going to come by today to show Orville some of his latest contraptions for sale. Mr. Hankey annoyingly came by almost everyday, but was harmless enough. Hoak Gumball, the county agent was also supposed to stop by to look at the invasive species problem.

Orville had just finished his breakfast of frying pan-sized pancakes prepared by Liza. The pancakes were about an inch thick and incredibly filling. Liza hadn't managed to prevent burning the pancakes a little each time she cooked them, because of the unusual thickness. Orville never complained, because Liza was learning as she went. In the old apartment in the city, they ate out most of the time, which limited her cooking. She hadn't yet acquired the knack of controlling the portion sizes of her farm-cooked meals. Orville headed to the barn to find a tool that he had lost the week before. The husband and wife team of Andy and Randy were the local home improvement experts and they were working on an addition to Eg's shed. Eg had been complaining that the shed was a little too small for him to walk around in, so Orville hired Andy and Randy to add another room. Orville got into a discussion about the shingles that were to be installed on the roof part of the extension.

Eg had insisted that he wanted the same shingles that were on the main part of the shed, while Andy and Randy claimed it would difficult to find that particular old shingle pattern/color. Orville thought a shingle that matched close enough would be fine. Andy was a stickler for

perfection, whereas Randy wasn't. Randy sided with Orville that a close-enough shingle would work. Andy was on Eg's side. Eg complained that he had lived in the shed in entire life, including being born in it. He hoped to have his own house someday, or at least live in a structure big enough to be considered by him to be a house. He was very excited about the new addition to the shed and wanted it to be perfect. Orville relented and allowed Andy and Randy to special order the old shingle pattern/color at higher cost. Randy and Andy worked at an incredibly slow pace and seemed to be on coffee breaks all too often. The duo had been recommended to Orville by Mr. Hankey. Orville was a surprisingly patient person and he didn't want to make any enemies out there in the country.

Orville left Eg in charge and went into town to check on the seed order at Mr. Ducker's store. The farmer who lived down the road from Orville and Liza, Mr. Sniffle was at the store with his intelligent pig, Adam. Mr. Sniffle was checking on his seed order as well as showing off Adam's new trick. Mr. Sniffle was always teaching Adam to do different things. On that day, Mr. Sniffle placed a harmonica on the floor, Adam picked it up in his mouth and began playing, "Mary Had a Little Lamb." The pig was actually quite good. Mr. Sniffle sang along to the music and then Mr. Ducker chimed in. Orville didn't want to feel out of place, so he chimed in as well. As the 3 men sang to the music of the pig, Hoak Gumball walked into the store. He began singing to the music. As the 4 men sang, they actually began to sound really good, almost as good as a barbershop quartet. It was simple coincidence that their voices complemented one other so harmoniously.

When the constantly scheming Mr. Hankey walked into the store, he appraised the 4 singing men and the pig. He decided that the men should in fact form into a barbershop quartet and enter themselves into the singing contest and the county fair. He offered to be their manager for a small percentage of the profits. When Orville asked Mr. Hankey what profits could possibly be involved when a group sang voluntarily and Mr. Hankey said he didn't know yet, but he would find out. When Adam had finally run out of breath from playing the harmonica for so long, he spat out the harmonica onto the floor and scooted into the corner of the store to get some water from his bowl and take a poop. Mr. Ducker always had a fresh bowl of water and a thick blanket in the corner for Adam's daily visits with Mr. Sniffle. Mr. Sniffle swept Adam's poop out the front door of the store with the designated broom for pig poop. The broom had the name Adam scrawled on the handle.

Orville asked Mr. Ducker about his seed order and Mr. Ducker went into the back to look around for it. As Mr. Ducker searched, Orville asked Hoak why he was at the store when he was supposed to be at Orville's farm looking into the invasive species problem. Hoak apologized and claimed that he had completely forgotten about the appointment. Orville had noticed that the people out in the country seemed to think and move at a slower pace than he was used to. Orville scheduled another appointment with Hoak and Hoak reached for his notebook. As Hoak was

writing, he noticed the appointment with Orville annotated in the notebook. Hoak mentioned to Orville that he already had an appointment written in his notebook. Orville pointed out that the appointment was for today and that Hoak had missed the appointment. They had just talked about the appointment 2 minutes before. Hoak claimed to not remember talking about the missed appointment. As Hoak scratched his head, Orville talked to Mr. Sniffle. Mr. Sniffle had been waiting for his seed order for 3 weeks. Orville and Mr. Sniffle were at the mercy of Mr. Ducker, because he was the only game in town for placing seed orders.

Mr. Hankey returned from his truck with a device that resembled an old sewing machine. He claimed that it would save the housewife hours of labor while making articles of clothing. He offered it to Mr. Sniffle first and he said his wife never sewed anything. Orville told Mr. Hankey that the device looked like just an old sewing machine. Mr. Hankey maintained that it was a special sewing machine used by one of the wives of an Arab sheik. The sewing machine had a lot of history attached to it. Orville told Mr. Hankey that it looked like a piece of junk that had been found at the junkyard. Mr. Hankey assured Orville that he had purchased the sewing machine from some world traveler. Orville laughed. Mr. Hankey offered the machine to Hoak, but he was still looking at his notebook trying to figure out what happened with his appointment scheduling.

When Mr. Ducker appeared from the back with 2 large boxes, Mr. Hankey offered the sewing machine to him. Mr. Ducker said his wife never sewed anything. Mr. Hankey walked back to his truck with the sewing machine. Orville and Mr. Sniffle opened their respective packages to check their seed orders. As Orville compared the package contents to his handwritten list, he asked Mr. Ducker where he found the boxes. Mr. Ducker claimed that while he was rearranging the back room last week, he had accidentally covered the boxes with a tarp and had forgotten about it. Orville noted that every pack of seeds in his order was incorrect. He became excited at Mr. Ducker. Mr. Sniffle's order was perfect and he left the store with his box. Orville wanted to know what happened to his order. Orville asked Mr. Ducker how Mr. Sniffle's order could be perfect and Orville's order was completely botched.

Mr. Ducker told Orville that Mr. Sniffle had been ordering the same seeds in the same quantities year after year, so that the ordering process became perfected. Since Orville hadn't been ordering as long as kept changing the seed varieties and quantities, it complicated matters. Orville showed his handwritten seed order to Mr. Ducker and demanded for him to read what was written. Mr. Ducker read off the exact seed varieties and quantities that were in Orville's box. Mr. Ducker said that he had a hard time reading Orville's handwriting and maybe that was the problem. Orville flew into a rage and then immediately calmed himself down again. He handed the box of seeds to Mr. Ducker and wanted his money back for the order. Mr. Ducker told Orville that it was impossible to give a refund for various reasons. Mr. Ducker maintained that it usually took him a few years to get the seed orders of the farmers exactly right. He hoped that Orville would

bear with him in the meantime. Mr. offered Orville a free pickle from the pickle barrel for his trouble. Orville took his box of seeds and grabbed a pickle on the way out of the store. He decided that he would plant the delivered seeds anyway, because it was getting too late in the season to order more. That oaf Mr. Ducker would probably mess up a new order anyway.

Orville encountered Mr. Hankey at his truck in front of the store. Mr. Hankey was holding in his hands what looked like an ordinary baseball cap with strange wires and tubes attached to the top of it. Mr. Hankey attempted to take advantage of Orville's onsetting baldness by proclaiming his device capable of reversing baldness. In fact, Mr. Hankey claimed that the device would actually grow new hair and that within 3 months time, Orville would again be in possession of a full head of hair. Orville asked Mr. Hankey if he had tried the device on himself. Mr. Hankey said that he hadn't and argued that the device came with a certificate of authenticity as to its effectiveness. Orville laughed and walked to his car.

Hoak Gumball staggered out of the store still holding his notebook and asked Orville if he was heading back to his farm. Orville replied that he was and Hoak said that he would follow him. When Orville arrived home for lunch, he noticed that Mr. Sniffle's pig, Adam was standing on the top of the shed playing his harmonica. Mr. Sniffle was standing in front of the shed singing along to Adam's rendition of "Jingle Bells," which seemed odd for the time of year, which was Spring. Orville asked Mr. Sniffle why Adam was playing that song and Mr. Sniffle replied that he had only taught Adam so many songs and that was one of them. Randy and Andy were standing in the middle of the addition that they were building. They were singing "Jingle Bells" to Adam's harmonica rendition of the song. The buffoons had built the 3 walls of the addition around themselves so that they were trapped inside. Normally, additions were constructed while the carpenters were standing outside of the addition. Randy and Andy were too unknowing to be able to escape from their trap and settled on singing along to Adam's harmonica.

Orville called Eg's name until the stout lad had appeared on the scene. Orville instructed Eg to fetch a ladder from the barn. Eg returned 14 minutes later with a stepstool. Orville sent Eg back to the barn again after explaining that a proper ladder was needed to extricate Randy and Andy from their trap. Eg returned after 19 minutes with a ladder, which he placed against the side of the shed addition. Eg quickly climbed up the ladder, jumped down into the addition and became trapped with Randy and Andy. Eg began singing "Jingle Bells" along with Randy, Andy and Mr. Sniffle. Orville had another mild panic attack, laughed, farted and pooped a little bit in his underwear. Orville clumsily lurched to the house where Liza was preparing lunch. Orville changed his underwear and proceeded to the barn, where he found a suitable stepladder. He placed the opened stepladder over the wall of the addition and the 3 still-singing idiots climbed out. There was something about Adam's harmonica playing that induced the listeners into singing along until the music stopped.

Adam played his harmonica the entire time and Mr. Sniffle, Randy, Andy and Eg never stopped singing along. Orville noted that the longer that Adam played a song on his harmonica, the better it sounded; that certainly was one talented pig.

With everyone outside the addition and still singing, Orville felt a sudden impulse to yell, "Stop," but he didn't. The insanity and buffoonery of the people around him had begun to take hold. He joined in with the singing and found himself yelling the words. Upon hearing Orville yelling the words to "Jingle Bells," Liza rushed out of the house with lunch, which was a whole roasted turkey. Just then, Hoak Gumball appeared in his jeep. Orville ran over to Hoak, slapped his face and asked him where he had been for so long. Orville slapped Hoak again and loudly stated that Hoak had been following him to the farm. How could Hoak have gotten lost along the way? Hoak said that he had been so dumbfounded by the mistake in the appointment calendar in his notebook that he had been attempting to reconcile it while following Orville to the farm. Somehow, along the way, Hoak had made a wrong turn. Hoak didn't think that it was such a big deal that Orville had to slap his face for it.

Randy, Andy, Eg, Mr. Sniffle and Liza agreed with Hoak. Throughout the proceedings, Adam continued playing his harmonica and had switched to his rendition of "Love Me Tender." When everybody heard how beautifully Adam was playing the Elvis song, everyone involuntarily began singing along to the pig's music. Liza placed the turkey on the sawhorse used by Randy and Andy, to enable her to participate fully in the singing. It was a song that few human beings could resist singing along to. The power of Adam's music managed to settle any differences and unsettledness that might have polluted the air in the last half hour. That pig was a force to be reckoned with. Mr. Hankey drove up unnoticed in his junk-laden pickup truck. He emerged from the cab of his truck and went around to the back to remove something from under the tarp.

Mr. Hankey walked with his prize to the communal people singing at the feet of the harmonica-playing pig on the roof of the shed. Mr. Hankey had something wrapped in a red velvet cloth. When he removed the cloth, a glistening, glowing saxophone became visible. The singing people immediately stopped singing. They all felt the power of the musical instrument that Mr. Hankey was holding. Even Adam finally spat out his harmonica into the dirt at the feet of the people. Both humans and animal felt that there was something magical about to happen. Everyone stood silent as Mr. Hankey handed the saxophone up to Adam on the roof of the shed. When the people who were present at the time would retell the tale later, no one could understand how a pig was able to play a saxophone, but somehow he did it. Adam exploded into a rendition of "Silent Night" that Mr. Sniffle hadn't even taught him to play. The people were unable to sing along, because they were so moved by the beauty of the pig's melody. How was it possible that an animal such as a pig could possess such a power? Orville was the first to begin tearing up and then crying. By the time that Adam was into the second verse, Orville was bawling on the ground and Liza was lying on top of him doing the same.

145. Washyngtone's Ouija



145. Washyngtone's Ouija

Washyngtone's fingertips were getting hotter. The contact with the planchette was beginning to become unbearable, but he liked it. The woman on the other side of the planchette appeared to be experiencing similar distress. She was desperate to communicate with her lost love and seemed to be willing to expose herself to anything. Washyngtone had been born with his one-in-a-billion ability to make contact with the spirits via the Ouija. Many fake fortunetellers and similar losers merely manipulated the planchette in order to bilk money from their customers, who were crying for any kind of way to reach beyond. He noticed his ability at the age of 3 and after many years of using the Ouija, he had become withered and worn. He wasn't able to stop using his special gift and always helped people free of charge. He only asked one thing of the people - to give back in some way by volunteering in their community. Washyngtone had always believed that service to others was the greatest thing in which anyone could involve themselves.

Even though Washyngtone's fingertips were sweaty, they were still hot. The planchette was beginning to emit wisps of steam from the fingertip sweat evaporating into the air. He sensed that the woman was in agony, but she was still capable of continuing the session. She was weakening. They had been going at it for 3 hours and 43 minutes so far, which wasn't an unusual amount of time for one of Washyngtone's sessions. He had immersed himself in Ouija for days at a time in the past and had required medical treatment from the physical toll on his body. Washyngtone's mind had infinite strength and was only limited by his weakling human body. That was the problem. He felt that he could live in the state of Ouija forever, if only his body could keep up with his brain. He wished that he could perpetually remain in the Ouija state, once he had entered it, but his customers wouldn't be able to handle it. Over the years, he had been attempting to condition the left hemisphere of his brain to run the Ouija session, while the right hemisphere was caring for his body. He was slowly making headway.

Washyngtone and the woman had spelled out a few words that had some meaning, but they hadn't yet reached the threshold of pure communication, which was the ultimate goal of all Ouija sessions. The woman's loved one was visible in Washyngtone's mind and he described the vision to the woman in detail. Unfortunately for Washyngtone, when he saw the loved ones of his customers, the deceased were in a state of decay, related to how long ago they had passed away. If his customers had waited years before contacting Washyngtone for a session, the visions were occasionally like scenes from a horror movie. The ghastliness of the faces of the loved ones wasn't the problem for Washyngtone. He had become accustomed to the visions over time. The problem was that he desired to describe the facial features of the loved ones to the customers. He wasn't attempting to prove his genuineness to the customers. That wasn't it at all. He only wanted to be able to tell the customers that their loved ones were happy and content in their current state. If the face of the deceased was excessively rotted away, he was unable to discern a smile or a frown.

The woman on the other side of the planchette was beginning to weaken more and began quietly moaning. Washyngtone shushed her. He always needed absolute silence when he was in the state of Ouija. The woman became silent and her quiet moans were replaced by tiny tears. Washyngtone could tolerate a customer crying as long as they were quiet about it. He sensed that she had gained a modicum of strength, hopefully enough to carry her to the threshold. Washyngtone described the woman's loved one as having dark hair, high cheekbones, a smallish nose and a gentle chin. It was difficult for Washyngtone to be positive, but he detected a smile on the face in the vision. When Washyngtone told the woman about the smile, she began laughing out of sheer happiness. Washyngtone shushed her again. He related that the smile was a good sign, because it indicated that her loved one was content in their current state. The woman laughed again and Washyngtone shushed her again.

They continued and the planchette suddenly began to move feverishly all over the board. Washyngtone and the woman could barely keep up with the spastic movements. At one point, the planchette drifted off the board and onto the table, back onto the board, off the board again and back onto the board again. It was the type of Ouija activity upon which Washyngtone's brain gorged. He believed himself to be placed on earth for one reason and that was to be immersed in Ouija. The session was becoming one of the most intense that he had ever indulged in. On one hand, he wanted to control the planchette and on the other hand, he knew that he couldn't and mustn't. The planchette was the key to the visual communication for the customer's eyes. Washyngtone was capable of seeing the loved ones and sensing their moods while he was in his Ouija state. The planchette was the physical means of providing the customers with direct information from their loved ones. Washyngtone could say anything he wanted to the customers, but the customers really believed in the words spelled out by the planchette.

The planchette finally stopped moving and parked on the word "Hello." The woman stopped crying and froze with anticipation. She took an enormous breath and held it. Even with his eyes closed, Washyngtone sensed that the woman was holding her breath, which wouldn't be good for her. If she continued holding her breath in her ever-weakening state, she might faint and interrupt the flow of messages. Washyngtone shushed the woman and she let out her breath. Washyngtone felt that they had arrived at the threshold. The word "Hello" was the indicator. The woman's loved one was attempting to communicate with her. Washyngtone instructed the woman to say "Hello" and she did. Then the planchette spelled out the woman's name. They had now passed through the threshold and entered the spiritual world of the woman's loved one.

Once the Ouija session had entered the spiritual world, he opened his eyes in order to observe everything that was taking place in the room. He closely scrutinized the woman's face for reactions to the planchette's movements and spellings. He scanned the room for movements. Occasionally, while in the spiritual world part of the Ouija session, objects moved in the room. Sometimes, objects hurtled across the room and smashed into the wall. The special room in

Washyngtone's house in which the Ouija sessions took place was minimally furnished for that very reason. The planchette began spelling out various last names - Rathson, Bergdorff and Johnson. The names were vaguely familiar to Washyngtone, but he couldn't remember why. His brain had been thriving on the Ouija state for so long that there wasn't much room left for storing day-to-day trivia such as news headlines. He dismissed the names as acquaintances of the woman and/or of her loved one. Sometimes names were important facets of the Ouija sessions, sometimes they weren't.

Washyngtone had noticed the woman's reactions to the names. She appeared startled and worried a little. He asked her if the names meant anything to her and when she said, "No," he sensed that she was lying. While his fingers were on the planchette, he could detect infinitesimally slight twitches in her fingers, which were unrelated to the heat of the planchette. Washyngtone had operated his Ouija millions of times in his lifetime and had evolved into a sort of a lie detector. His senses and abilities were so acute, that he could tell when someone was lying. While he was looking at her face, she looked back at him with a look of guilt and quickly looked down at the board again. He wondered where that was coming from. The woman had expressed elation over the description he gave of her loved one's smiling face. She seemed equally excited by the "Hello" and the spelling out of her name. There was something about those 3 last names that were spelled out by the planchette that had rattled her.

Washyngtone asked the woman if she had any questions for her loved one. She looked at him and he saw her eyes getting shifty, as if she was trying to formulate the proper response to his question. She paused for a few moments and stuttered, "Y-Y-Yes!" She was definitely up to something. Either she was actually nervous from the long session, or she was attempting to conceal something. She had to know that Washyngtone's powers were known everywhere and that he might be capable of seeing and sensing more than obvious observations. The woman was becoming obviously nervous at that point and Washyngtone asked her if she wanted to get a glass of water. He would be able to maintain the spiritual connection by staying with the planchette. The woman immediately rose from her chair, shuffled to the pitcher of water and drank heavily directly from the pitcher. She drank so sloppily that the spilled out of the sides of her mouth and onto the floor.

Suddenly the planchette under Washyngtone's fingertips slid across the Ouija board and spelled "Traitor." The woman had been watching the planchette spell the word as she was gulping the water. When the last letter "r" had been indicated by the planchette, she dropped the pitcher onto the floor. Washyngtone had such immense concentration, that he wasn't startled by the sound of the exploding glass pitcher. He slowly turned his head and looked at the woman. The woman looked into Washyngtone's eyes and was compelled to return to the table. She felt like one of the victims in a "Dracula" movie, unable to break the powerful gaze of the vampire. She sat down, placed her reddened fingertips on the planchette and they continued the session. Washyngtone

made it a point to never judge any of his customers. The customers sought him and wanted him to help them. That was his role. He tried as hard as he could to operate the Ouija sessions in a calm manner, but things happened.

When the planchette started moving again, the woman gasped, as if she was afraid of the next spelled word. What was she hiding? Washyngtone had recognized that the session was beginning to turn into a special one when the planchette spelled the words "Hiding" and "Place." Hiding place! The woman shrieked like a hawk as her purse leaped from her chair, flew across the room and catapulted out the window with a terrifying ruckus of noise and glass shards. Washyngtone kept calm; he loved this stuff. The last 2 words seemed to have a different effect on the woman than the word "Traitor" had. Her emotional state turned from one of dread to one of interest. Even though her purse had mysteriously crashed through the window, it didn't seem to matter. She wanted to see the next word. She decided to ask the board, "Where?"

The chair on which she sat elevated from the floor about 3 inches and dropped. It did it again and again, until she screamed, "Stop!" Washyngtone grinned slightly, enough to satisfy his need, but not enough for the woman to detect. The planchette was still parked on the letter "r." It wasn't Washyngtone's place to attempt to steer the session in any particular direction. His role was only to administer and facilitate the Ouija session. He was like the person who operated the subway train or the pilot of an aircraft. He provided the means through which the customers attempted to communicate with their loved ones. He had no place in trying to influence the movement of the planchette. He never did and never would. It was always interesting to him to watch the magical object running around on the board. His fingertips provided the fuel, if you will, for the planchette to move. The customers were the ones who subconsciously and consciously caused the planchette to move at all. The will of the customers caused the planchette to move in a particular direction and to stop at strategic points during the Ouija session.

Washyngtone found every session to be incredible and otherworldly and he counted his blessings every day that he had been given his gift. He couldn't think of anything else that he would rather do in life. Ouija was his life and he was Ouija. He was intertwined with the Ouija state and cherished the purity of it more than anything. He couldn't allow a Ouija session to be influenced or altered from what it was intended to be. If he ever detected that a customer was trying to move the planchette to a certain location, he neutralized the customer's impulse. Washyngtone had realized early on how customers might initially want to believe in the power of Ouija, but part way through the session try to influence it. A customer might see things going the way they didn't want them to go and try to steer the planchette. The spiritual world operated in one direction and was unable to reverse direction. If a customer truly desired pure information from the other side, they had to be willing to accept the bad along with the good. If there was only bad, then so be it. The spirits only reluctantly spoke to the material world and didn't like it when people tried to affect the outcome of a Ouija session. Washyngtone did his best to protect the

integrity of his precious Ouija and probably had a 99.9999% success rate at facilitating pure Ouija with his customers.

The woman was frazzled from being slammed up and down on her chair. She was reluctant to ask another question. She looked beckoningly at Washyngtone for assistance. He looked at her in silence and looked at the planchette still parked on the "r." They were at a standstill. It was up to Washyngtone to carry the session up to and through the threshold into the spiritual world. He had done his part. It was up to the customer to take it from there. He had seen it many times before. The customer would begin getting answers that they couldn't or wouldn't accept. They would then expect Washyngtone to step in to get things steered in their more favorable direction. The woman had to make the next move. Washyngtone concluded that the phrase "Hiding place" was obviously very meaningful to the woman. She wanted to know the location of the hiding place, because in that hiding place was something valuable to her in some way.

The woman asked, "Where?" One of the other windows of the special Ouija room destroyed itself and blew outside. Washyngtone thought to himself that this was getting really good. The forces from the spiritual world were slowly gaining more control in the material world. Washyngtone had witnessed similar violence before, but he was fearless. He lived for the stuff. The woman began getting a sense of her own mortality and wondered if she was going to get the answer to her question without being injured in the process. She looked at Washyngtone, but his eyes were still focused on the parked planchette. He was unable and unwilling to help her. She had to realize that by now. The woman needed to know the location of the hiding place. How far was she willing to go? It seemed that with each query of "Where," the response of the spirits was stronger than the last time.

Washyngtone was unable to tell the woman that the longer they were on the spiritual side of the threshold, the more intense the responses of the spirits would become. He hoped that she would have noticed, but she seemed to be too obsessed with the hiding place to care. If she didn't ask a question or state something that the spirits found agreeable, things could get ugly. The woman's eyes were wide open and sweat poured down her forehead and face. She was noticeably sweating and her blouse was soaked. She was probably feeling chilly with 2 of the windows blown out and cold air rushing into the room. The woman roared in a deep tone, "Where?" The 3rd window shattered. With her fingertips still on the planchette, the woman stood up and uttered the shrillest, "Where?" The 4th and last window of the room erupted into flames. Washyngtone had to admit that was the first time he saw glass catching on fire. He loved every second of it. The woman was clearly freaking out and in over her head. She had lost control of the Ouija session that she had hoped against hope would give her the answer. However, the answer was reluctant to be granted to her. She debated whether or not to ask the question again. What could happen next? She was petrified. Would the roof collapse? Would the walls fall down? Could she somehow become horribly disfigured? She had to know. "Where?"

146. Sigfreed's Royy



146. Sigfreed's Royy

Success! Sigfreed had finally done it. For his entire lifetime in 1600's Europe, Sigfreed had wanted to be capable of winning at any game he played, whether it was a board game, Checkers, Chess or whatever. He had a troubled childhood with 2 sisters who always beat him at games. It had left an indelible mark on his psyche. He had vowed to get a degree at college and become a research scientist. His goal had been to create a human being with whom he could play games and always beat his creation. After 11 months of intense pondering and gallons of coffee drinking, he finally cracked the case. During college, he had read in an obscure manuscript about the concept of rendering a human being into a state of near-deceasedness and then bringing them back to a somewhat alive state again. The process was so incredibly tricky, painstaking and almost impossible to become successful at, that few people had done it.

The process involved a human eating an exacting amount of a specially prepared concoction, which was comprised of the intestines, ovaries and liver of fugu (or blowfish). The fish contains a poison called tetrodotoxin, which is 1,200 times deadlier than cyanide. The toxin is so potent that a lethal dose is smaller than the head of a pin, and a single fish has enough poison to kill 30 people. Sigfreed's experimentation required 873 failed subjects, before he could claim victory with the 874th volunteer. Back then, the prisons were so overflowing with hardened criminals, that the government was more than willing to donate the excess inmates to the cause of Science. All the men were volunteers who chose freedom via becoming a laboratory animal of sorts to a lifetime of prison hell. The volunteers were so happy to be free of their incarceration that they were willing to subject themselves to anything. Sigfreed's process required approximately 2.5 years of time, at a rate of about one experiment per day. It didn't take long to determine if the experiment was a success, because if it wasn't successful, the subject became deceased immediately and never returned to life.

Sigfreed had determined through a raw interpretation of The Scientific Method the means of experimentation. At first, he was slow in determining the factors involved with bringing the subject back to life. There was something about the tetrodotoxin that evaded the typical scientific logic of the times. It was all too easy to cause a subject to perish; any street vendor could accomplish that task. Determining the precisest amount of the poison was the dilemma. Sigfreed carefully weighed the subjects to achieve a starting point for the amount of poison that might be necessary. Since the subjects had variable body weights, it posed an obvious problem. It came down to calculating a formula based on body weight. The toxin was administered to the subjects in milligrams of dried and ground poison. The poison was added to the subject's "last supper," as it were.

In the 1600's, the accuracy of laboratory scales left a lot to be desired by the experimental scientists. Sigfreed eventually concluded that pelletizing the poison was the best solution. The

pellets were of a specific weight and he calibrated the doses by the number of pellets per pound of body weight. His patience and manual dexterity were put to the test as he created the pellets. He had devised a method that was ahead of its time for the day. The pellets weighed exactly 9 micrograms each. The formula in its most correct iteration proved to be 2 pellets per pound of body weight, meaning that a 150-pound subject would be administered 300 pellets in their food. As simple and exacting as it seemed to be, counting the tiny pellets to the exact pellet was nearly impossible and required the use of a custom microscope.

When the final product of Sigfreed's efforts had materialized, Sigfreed was overjoyed. He named his creation Royy in honor of his father. When Royy had come back to life and had continued breathing and functioning as a human being, Sigfreed's dreams had come true. The issues related to Sigfreed's creation were manifold and expected. When a human being had been exposed to the tetrodotoxin, expired and been brought back to life by the specific dose of adrenalin, the person was reborn as a human shell. The person's memories, personality, intelligence and knowledge base were eliminated by the Sigfreed's process. Essentially Sigfreed was left with what was labeled in modern times as a zombie, which is what he wanted. Royy was a human body with a brain that was capable of running the body's basic functions, just enough to keep the body alive in order to support the brain.

Sigfreed found that Royy was capable of walking upright and shuffling his feet to get around, but wouldn't be playing tennis anytime soon. As long as Sigfreed could get Royy to sit down at a table and play games with him that Sigfreed could win was all that mattered to Sigfreed. Royy was more like a baby than Sigfreed had anticipated, because the first human function performed by Royy was pooping in his pants. Royy docilely stood in place as Sigfreed stripped off Royy's shirt, pants and underwear and replaced the items of clothing with a smock. That way, Royy could piss and poop at will and the foulness would simply fall onto the ground. Because of Royy's primitive hygienic habits, Sigfreed decided to keep Royy locked in the barn where the games and game table would be.

Sigfreed's creation was a new concept that required some getting used to. Royy was unable to talk, since he didn't know how. Royy was a passive entity that seemed to be content staying wherever Sigfreed had last positioned him. On the morning after Royy's creation, Sigfreed went out to the barn to find Royy standing in the same place that Sigfreed had left him. Sigfreed expected that Royy would sooner or later learn how to do things much in the same way that a newborn baby learns things. Sigfreed wasn't sure if Royy became hungry, but assumed that because Royy was a functioning human, some type of nutrition would be required. On the second morning, Sigfreed went out to the barn to look for his cat, which liked to eat the mice in the barn. Sigfreed couldn't find the cat.

On another day, when Sigfreed called for his dog, the dog never showed. Sigfreed was beginning

to wonder what was happening to his pets. On Saturday, Sigfreed went outside to head to the barn and found Royy eating the milk cow that was in the corral. Somehow, Royy had found a way out of the barn. That answered the question of Royy being hungry or not. On Sunday, Sigfreed found Royy eating the horse. At that point, Sigfreed thought that he still had the billy goat and the ewe sheep remaining as farm animals. Sigfreed was wrong. Royy had apparently eaten the goat and sheep before eating the horse. Apparently, Royy had a large appetite. Sigfreed was surprised that Royy needed to eat so much for having such a sedentary lifestyle. That was where Sigfreed was wrong.

When Royy had come back to life, he had been reborn with a different type of hunger. The new Royy seemed to eat out of animal lust, not necessarily to feed a hunger. The fact that Royy had eaten all of Sigfreed's pets and farm animals was the proof. Sigfreed tried to feed Royy from large bags of Purina Dog and Cat Chow. Royy refused to eat the dry morsels. Sigfreed threw Royy a raw chicken and he wolfed it down, bones and all. Sigfreed had never seen a human eat the way Royy ate. He was like a wild animal, more like a hyena or wolf than a human. Sigfreed found it somewhat unnerving. When Sigfreed set up a game of Checkers in the barn in the hopes of playing with Royy, Royy smashed the game to pieces. Royy did the same with the Chess and other games. Sigfreed's hopes had been dashed. After 2.5 years of work, he was left with little more than a wild, adult-sized baby with a large appetite for meat. There had to be a way of training Royy to do Sigfreed's bidding. There had to be. What was missing?

Sigfreed locked Royy in the barn with 24 whole raw chickens and bolted shut all the openings of the barn. Sigfreed didn't want to chain up his creation like a prisoner in the barn, but he needed to keep him in there under wraps. Even though Royy had appeared to be without thought, he managed to muster enough instinct to escape from the barn when he ate the farm animals outside the barn. That afternoon, Sigfreed purchased a large order from the local butcher that he estimated would keep Royy fed for a while. Sigfreed needed to get to the bottom of things. He had succeeded in creating a mindless drone of a human being, but the drone wasn't performing as intended. In the middle of the night, Sigfreed was awakened by a pounding on the barn door. Royy had eaten all the chickens and was apparently hungry for more. Sigfreed emptied his refrigerator and freezer of meat and gave it to Royy.

Sigfreed watched as Royy ate frozen hamburger and gnawed on a whole frozen turkey. In the morning, Sigfreed bought a large commercial refrigerator to house the meat purchase from the butcher. Sigfreed had the fridge installed in the barn, along with the meat order. Royy would then be able to feed himself at will. Sigfreed didn't like be roused from his sleep in the middle of the night for any reason. He cherished his sleep and required it to achieve his greatest scientific insights. The large meat order should satisfy Royy for at least 2 weeks while Sigfreed figured out a plan for his creature. After 5 days, Royy was done with the meat in the large refrigerator and was banging on the barn door again. All Sigfreed could do was buy another fridge and stock

both fridges with large quantities of meats. In theory, that should tide Royy over for 10 days. Sigfreed began researching the projects conducted by scientists in Africa who worked on a government-subsidized study. The study involved hidden tribes that had practiced voodoo and zombie creation in the 1550's. Sigfreed found the study to be of great value, because it answered questions about the voracious appetites of the zombies. Something happened to a human being when it had been turned into a zombie that instilled in it an unrealistic appetite.

Sigfreed wished that he had known about the study before he had created Royy. If he had known, he could have been prepared far enough ahead of time to satiate Royy's hunger with the large meat quantities craved by Royy. More importantly, Sigfreed would still have his dog, cat and farm animals. Sigfreed remembered something he learned in college about seafood being good for the brain for some reason. He led Royy over to the fishpond, which was teeming with many varieties of fish. Royy immediately stumbled into the pond and began eating whatever fish he was able to catch with his clumsy fishing style. He basically slapped at the water until a fish flew out onto the shore. He dragged his soaking wet body onto the shore, ate the fish and repeated the process until he was full. Royy was beginning to become misshapen by his unusual eating habits and had formed a large gut. The gut always needed to be full.

Since the fishpond was so large, it would easily supply Royy with weeks of food. Sigfreed fastened a collar and chain to Royy's waist on one end and to a massive post on the edge of the pond. Royy would be safe there and would stay out of trouble as he feasted. In the meantime, Sigfreed would continue his research. Sigfreed hoped that by switching Royy to a seafood diet, it might trigger some reasoning in the zombie's brain passages. Sigfreed was still in need of a person to beat at games and he wasn't planning to give up on Royy. There had to be a way of getting Royy to take some interest in playing games. After a week, Sigfreed was surprised to see Royy using a stick that he had found on shore, in order to catch his fish. Progress! Was the seafood diet actually working? After another week, Sigfreed found Royy sitting on the edge of the pond at a campfire. Royy was cooking a fish on a stick! Incredible! How did he start the fire?

Sigfreed concluded that Royy's brain seemed to be responding to the seafood diet, thus enabling Royy to learn. Royy seemed to be content at the pond and exhibited no need to change his surroundings. In another week, Royy was sleeping on a cot under a lean-to. How did he learn how to do those things? After a month, Sigfreed noticed that the formerly bearded Royy was now clean-shaven. How did he shave off his beard? He must have used a sharp rock. In 5 weeks, Sigfreed was flabbergasted to see Royy standing there on the edge of the pond in a shirt and pants that he had somehow crafted from materials around the pond. Sigfreed hadn't wanted to rush Royy after that last attempt at playing games, but he felt like trying again. Sigfreed brought a Monopoly game to the pond and set it up on a table that Royy had constructed from turtle shells.

Sigfreed explained the rules of the game to Royy and they began playing. To Sigfreed's great joy, he won every game. It wasn't much of a challenge, but at least Royy wasn't destroying the game. Sigfreed finally had what he had always wanted. He brought over all his other games and beat Royy at all of them. Sigfreed was in a nirvana-like state. He had done it! It seemed strange that such a great scientist would find pleasure in beating a zombie at a game of Checkers, but it was what Sigfreed had struggled for over those 2.5 years. He felt like a kid again, only now he was beating a substitute for one of his sisters at the games. Sigfreed decided to allow Royy to have more freedom around the large estate, since the zombie seemed to be gaining in intelligence. Sigfreed removed the chain and Royy was then able to wander as he desired. Perhaps it was because Royy had been at the pond for so long that he didn't care to stray from it.

Sigfreed observed how Royy constructed a nice shed on the edge of the pond to live in. Over time, Royy added onto the shed, until it was a 3-bedroom, 2-bathroom abode. It was incredible how far Royy had evolved in 4 months. Sigfreed was beginning to wonder if he was onto something. He wasn't sure if Royy would have evolved on his own on the meat diet or if it was the seafood diet that had caused the change. On one hand, Sigfreed wanted to know, but on the other hand, he didn't want to push his luck. Royy had been the result of a lifetime of vision and 2.5 years of intense experimentation. Sigfreed didn't want to ruin a good thing. A true scientist would have wanted to experiment with the cause of Royy's seeming jump in intelligence. Royy was satisfied with having his game playing mate.

After 5 months, Royy had somehow defeated Sigfreed at Checkers. Sigfreed dismissed it as a fluke and then Royy beat him again. Royy then defeated Sigfreed at Chess and then at every other game. What was going on? It wasn't supposed to work that way. Sigfreed couldn't allow it. He locked Royy in the barn again and put him back on the meat diet. As Sigfreed had hoped, the meat diet had dulled Royy's cognitive abilities. In 5 weeks time, Royy was back to being the dolt he was before. The problem was that he also had reverted to his revulsion at playing games. Sigfreed had lost his game playing companion. Sigfreed reckoned that perhaps a combination diet of meat and just enough seafood would spark Royy's interest in playing games again. It was!

In another 3 weeks, Sigfreed was again playing games with Royy and beating him at all of them. The scientist in Sigfreed enabled him to dial in the correct dose of seafood for Royy's consumption. With each 100 pounds of meat, Sigfreed gave Royy one sunfish, one perch and one bullhead from the fishpond. Sigfreed had to ensure that Royy would never be capable of beating him at the games. Things went along quite swimmingly for a while with Sigfreed and his zombie creation both living their lives to their respective capacities. Royy had grown a huge beard again and was quite smelly, but Sigfreed overlooked Royy's minor flaws in exchange for the game playing trait. Sigfreed loved winning and Royy loved eating. One morning, Sigfreed went out to the barn to play Monopoly with Royy and Royy was lying on the ground with a fishbone protruding through his neck.

147. Alexander's Shore



147. Alexander's Shore

Alexander was walking along the beach in the Florida Keys, pulling his metal detector rig with his right hand and carrying his shovel in his left hand. He had constructed a special rig, which was composed of 4 metal detectors attached to a bracket and handle for towing. The detectors beeped when detecting and had large visible lights on top for easy detection in the brightest sunlight. His dream was to find one or more of those valuable gold Spanish doubloons from yesteryear. He knew of 2 other detector people who had retired from beachcombing after finding some of the precious gold coins. That Florida location was known as a prime spot for things to wash up from the sea bottom. Alexander's rig was 4 times more likely to find something than a typical detecting person's single unit. He was proud of his device and many people ogled it as he combed the beach every day.

He had unearthed several thousand dollars of coins over the years, which covered the cost of his expensive rig, but craved the big haul, as did all treasure hunters. He could still see the look on the 93-year-old woman's face when she dug up her 2 doubloons way back when. She fainted and almost had a heart attack, but ultimately survived to tell the tale. It was incredible how random the process was. It must be that the doubloons were originally in wooden/iron containers and over the centuries, the containers dissolved, leaving the doubloons to the seafloor wave action. Sooner or later, big storm surges would slide the coins and other treasures onto the beaches. It was exciting to think about making the big discovery, but Alexander was content strolling in the heat. He always wore a big hat, light-colored long-sleeved shirts and pants to avoid most of the sun. Alexander loved being warm and couldn't imagine living anyone where else on earth. He loved Florida's warmth and ever-greenness. He felt that if humans were meant to live in the cold, they would have been born with fur.

As Alexander casually drifted along the beach towing his detector rig, he allowed his mind to float away. Even though he always wore one of those water reservoirs with the flexible straw on his back, he sometimes forgot to drink enough of the water. The heat caused him to experience hallucinations, which he enjoyed. He soon found himself walking on the surface of the moon, like one of the early astronauts. He was towing his mesh bash filled with the samples of moon rocks and other necessary materials. NASA was looking forward to getting a look at the stuff. Many theories had been bantered back and forth over the decades about the exact composition of at least the surface of the moon. The samples were absolutely essential for the research. Billions of dollars had been invested in order to fill that mesh bag.

Oh look! There's a moon creature! It looks a lot like a crab. There's another one. What's that? A partially rotted, partially eaten carcass of a moon tuna was being attacked by moon gulls. Alexander paused a moment to observe the spastic birds. One of the birds flew off with the head! That must be one powerful moon gull. There's another moon crab, and another. Where

did they all come from, where did they hide and what did they eat? Alexander had so many questions in need of answers that he blurred his mind. He wanted to enjoy the walk, so he decided to turn off the questioning side of his brain. He wanted the relaxed side to take the helm for a while. He wished to enjoy the scenery. It wasn't every day that someone was able to drag their feet on the moon. He wanted to savor the experience and not muck it up with too much Science. One of the moon gulls just dive-bombed his head on the way to another half eaten moonfish. Those moon gulls certainly were ravenous. Alexander was glad that he wasn't a moon gull, having to scrounge around all the time for food.

Even though he was wearing a spacesuit, Alexander noticed that he was somehow getting moon sand in his shoes. He hated it when that happened. The grains began to chew away at his skin and irritate him to no end. After a while, the sensation of the moon sand in his shoes had gone away and he was glad. The mesh bag with all the samples in it was getting unusually heavy and he turned around to look at it. There were 3 moon gulls sitting on the bag going along for a ride. The nerve of those creatures! He shook the bag and shooed away the moon gulls. The bag felt light again and he was able to concentrate on the scenery. He loved the way the moon sand formed into slight hills and valleys in such smooth forms. The moon dunes looked smooth enough to caress. They looked as smooth as baby's bottom. Alexander didn't necessarily know how smooth a baby's bottom, since he never had any kids. He had heard that silly expression used a lot and it seemed appropriate for the moment.

Occasionally, the smoothness of the moon sand was interrupted by an indentation, from which a moon spider would appear and then disappear again. The sight startled Alexander to the point of feeling the sand in his shoes again. He quickly dismissed the sensation, because he couldn't possibly have any sand in his shoes. He looked up to see the glowing brightness of planet earth. From the surface of the moon, the earth looked magnificent. It was so colorful and varied, obviously multi-textured, via the water bodies, mountains and forests. Earth was indeed a miraculous creation. A short distance in front of him was a moon pond that was surprisingly full of greenish, grayish, blackish water. He wondered how a moon pond could possibly have any water in it, but there it was, plain as day. There were moon ducks floating in the moon pond. They occasionally bobbed their heads under the water and then back up again. They were probably challenging each other to see how long they could hold their breaths. Alexander remembered doing that all the time as a kid.

The mesh bag with the samples was getting heavy again and turning his head back revealed a gaggle of moon crabs going along for the ride. He shook the bag and shooed away the crabs. Alexander wondered why the moon gulls and moon crabs would want to take a ride on the mesh bag in the first place. Did they just want to experience what it was like to be transported somewhere by means other than by their wings or legs? Or, were the animals headed somewhere in a hurry and hoped that Alexander would be able to get them to their destination sooner? If the

latter was the case, how did they know if Alexander was heading where they wanted to go? It had to be that the animals had simply wanted to experience a free ride. Alexander had noted that just before he had shaken the mesh bag and shooed the animals, they seemed to have unusually contented looks on their faces. Perhaps moon animals like taking rides.

Alexander came upon a beached moon whale, which really blew his mind. He didn't realize that there were whales on the moon. He was discovering so many things on the walk of which NASA was probably unaware. The whale moon whale was huge and in his way. He walked around the moon whale, toward its head. As he rounded the beast in a counterclockwise manner, he encountered hundreds of moon gulls devouring the moon whale as fast as they could eat. It was quite a scene. The flock of moon gulls was so large that Alexander was forced to walk through the flock to continue on his journey. The gulls were in no mood to lose their places in line for the feast. They fiercely attacked him and pecked his body from head to toe. He was glad that he was wearing his astronaut suit or he would have been severely damaged.

He finally made his way to the other side of the flock and continued dragging his feet and his mesh sample bag. He looked up at the earth again, just to take a bite of its beauty. He gazed a little too long at the moon and walked headlong into a rotted, partially eaten carcass of a moon sea lion. It was more decayed than he would have wanted, because he fell into it; actually he fell through it. The carcass was more like a large Jello mold of sea lion than of an actual sea lion. Alexander's body fell all the way through the seal to the moon sand and the rotted mess folded over him and covered him completely. He would have been in real trouble if he didn't have on his spacesuit. The acrid stench most likely would have rendered him unconscious. As least, that was what he thought.

He had forgotten that he had temporarily opened the vents of the spacesuit, because his facemask was becoming slightly fogged. The moon sea lion goo began seeping through the vents and onto his face and nostrils. Wow! What a smell! He instantly fainted and lay under the pile of filth for an unknown period of time. When he awoke, he crawled out from the pile and crawled along on his hands and knees until he regained his liveliness. Once he had blown the vile grease from his mask, he was able to breathe freely again and was happy. He began walking again and dragging his mesh sample bag, which was still a little slimy. Alexander reckoned that as he walked, the moon rocks and other samples in the mesh bag would gradually become cleaned by the intense light shining down from the earth. He continued strolling and taking shorter views of the earth to avoid falling on something.

Suddenly, the moon sand gave way beneath his feet and he dropped downward at a surprising rate of speed. Down, down. What the? Down, down. At one instant, he wished that the thrill ride would end, but then he thought that if it stopped, he would be stuck in sand. What would he do then? He then hoped that the ride wouldn't end until he had somehow emerged somewhere.

He felt afraid and thirsty at the same time. He kept falling and falling. What was happening? He remembered to hold onto the mesh sample bag, because those samples were more important to NASA than he was at the moment. It didn't matter if he made it back to earth, but those samples were priceless. His descent slowed a bit, then sped up then stopped briefly. Oh no! Keep going! Keep going! He started falling again and slammed into a hole up to his waist in a pile of moon sand. Finally! Without having time to think, he felt pressure building around his waist. He was really in the hole pretty tight. The pressure was beginning to aggravate him.

The pressure became intense to the point of limiting his breathing and then he heard a loud explosion as the pressure launched him back up through the moon sand. He ascended much faster than he had descended and before he knew it, he was shot out of the sand like a cork from a champagne bottle. The angle of his trajectory resulted in him catapulting in the opposite direction of which he had been walking. He landed in the pile of moon whale and moon gulls. The birds were pecking and rending the moon whale flesh so indiscriminately that they pecked his body as well. The spacesuit had once again provided him with some protection from the attacks. Unfortunately, he still had the vents open on the mask and the putrid moon whale seeped onto his face and nostrils. He instantly fainted and was pecked thousands of times before he awoke.

More often than not, when Alexander daydreamed while treasure hunting, his dreams mixed reality with fantasy. When he awoke, he was lying in a pile of rotted whale carcass and was being pecked seemingly out of spite by hundreds of gulls. This was no daydream. He was no longer sashaying along the moon landscape wearing a protective spacesuit. He was actually being pecked by beaks. The gulls had shredded his clothing to the point that he was essentially naked and only covered by strips of foul-smelling cotton. He wished that he had awakened sooner. As he climbed out of the whale with the gulls still pecking, he felt a little bit foolish. As open-minded as people were in Key West, he presented the people on the beach with a spectacle, to be sure. Many of the beachgoers and sunbathers were familiar with the site of Alexander treasure hunting and daydreaming along the shore each day. He knew most of them by name. The regulars were accustomed to the mannerisms of Alexander when he became lost in his imagination.

This time, it was the greatest show of all. Poor Alexander only had his detector machine, minimal clothing and very little dignity left. He laughed it off and chocked it up to experience. He was never the type of person to allow himself to be dragged down by events. Anything that happened to him in his life was usually brought on by his behavior. He welcomed new adventures, both physical and psychological. One of Alexander's fellow beach bums ran over to him as he resumed his walking and treasure hunting. The person gave Alexander a colorful cover-up to cover his nearly nude body. Alexander welcomed the offering with thanks and promised to return the article to the person before they departed the beach for home. Alexander

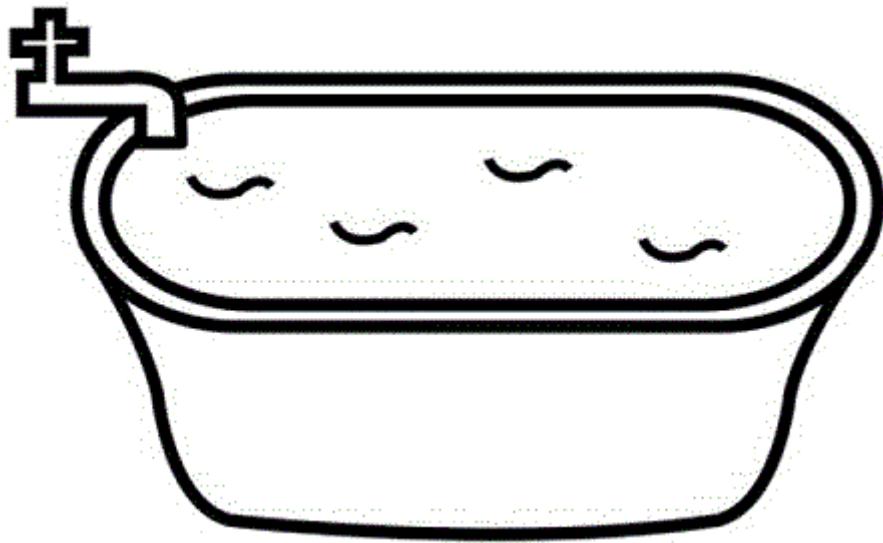
knew a lot of people, but had always been too flaky to really become friends with any of them. He was content with living his life and letting his acquaintances live theirs as it should be everywhere for everyone.

When the average person visiting the beach for the first time saw Alexander, the person formed an immediate impression of Alexander as being just another one of those old surfer dudes. He looked like an old surfer, because his skin was brown, ruined and leathery, like the nut sack of an old water buffalo that had passed away in the searing heat of an Africa plain. He didn't care about his appearance or about what other people thought of him. He was a true individual who possessed a great intellect on the artistic side of reasoning. His current life was devoted to soaking up the heat, dragging his detectors and envisioning other worlds. He had never smoked, taken drugs or drank alcohol and never would. He had never been the least been interested in destroying his body with those unnecessary vices. He had been lucky enough to be born with a brain that was satisfied by the simple things of nature.

When Alexander woke up each morning in his basic abode on the far end of the beach, he ate, walked out into the ocean with a bar of soap and took a bath. He then threw on the first shirt and pants that caught his eye, whether the clothing was clean or not. He filled up his water container, located his shovel and detector apparatus and started walking. The stretch of beach that he walked each day went for miles. He walked from sunup to sundown. He almost always lost track of time while walking and many times walked home in the dark, which he loved. On the clear nights, he walked home and imagined himself to be floating in space like an astronaut that had broken loose from their craft. He was never fearful during those space visions, because he was the prototypical space cadet. He was perpetually floating in space, while conscious or while having his visions. He would have it no other way. On some days, he found objects of value and on others, he didn't. He was content to just get by.

He had inherited his basic abode on the far end of the beach from a kindly gentleman whom Alexander had helped one day. The gentleman had been swimming and was pulled out into the ocean by the undertow. The man panicked and flopped around in the waves, screaming like a banshee. Alexander waded out into the ocean, retrieved the man and the man felt that his life had just been saved. The gentleman made a provision in his will for Alexander's little house, which the man had owned for some time. Alexander was eternally grateful to that man who passed away 4 years ago. As Alexander fondly thought back to that gentleman, he began to drift off into another world again. Before he fully left the here-and-now, his detectors began beeping like crazy. He stopped and turned around to see all 4 detectors flashing and beeping. Yes! He had found a treasure chest of Spanish doubloons! It had to be! He had never seen such activity on his machine. He dropped the apparatus and hurriedly began digging in the sand. Coins! He found coins! Curses! They were just more of those fake gold tokens from one of the hotel/casinos along the beach. In his reverie, they would have been doubloons.

148. Mohandma's Tank



148. Mohandma's Tank

Mohandma and liquid were intimately bonded. When he was in his mother's womb, he had been encased in a warm liquid. While on the way to the midwife, the canoe that his pregnant mother was riding in capsized in a slightly turbulent Indian river. The pregnancy was overdue by a week so that Mohandma could pop out at any moment. He did. When his mother fell from the canoe into the river, she immediately went into labor. In no time at all, Mohandma slipped out of his mother and they both went floating along with the current. Fortunately, he was still attached to his mother via the umbilical cord and remained tethered to her, until they both washed up on shore at a bend in the river. He was slightly bruised and his head had made contact with numerous rocks, but luckily, the skulls of infants were flexible. He emerged essentially unharmed and his mother was very happy. When he related the tale of his birth to people, nobody believed him.

Mohandma was born with an extraordinary intellect and acquired Master's Degrees in medicine and psychology. He had grown up in an environment of much suffering by the people around him. Many of his friends and relatives had become addicted to various substances. He needed to help the people in overcoming their addictions. He had studied feverishly about the causes of addiction and the many ways of helping the addicts. Few of the current methods managed to produce long-term results and Mohandma wanted to know why. He had written many papers on the human mind and its secrets. Since the brain was divided into 2 hemispheres, it complicated matters infinitely. Due to the limited means of studying the brains of living people, mysteries about the brain's functions abounded. It was easy enough for a scientist to examine the brain of a deceased person and to compare the differences of an addict's brain to a non-addict's brain. Even that was guesswork and theory.

Mohandma set out to dig deeper into a person's psyche to determine what made people tick. He spent years studying case files of psychiatric patients and learned very little. While patients were consciously speaking to their therapists, they weren't always capable of telling all. Some patients were capable of being hypnotized and then theoretically revealing more, but it still wasn't enough. As long as the subconscious of the patients had some fear of revealing the rawest thoughts, therapy would always be limited. Psychiatrists and therapists gladly made large sums of money by merely listening to their patients, but few of the patients were ever wholly healed. The idea that patients were content having someone to talk to outside of their circle was hogwash to Mohandma. After reading tens of thousands of case files, he became severely depressed at the state of the psychiatric industry. What could he do to truly help people?

He had come upon the concept of the Sensory Deprivation Tank (SDT), which was a system of removing the exterior sensations of the patients and allowing them to intensify their brain control. The typical system involved a person lying naked in a soundproof darkened room in a

tank of water. By floating naked in the water, the sensation of touch was removed. The soundless dark room removed the sensations of hearing and sight. The odorless water removed the sensation of smell. The lack of anything in the person's mouth eliminated the sensation of taste. By removing the 5 sensations, a person's mind was freed by the typical external inputs. Sometimes the system worked, but most of the time, it didn't. Mohandma researched why it didn't work. It seemed like a perfectly logical idea. The problem with the system was that the average person was accustomed to having one or more of their 5 senses engaging them in some way. It was difficult for someone to suddenly have no sensations, as if they were sleeping, but actually awake.

Mohandma decided to create his own version of the SDT system, which he believed to be the solution for eliminating addictions. Mohandma began by evaluating the method of suspending the patients in the tub. He theorized that perhaps the water was the culprit. Even though the patients were properly deprived of the sensation of touch while floating in the water, something was still missing. Firstly, the ordinary water used in the standard system wasn't capable of precisely adapting to the person's body temperature. The typical method involved determining the precise water temperature required by the patient. There was no exact way of knowing to the degree, other than by asking the patient how the water felt to them. Once the standard system water temperature had been theoretically reached, the person was then left alone for the therapy session.

Secondly, the way that the patients floated in the water left much to be desired. The patient wasn't capable of remaining stationary in the tank, due to the movement of the water. Another type of medium was required to suspend the patients in the tank. The new medium would be as odorless as water and be capable of creating a feeling of temperature neutrality in the patient. The new medium would automatically adjust the temperature of the medium that was in contact with the patient's skin. The patient would essentially feel as if they were comfortably floating on air. The new medium, which Mohandma decided to call a gel, would perfectly support the patient's body and eliminate any movement. It was essential for the patient to be as sensorially deprived as possible.

The Indian village of Jalip, in which Mohandma was raised, had enormous fields of Konno root, which was cultivated for use as a starchy food source. Normally, the root was peeled, boiled and eaten with some spices during meals. He had always remembered how the root would form into a gelatinous slimy mass if it was overcooked, which happened occasionally. His mother had been so busy raising him and his 3 brothers that she sometimes forgot to watch the Konno pot. He hated those meals when they reluctantly ate the overcooked glop with a smile or remain at the table until they had finished. His method had always been to swallow the slimy stuff as quickly as he could, while trying to avoid the gooey texture. He had been raised in a household where the children ate what they were served. It was the thriftiness of Mohandma's parents that had

enabled him and his 3 brothers to attend college.

He acquired a large amount of the Konno root for the laboratory wing of his clinic and set about concocting the desired consistency. After 5 months of trials, he attained his goal. He started using the gel on volunteers and meticulously gauged the results along the way. He carefully queried the volunteers to guarantee his results, before trying the gel on an actual patient. His integrity was so pure, that he didn't want to cause any addicts to become worse than when they initially walked into his clinic. The Konno root gel had such a naturally neutral smell, that after filtering it 12 times through specially designed sieves, the resulting product was as odorless as water. His new gel had met with his necessary specifications. However, he wasn't yet ready to begin using his new system on an actual patient. He had more research to cover.

Over the decades, many wildly differing methods had been employed while attempting to rid patients of their addictions. Some methods utilized the cold turkey practice of removing the patients completely from their addictive substance. Others talked about transferring the patients to other "less harmful" substances and then slowly weaning them off over time. A few methods applied a combination of a partial cold turkey and a partial transference to another substance. No method had been found that could conclusively free patients of their addictions for the remainder of their lifetime. Something was missing from the analysis and Mohandma struggled to know what it was. He took some time away from his clinic and visited with an allegedly 123-year-old woman who was supposed to be spiritualist like no other. The majority of the Indian people were spiritual to different degrees, especially Mohandma. His family believed in the mysticism of nature and cherished the world.

He felt that he needed to palaver with the old woman, in order to verify some of his theories, or at the very least, to gain some kind of insights on the human mind process. He took a train, then a bus, then an ox cart until after 29 hours, he had arrived at the woman's hut. He was extremely tired, hot, thirsty and diarrheic. The old woman was sitting in the corner of the hut gumming a piece of something with her toothless mouth. She handed whatever she was gnawing on to Mohandma and he put in his mouth. He had never tasted anything like it before, but after chewing and swallowing the jerky-like object, he felt a little better. The old woman smiled a toothless smile at him, as if he passed her test. Before he could begin talking to the woman, he heard sounds emanating from his gastrointestinal tract that he had never heard before. The old woman smiled an even bigger toothless smile and pointed a leathery finger to the front door of the hut. There was someone standing just outside the hut who motioned for Mohandma to make a left. He ran to the outhouse on the corner of the hut and really let things fly.

Apparently, the old woman had noticed the look of distress on Mohandma's face when he walked into her hut and decided that he needed some of her special secret jerky. Whatever was in the jerky had really done the trick. Mohandma felt much better, drank some water and ate some of

the fruits and vegetables handed to him by the old woman's assistant. Mohandma didn't realize how hungry he had been and ate 4 bananas, a pineapple, a papaya, a mango and some radishes. The old woman's assistant prepared a large pot of tea for Mohandma and the old woman to drink as they talked. After 3 more pots of tea and more snacking, Mohandma had finally gotten to the point that he was waiting for with the old woman. For her own reasons, it took her a while to reveal her most important insights. The old woman sent her assistant out of the hut and the door was shut tightly. The old woman told of the thousands of poor addicts who lived in her village and also those who had traveled to the village for her help.

It had always pained the woman that so many people became the victims of their own minds. The woman explained that a person's brain was born with everything needed for lifelong happiness. It was when a person grew older and matured that the problems set in. When a person's brain wasn't satisfied by intellectual enrichment, emotional satisfaction, romance, success or other necessary pacification, the person became forced by their brain to seek out some sort of self-medication. The medication came in many forms and was usually a substance created by humanity. The woman found it ironic how humans created the means of their own self-destruction. For some people who had damaged their bodies so excessively by substances, it was sometimes too late to effect a cure. The old woman felt that all addicts could be released from their chains, if they only knew how. The modern methods were always too reliant on quick fixes or localized band-aids, none of which worked indefinitely.

Mohandma agreed with the woman's concepts and before the trip, he had been on the verge of finalizing his own take on her theory. He always had theories swimming around in his brain like a school of sharks feeding on a whale that was caught in a commercial fishing net. The ideas were always at the ready for fine-tuning. He simply needed the time and focus to concentrate on a particular theory to bring it to completion. When the old woman had actually verified his partially-formed theory, he became elated and began singing. The woman recognized the tune, which was an old Indian folksong and she began singing along. The words went as follows, "We had joy; we had fun; we had seasons in the sun, but the hills that we climbed were just seasons out of time." In between singing the words, the woman barked to her assistant outside the hut to come in and brew some more tea. The old woman, the assistant and Mohandma drank 3 pots of tea together and sang more old Indian folk songs. Mohandma was having the time of his life, but realized that he had to find a place to sleep for the night, before he headed home the next day.

The old woman invited Mohandma to sleep in her hut for the night and he graciously accepted her kind offer. Later in the evening, the old woman whispered something to her assistant and the assistant removed something from the cupboard. The assistant made another pot of tea and while Mohandma was immersed in conversation with the old woman. The assistant sprinkled some powder from the packet removed from the cupboard. The next day, Mohandma woke up naked and had numerous stains on his body. The last thing he remembered was the old woman

whispering to her assistant on the previous day. The old woman appeared to be happier than she looked on the previous day, as did her assistant. Mohandma couldn't remember anything, but there were muscles aching in his body that he didn't even know he had. After breakfast, Mohandma bade the old woman and her assistant farewell. The old woman insisted that she required the minimal fee of a kiss from Mohandma, for all that she had done for him. Visions of the previous night suddenly appeared to him and he realized that he had probably given the old woman, her assistant and possibly other people more than a kiss already. He decided to kiss the woman out of respect for her incredible wisdom and experience.

The old woman wrapped her arms around Mohandma and delivered a kiss on his lips with her toothless mouth that he would never forget. It was the type of kiss that would most likely give him nightmares for weeks. On the long trip back home to his clinic, he thought about his plan of attack. He would use his modified SDT system and add a new twist. He would follow the old woman's logic and attempt to replace the patient's addictive substances with other inputs. The trick was to determine what the person required for their minds to revert to an earlier state of contentedness without the need for external substances. Additionally, he decided to employ a gradual reduction-replacement schedule. While at Mohandma's clinic, the patients were allowed to continue using their addictive substances. After designated amounts of time, which would be different for each patient, the daily dosage of the person's addictive substance would be reduced and be replaced by other inputs.

Mohandma attempted to expose then patients to everything under the sun including playing new games; listening to, writing, singing and playing music; creating poetry and literary works; appreciating and creating artworks; watching and playing sports; acting in and writing plays, along with other physical and mental inputs. Eventually, while the person was still safely enjoying their ever-lessening amount of substance, the time in the tank when combined with new inputs would allow them to control their brains into requiring less and less of the substance. After time, the patient would have no need for the addictive substance. Their brain would become pacified by the new input, whatever it was. After weeks of trying the new method, it proved to be successful overall, except for the few individuals who had too much substance-related physical decay.

Mohandma's system was astonishing. Addicts from all over the world participated in his program. The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation footed the entire bill for all the patients, regardless of their ability to pay. After the pop singer Michael Jackson had been cured, he donated \$100 million to Mohandma's clinic, out of sheer gratitude. Mr. Jackson had declared to the world that Mohandma's clinic had saved his life. Another pop star named Prince had also been cured at the clinic. Prince had been too entrenched in debt from his various failed business ventures to make any donation. One of the most famous movie stars of time, Paul Newman, had been cured of his nicotine addiction and joyously lived to the ripe old age of 97.

149. Aldo's Lockbox 2



149. Aldo's Lockbox 2

Tropical Storm Donna was making matters difficult for also and he wished that he had picked a more seaworthy boat. It was the luck of the draw. He hoped to make it to the island before the stupid little boat sank along with the lockbox. The boat sprang more leaks. The leaks were small, but water was beginning to rise in the boat's bottom. He cupped and heaved as much of the water as he could, but the rain more than overshadowed his efforts. The wind and whipping rain blurred his vision, but he was still able to see what was ahead of him in the darkness. The boat was half-full of water and felt nervous. Was he going to make it? He had to. The vast wealth in the lockbox would set him up for life. He had to get to the island to bury it. He realized as the water level in the boat had attained the 3/4 mark, that he was definitely going to sink.

Wait! Was that the island? Yes! It was the island! The boat suddenly began its descent into the ocean. It had reached its limit. Aldo looked down at the heavy lockbox and panicked. He and the lockbox were going down to Davy Jones' Locker together. The boat motor still managed to move the boat toward the island. The island was definitely still getting closer. As he finally convinced himself that it was sink or swim, he grabbed onto the lockbox. The boat slipped out from under him and sank. He hoped that the water was shallow enough for him to walk to the island with the lockbox. It wasn't. He sunk under the water with the lockbox and had to let it go or drown. He swam to the surface and then toward the island. The storm was pounding him mercilessly. He crawled up onto the island shore and began weeping. He sat up and looked at the ocean. He saw nothing but waves and torrential rain. Dang it! He leaned onto his back with his closed-eyes face looking at the downpour. Stupid boat! Stupid storm! He lost the lockbox!

It wasn't actually lost yet, if he could somehow determine where it was out there and bring it to shore. He convinced himself that he would be able to find it if he hurried. The storm was probably already pushing it from its originally dropped location. It had to be straight out from where he was sitting. He stood up and looked out there. Wow! He couldn't see anything but black ocean waves. What was that sound? A boat motor? Certainly from not his boat. What was that out there? A boat! What? Two men were on the boat. Who would be stupid enough to be out in a storm in a little boat like that? He was and now somebody else was. Is that ... no, it can't be! It's Jimp and Craiger! How did they find me? The 2 men in the boat headed right for Aldo and rammed their boat onto the shore. They jumped out of the boat and ran up to him. "Where's the lockbox?" Jimp roared as Craiger grabbed Aldo's collar. Aldo squeaked, "What lockbox?" "THE lockbox!" Craiger emphasized. Aldo meowed, "I don't know!" "Liar!" Jimp yelled as he slapped Aldo's face. "I, I, mean it! I really don't know!" cried Aldo. Craiger screamed, "Then what are you doing here?" Aldo yelled, "It's out there!" "Out where?" Jimp asked. Aldo pointed his finger to the ocean and said, "Out there!"

Jimp and Craiger were dumbfounded. "You lost it?" shrieked Craiger. "Yeah, on the way here!"

Aldo quietly grunted. Aldo assured his cronies that if they hurried, they could still find it. It was straight out from where they were standing. Before the 3 men realized what had happened, they realized that the boat navigated by Jimp and Craiger was gone. They should have tied it down before they attacked Aldo. The 3 were trapped on the island, miles from the mainland in a tropical storm. The men quickly determined that Aldo was right and that they needed to try to find the lockbox before it was moved too far away by the storm. They began taking turns swimming out into the ocean and looking around under the water. The puny amount of light produced by their weak-battered flashlights helped a little, but it was difficult. They tried for hours through the storm, as their eyes became bloodshot from the salt water and their skin became wrinkly like the soles of the feet of a really old Indian woman.

The storm subsided as the tiniest rays of morning light began to appear and they heard a boat motor. As Jimp was dragging his weary body onto the shore, a fisherman appeared in a fishing boat. "You fellers need a lift?" the old salt belted. The 3 men were shocked at the sight of the fisherman. What was he doing there? The 3 stood there soaking wet and presented an interesting sight to the man in the boat. The man asked them what happened and they related how they were out fishing and the storm caught up with them. Their boat capsized and they were waiting for help. The fisherman asked them why they were soaking wet, especially since it wasn't raining any longer. The men claimed that they had just been washing up. The fisherman accepted their excuse, but didn't believe it.

The 3 men asked the fisherman to excuse them as they talked in private for a moment. The 3 agreed to take a ride with the fisherman and then come back to the island later to find the lockbox. They boarded the boat and headed back to the mainland. The fisherman asked the 3 what they were fishing for and Craiger said tuna. The fisherman knew they were lying, because there were no tuna in those waters. The old salt was getting more and more suspicious. The old salt asked the men where they were from and when they accidentally revealed their home states, they were busted. The old salt didn't tell them, but he thought to himself that the 3 men must be the ones who stole 2 of his boats. The home states claimed by the 3 men matched the license plates of the cars in the parking lot of his little marina. To the old salt, the theft of his 2 boats was just a minor crime, but to the 3 men it meant more.

Aldo, Jimp and Craiger huddled for a moment and decided that the old salt was asking too many questions and something had to be done. Jimp pushed the fisherman overboard and turned the boat back toward the little island. The 3 decided to take turns diving from the boat to look for the lockbox. When they arrived at the approximate location, Aldo went first. Jimp and Craiger realized that they needed Aldo for the time being to help with finding the lockbox. When the lockbox was found, something would happen to Aldo. Aldo suspected what the 2 men were up to and felt secure for the moment. He knew they needed him to help find the fortune. During the shifts that Aldo was on board the fishing boat with either Jimp or Craiger, they talked heatedly

about how Aldo had betrayed them. After the heist, the lockbox had been concealed in a hidden place that was known only by the 3 men. According to their plan, once the heat was off related to their crime, they would retrieve the lockbox and split the loot 3 ways.

Obviously, Aldo wasn't able to wait for the heat to be off. He didn't trust Jimp or Craiger and decided to take all the money for himself. Jimp and Craiger were more acquainted with each other than either of them was with Aldo. Aldo knew the arrangement before entering into the plan with the guys, but took his chances anyway. Their plan had been executed perfectly and no one had gotten hurt along the way, until the old salt, that is. When Aldo dug up the lockbox back then and headed for the hills, so to speak, he never imagined that the 2 men would ever find him again. Aldo had been foolish. Now he had to tread carefully to keep himself alive while looking for the lockbox. The 2 guys outnumbered him, but anything was possible in the world of crime. Fellow criminals often turned on each other.

The 3 hoods knew they had to find the lockbox quickly and return the fisherman's boat before anyone became suspicious. The old salt probably fished all day on a typical outing; the 3 men might have 5 hours to find the lockbox and get back to the mainland. At the marina, they would sneak the lockbox into one of the cars and drive out of there. The 3 didn't think that the old salt would have called the Police yet about the 2 missing boats. They hoped that anyway. Average criminals like Aldo, Jimp and Craiger were run-of-the-mill lowlifes with somewhat below average intellects. They never liked being in school and saw no need for education. They were the types to foolishly claim that the streets taught people the best education. Why was it then that so many "street-educated" people were living in prisons? The 3 men never asked that question and didn't care anyway.

While talking to the individual men during his shifts on board, Aldo attempted to get a feel from the 2 men about what was going to happen back at the marina, when they arrive there with the lockbox. The consensus seemed to be that Jimp and Craiger would split up and one of them would ride with Aldo in Aldo's car. The lockbox would be placed in the trunk of their car, not Aldo's. They would then drive somewhere and divide the money. The heat about their crime had finally subsided enough for them to freely use the ill-gotten money at will. The \$2.1 million would result in \$700K for each of them, enough to live like kings for a while. It seemed like a plausible situation, but since Aldo had betrayed the trust of the 2 men by stealing the lockbox from them, a different outcome was more likely. Aldo figured that once the lockbox had been found, he would be a goner. In a way, he hoped that they would never find it and he could just shake their hands, apologize and go on his merry way. It didn't work like that in the criminal world.

After 2 hours of diving, the men's eyes were red from the salt water and their skins were beyond wrinkled and becoming irritated. Where was that stupid thing? Aldo had been relatively confident about the approximate location. The lockbox must have been moved by the storm

currents on the sea floor. The water was only about 11 feet deep, but they couldn't see much. The ocean water was too murky. Their dimming flashlights proved to be of little help. They ate all the food and drank all the water on the boat. They hoped to be back at the marina shortly, so that there was no need of rationing any supplies. The wind began building and rain began to pour. Tropical Storm Elizabeth was upon them. Great - just what they needed, another storm! The men were too focused on the diving to worry about some wind and rain. The problem of the wind made it necessary to pull up the anchor and run the boat motor with the boat pointing into the wind. It was the only way to steady the boat over the diving location. Constantly running the engine used up valuable gas that they might need to get back to the mainland. No one cared.

The lockbox was all that mattered and it had to be found. Where was it? Jimp and Craiger took turns yelling at Aldo when he was on board about how he was mistaken about the location. Aldo stalwartly maintained his opinion. As they took turns diving, Aldo devised a plan; he had to be ready. When the lockbox was found, it would be chaos. He would have to act in an instant to avoid any mishaps. Into the 3rd hour, Aldo's plan had been refined to a razor-sharpness. All they had to do now was to find that stupid lockbox already! Where was that thing? Where was it? Where was it? The 3 had agreed upon the timeframe for finding the lockbox and navigating to the marina to avoid suspicion. None of them had thought about the fuel supply in the boat. The storm had forced them to consume the fuel at an unexpected rate. Jimp and Aldo were on board with Craiger diving, when Jimp at the wheel of the boat noticed the fuel gauge. It was under 1/4 of a tank. When Craiger surfaced, the 3 discussed the limited amount of fuel.

Since none of the 3 men was a seasoned boater, beyond being capable of operating the borrowed boats, they didn't know how long the fuel would last. Should they give up the search and head back, before they found the lockbox. They talked back and forth about it and decided to dive for one more hour. If they didn't find the lockbox, they would head back to the marina and return with another boat to resume to search. The lockbox had to be there somewhere; they just needed more time. Where was that stupid thing? The 3 men didn't want to abandon the location without finding the lockbox. The lockbox contained the means of immense happiness. They didn't want to leave the lockbox there in the bottom of the ocean. Where was it? Jimp and Craiger took turns slapping Aldo's face out of rage. They also hoped to slap some sense into him. Aldo got into a fistfight with the 2 men and landed some good blows, but they all realized that they had to stop. They were wasting valuable time bickering when they should be searching.

The storm was intensifying. While Jimp was diving, he abruptly appeared at the surface and shouted, "I found it! I found it! Quick, give me a rope before we drift away from it!" Craiger untied the anchor from the anchor line and handed the end of the line down to Jimp. Jimp dove down to tie the line onto the lockbox. Now! Aldo picked up the anchor, smacked Craiger in the head with it and pushed him overboard. Jimp surfaced and told Aldo to pull it up. The lockbox was heavy, but while still under water, it was manageable. Aldo began pulling on the line as

Jim climbed into the boat. The anchor line was firmly tied to a boat cleat, which made it impossible to lose the attached lockbox.

As Jim placed his feet on the boat deck, he asked Aldo where Craiger was. Now! Aldo let go of the line, picked up the red-stained anchor, smacked Jim in the head with it and pushed him overboard. Yes! Aldo had executed his plan to a tee. He pulled up the lockbox and drove away. He was so happy at seeing the precious lockbox again that tears poured from his eyes. He found the thing that he lost. They were reunited again. He reckoned or hoped that there would be enough fuel to get back to the marina. He could then furtively load the lockbox into the trunk of his Charger and drive in a westerly direction. He had to find a place where he could disappear. Yeah! He had the lockbox back again! He was so happy! He carefully watched the fuel gauge as it went down more quickly than he had hoped. The boat motor was working hard, trying to resist the storm forces. He was barely moving, but the engine was roaring.

His happiness turned to grief when after only 35 minutes, the engine quit and the boat could only float. Now what? Tropical Storm Elizabeth had escalated into Hurricane Elizabeth. Aldo was caught in the storm by the hurricane was definitely being carried out to sea. He knew enough to know east from west and it didn't look good. If only the storm could carry him and the lockbox toward the mainland, things would be much rosier. After a day of drifting in the wind-driven rains, he became destitute. He wished that he had never dug up the stupid lockbox and attempt to bury it on the stupid island. What was he thinking? He was Blackbeard or Bluebeard or whatever color bearded pirate that was. He had to remain calm. He had no food or water, but he was in a solid fishing boat with his lockbox on the deck. He kept looking at the lockbox between gusts of wind. It helped him to stay focused. There was no plan that would get him out of his predicament. All he could do was wait for rescue by someone, hopefully not the Coast Guard. He would be safe, but soon in jail.

He needed to see a passing fishing boat or cargo vessel. He felt as if he was drifting in the direction of the Bermuda Triangle. He didn't believe in the superstitious mumbo-jumbo about that area of the ocean. He had seen a TV show that attempted to debunk all the myths about the triangle. Most of the mysteries seemed to be explainable by scientific means. The days passed and Aldo was thirsty and starving; he perceived that he was wasting away. The hurricane finally blew through, but he felt like he was so far away from civilization that he would soon perish alone, but wealthy. What good was the money now? His emotions became frayed and he suffered through cyclical bouts of crying, laughing and crying again. He was so dehydrated that no tears flowed when he sobbed. He fainted often and was dizzy each waking moment. During one of his conscious periods, he squinted his eyes at something in the distance. It looked like a whale carcass. As he drifted closer, he determined that it was definitely a dead, rotting whale. He heard a voice. "Help! Help me! Help me, please!" He spied a bedraggled man floating in the water and yelled to him, "Who are you?" The man replied, "Rex! Please help me!"

150. Buck's Tunnel



150. Buck's Tunnel

Buck was dreaming; he had to be. He awoke lying on his back in a shallow stream of cold water. Where was he? He looked up at the brick masonry and thought it was a cool looking ceiling. It wasn't the ceiling of a house. His body was aching all over and the water was cold. Why was he still lying in it? He tried to get up, but couldn't. All he could do was lie there, like a sleeping alligator. The water was getting colder. He had to get up out of the water. Why couldn't he get up? Even though his body ached, he didn't think he was paralyzed; or was he? He tried to move his fingers; they wouldn't move. He tried to move the rest of his body, but couldn't. Crap! Where was he? He continued looking up at the ceiling, because he didn't have much other choice. He thought that he might be in a tunnel made out of masonry bricks. Yeah, that must be it. How did he get there? The water seemed to be getting even colder.

It was as if someone was turning on the cold water of a faucet in a house until it emptied the room temperature water in the pipes and now the pipes were filled with the colder water from the pipes under the ground. He didn't think that was his situation, because he was in a tunnel. He wasn't in a house, unless it was a tunnel in a house, which was preposterous. The temperature of the water seemed to finally stay at a certain cold temperature and not get any colder. If only he could raise his aching body out of the water, it wouldn't matter what temperature the water was. He was at the mercy of the water. As long as it didn't get too much colder, he would avoid hypothermia. As long as it didn't rise to a level over his nose and mouth, he wouldn't drown. All he could hear was the gentle current of the water. In any other circumstance, the sound of the water would have been soothing, even tranquil. In his case, the sound of the water was accompanied by the cold temperature of the water. The cold temperature negated any calming effects that the water might have.

He was excessively thirsty. He was as thirsty as a camel that had walked 12 days in the Sahara Desert with out once stopping at an oasis for a sip. Due to his mysterious paralyzed state, he couldn't even roll his head toward the water to get of a drink of his likely foulness. He noticed that the water had a smell of a subway tunnel mixed with oregano. It seemed like an unlikely combination, but that's what it smelled like. He was in a state of wishing that the water was just high enough to flow over his mouth to drink, but not high enough to drown him. Pretty ironic and moronic. He was angry at his state of paralysis and angry with himself for becoming that way. He couldn't remember what had happened, but it was probably his fault again. Buck was always doing impulsive things and paying for them later. His current plight was definitely the worst so far.

He was completely paralyzed, but his skin could still feel the cold of the water and the coolness of the air. The skin on his back was numb from a combination of the cold water and from lying there for an indeterminate amount of time. If he concentrated hard enough, he began to feel something more than the cold on his back. He felt something pushing unevenly. His head was

lying on something hard and then as he worked his way toward his feet, the sensation paused. His neck was just cold. His upper back was on something hard, then another pause of the feeling of hardness. Then his ass was on something hard then a pause, etc. Of course! He was lying on railroad track ties. He couldn't move his head, but his eyes could just barely detect the rails, if he really looked to the extremes of left or right. Oh no! He was lying between the rails of a railroad track! Great! What was that? A whistling sound in the distance. He sensed slight vibrations. The vibrations increased. He heard the familiar sound of train wheels on train tracks. It was the sound of wheels out of balance rolling on uneven rails. Everyone had heard the sound before. It was unmistakable.

A train was coming! He anticipated that if it were a train, he would be run over and dragged like a mannequin that was used by automotive companies for testing. At least he would be out of his misery and confusion. That would be something anyway. Wait! What was he thinking? He was too young to be thinking like that! He had always been a survivor. If the train came, he would just have to hope that it would pass right over. Yeah, that's it. It would pass right over the top of him. He would exhale as much as he could, to make his motionless body as low as possible. It would pass right over. Maybe not though. At 362 pounds, Buck presented quite the bulk when he was lying on his back. Maybe it wouldn't pass right over. Talk about an anxiety-laden set of circumstances! The train was coming. It was getting louder and creating more vibrations. Strangely, as he faced his impending doom, he suddenly felt calm. He laughed at how his emotions kept flipping from one to another, like someone flipping through the index cards of one of those old-fashioned rolodexes.

He laughed again and felt like really laughing, but it didn't seem appropriate. The fact that he was laughing at all was slightly peculiar, but psychotic laughing would be a sign of insanity. What difference did it make anyway? It wasn't as if he was sitting there having coffee with someone and then he suddenly started laughing hysterically. He was in a tight spot and he was entitled to laugh maniacally if he wanted to. Therefore, he did. He laughed and laughed, until he felt that he had made his point to himself. He stopped laughing and began crying. He thought about all the things he still had to check off on his bucket list. He still hadn't gone to Las Vegas to see Elvis Presley. Buck loved Elvis. He still hadn't gone to the top of the World Trade Center in NYC. The view from the top had to be breathtaking. Most important of all, he still hadn't seen Michelangelo's David. To Buck, there was no greater sculptor and painter. Buck resolved to stop bawling like a baby and simply hope for the train to pass right over the top of his rather bulbous gut that was sticking up.

The train was definitely coming. It would be over in a matter of seconds, unless of course the bottom of the train merely grazed him enough to maim him and not cause his demise. That would suck. Buck imagined the train passing over him and catching onto his big gut. Maybe he would be rolled down the tracks like an old wobbly bowling ball being rolled down a bowling

alley lane. By the time that the train had finished rolling him down the tracks, his body would definitely not be the same. He didn't want to visualize how messed up it could get. While the train was rolling him down the tracks, he might be conscious the whole time. What a ride that would be! With his luck, he would probably end up lying face down in the stream and drown. Obviously, it could be worse. Some iron part of the train might stab him, drag him down the tracks and keep dragging him for miles. That would be something.

So many graphic thoughts popped into Buck's mind in those moments before the train arrived. In between the visualizations, he asked himself why he was thinking the way he was thinking. It seemed bizarre. When people fear imminent demise, things happen to their psyches. He mentally slapped himself in the face to stop the morbidity of his brain. He had to be confident that he would emerge from the train event unscathed. The train would pass right over and things would get a little windy; that's all. He could then go back to lying there in the cold water, staring at the ceiling of the tunnel. As boring and mentally challenging as it was to lie there paralyzed looking at the ceiling, his survival instincts preferred it to perishing. Life was funny that way. He started laughing again at the idea that he would rather lie there in the cold water than be mauled by a train. The train could mercifully end his suffering, but he wasn't yet ready to meet his maker.

It was almost upon him. He shut his eyes as tightly as he could and exhaled. The vibrations from the train were tremendous. It was almost here! No! He heard the loudest sounds of his lifetime as the train passed over him. The train wasn't running on his track, however. The train was running on the track that passed above the tunnel. He opened his eyes and took a deep breath. He was saved! The train was passing above on another track! Yay! He watched as the joints between the bricks in the ceiling seemed to become wavy. It had to be from the vibrations. He could fully focus his eyes, because the minute shock waves from the train were subtly jiggling his eyeballs. He closed his eyes again to wait for the train to finish passing by. He was getting dizzy from trying to force his eyes to focus through the tiny tremors. What a long train! He had seen some trains in his day, but not one that long. After what he estimated to be 14 minutes, the train racket had finally ended. It was over. He was freezing.

He became depressed at the thought of surviving the train episode and he was still lying in the cold water. He was alive, but was he living? That was another one of those mysterious life concepts. He debated with himself whether or not to think about it, but he cancelled it. He had enough to worry about without digging that deep into his poor brain. After 13 hours of lying there, he had counted the individual bricks in the viewing area of the ceiling overhead 147 times. Strangely, he had arrived at many different numbers. Once, he counted 11,987 bricks. Another time, he counted 12, 325 bricks. Still another time, he counted 11, 999. He decided to call the number at somewhere between 11,900 and 12, 500. He didn't want to get into an argument with himself about the exact number of bricks up there. It was such a trivial concept that it shouldn't

merit him wasting his time. He had to concentrate his energies on getting out of there somehow. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it sooner, but he began to yell and scream for help. He shrieked, hollered and roared. There was nobody around. He was probably out in the middle of nowhere. The only things where he was located were the 2 intersecting train lines. He called for help for hours, in between laughing and crying. He beckoned until his voice was gone. That was it then. He could no longer request help from the nothingness out there. He would have to wait for his voice to come back. He would be able to try again later.

Buck was glad of one thing. He was lying in the water with his head downstream from his feet. At least, the cold water wasn't flowing directly on his head. He would probably feel even colder. As he pondered his fate, he began urinating and defecating in his pants. Now what? The urine soaked into his underwear and pants and then seeped into the water. The poop did the same. In too short of a time, the piss and poop water ran by his neck, face and head. Foul! Now he had to put up with lying in essentially a cold-water sewer until his clothing and ass area were rinsed clean by the water. He hated to think how long that would take. As he lay there in his sewer, he began humming a tune. He hummed the theme song to the movie, "Dr. Zhivago." He liked that song. He hummed it for a few hours, until his voice box quit completely. He didn't think it was possible for a human to not be able to hum, but it had certainly happened to him.

He tried whistling instead. He always liked the song, "Whistle While You Work," from the Disney movie, "Snow White." After another 39 hours of lying there freezing and whistling, Buck had trained himself to become a pretty good whistler. The tunnel had such great acoustics. It was a perfect place for whistling. He moved onto many of the other great whistling songs and perfected them as well. Buck wondered if he would be able to get a job somewhere as a whistler. There must be a venue somewhere that hired whistlers. During the nighttime, when the tunnel was pitch black, Buck kept his eyes closed. He didn't want to lie there staring in the dark. It was too creepy and horrific. He slept when he was tired, which at random times of the day. After another day, he felt a drop of water on his forehead. He thought that it was just some kind of moisture from humidity condensing on the tunnel ceiling.

After an hour, another drop fell on his forehead. He dismissed it as just a bit more condensation. After 29 minutes another drop fell; after 16 minutes another drop fell. The drops were gradually increasing in number. The first few drops felt refreshing on his forehead, because they dripped into his eyes, which needed rinsing. As the number of drops increased, the sensation changed from refreshing to annoying. The drops increased and increased. Buck surmised that the drops might not be from condensation. If they were, they would have stopped falling by now. The drops increasing implied that there was water dripping down through the ceiling of the tunnel. That is all he needed. What had he done to deserve this? Wasn't it bad enough to be paralyzed lying in a cold-water stream that was tainted by his own excretions? Wasn't that bad enough? Come on, already!

The drops continued falling for hours. The sensation on his forehead became one of pain. He wondered if he had become the latest unwilling victim of a Chinese water torture. He had heard about such a thing and had seen it once or twice in movies. He always thought it impossible that water dripping on your forehead could be a form of torture. He was beginning to believe it now. He hoped that the sensation of pain would eventually change to numbness. He needed his forehead to become numb. Why was it still painful? He was unable to move his head even the slightest amount. The drops began to feel like ball bearings falling on his forehead. The ball bearings were getting larger and larger. Buck found it funny how tiny drops of water could feel like large ball bearings. Drip, drip, drip, drip, drip. Stop! Please stop! The drops continued. He struggled to imagine the water drops to be feathers. Yeah, feathers. Feathers falling on his head would feel like almost nothing. He tried. He tried for many hours. It didn't work.

During the hours that Buck was trying to imagine the falling water drops to be feathers, the sensation on his forehead made the drops begin feeling like rocks. It was incredible. There must be some way out of this. If the drops continued to fall, they would drive him insane. He was back to wishing that the train overhead had been on his track. He didn't know how much longer he could take it. The odd thing about it was that he didn't have a choice. It wasn't as if he was freezing while standing next to his overturned car in a highway ditch in Wisconsin during a snowstorm, waiting for the tow truck to arrive. In the Wisconsin scenario, the agony of freezing would be over soon. In that scenario, he had a choice. The choice there would have been to live somewhere warmer, where the roads didn't become snowy and icy during the winter. In Buck's scenario, all he could do was lie there and take it. There was no way to walk away from it. It wasn't going to subside.

The water stopped dripping. Yes! Buck felt such elation, that he uncontrollably pissed and pooped again, thus rekindling the sewer he was lying in. The stench of his piss and poop had been almost gone up to that point. Now the stink was back. The happiness from the cessations of the falling water drops was worth it. Buck felt something on his left kneecap. Something was biting him. He couldn't lift his head to see what it was, but it hurt. He heard the sound of his pant leg tearing and then the pain intensified. Something was definitely biting his knee. The pain became excruciating. What was going on down there? It felt like something might be doing more than biting. It felt more like something was eating him.

An animal was eating him! He heard and felt the animal tearing at the flesh just above his knee. It felt much worse than the water drops on his forehead. He couldn't move or twitch his leg to shoo the animal away. It was probably some stupid rat. He imagined that this must be how it felt to have surgery without anesthesia. The animal worked its way up Buck's leg. Buck tried to yell, but had no voice. He whistled at the animal, but the fiendish creature feared nothing, since the body on which it was feeding was immobile. Buck suddenly felt pain in his right kneecap. Another rat! The water drops began falling again.

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book Three



Mikey with his 30 pound squash in 2018.

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book Three

write

/rīt/

verb

1. mark (letters, words, or other symbols) on a surface, typically paper, with a pen, pencil, typewriter, computer or similar implement.

(Example: How can they write that claptrap and expect people to read it?)

clap·trap

/'klap,trap/

noun

1. nonsense, especially pompous or important-sounding nonsense.

100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book Three

This book is dedicated to:

My wonderful wife Donna E. Pszeniczny for putting up with my incomprehensibleness.

My father Leonard S. Pszeniczny and mother Marcia A. Pszeniczny from whom I inherited my active imagination and bombasticity.

My brothers Leonard M. Pszeniczny and Brian J. Pszeniczny for all the good times we had growing up (The Tracks, The Land, The Ranch, The Ridge, Ron's Green LTD & The Forts).

July, 2016

The latest digital versions of **100 Short Stories by Mikey - Book One, Book Two, etc.** are available at the following locations with the most recently added chapters:

<http://100shortstoriesbymikey.weebly.com>

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151. Rafi's Cave 3



151. Rafi's Cave 3

As Rafi reached his hand up through the hole to freedom and life anew, something grabbed onto it. It felt more like a someone than a something. Somebody was up there! Yay! The someone above placed another hand onto Rafi's wrist and pulled with unexpected force. The person pulled so hard that Rafi thought his shoulder was on the verge of becoming dislocated. He tried to push himself upward along the wall of the hole, to help his ascent. The walls of hardened lava scraped his body viciously, but it was well worth the temporary physical agony. The sun shining on his face was so welcoming that he burst into uproarious laughter. The person who was pulling on his arm asked, "What's so funny?" When Rafi was completely removed from the hole, he looked up at a cute girl who was standing there as naked as he was. He told her that he was laughing because he was so happy from being free of his cave dungeon.

Rafi asked the girl who she was. She said her name was Ifar. As Rafi stood up, he instinctively covered his peepee with his hands and his cheeks reddened with embarrassment. He was surprised how casually she stood there with nothing covering her body. He accidentally glanced at her from head to toe and then quickly looked away, thinking that he had been caught ogling her. Ifar said that the people in her village wore nothing to cover their bodies, because they didn't see the need for it. Rafi hesitantly moved his hands from the location covering himself and let them hang freely. Ifar asked Rafi how long he had been trapped in the cave and he said he didn't know. She told how her entire village had been covered by the eruption of the volcano and that there were no living people anywhere. She had been spared because she had been in the village storage cave, tending to the preserved goods.

Upon hearing Ifar's words, Rafi collapsed to the ground and began bawling. Ifar knelt to the ground to comfort him and gently held him as he wept. Rafi's fragile mental and physical circumstances had thrust him into a state of delirium. He had no idea of the disaster that had taken place in the world above his cave. He fully expected to see his friends and relatives again. To hear that everyone was gone was too much for him to fathom. His short life had been overflowing with happiness and contentment until the day of the eruption. He felt that his interment in the cave had only been a temporary condition and that he would be free eventually. Now that he was finally free, he felt sledge-hammered by misery and woe. How could the creator have done such a thing to his people? Why? He managed to sip a few drops of salty water from Ifar's water satchel and he fell asleep.

Rafi slept for 35 hours and awoke initially feeling refreshed, but then he thought about the loss of his people and began crying again. Ifar gently caressed his long disgusting hair and he quieted down a little. She gave him a piece of something to eat, which he managed to choke down after some reluctance by his taste buds. Whatever the food was, it was unlike anything that he had ever eaten. He wanted more and she gave it to him. He was soon sitting up and eating and

drinking everything that she had with her. Ifar didn't seem worried about his ravenous appetite and the fact that he was eating and drinking so much of her provisions. She acted as if she had plenty more where that came from, which she did. She explained to Rafi that the village cave was full of enough preserved food and water to last for years for the two of them. Her village of 127 people had always believed in being prepared for nature's occasional mischievous events. They perfected a method of preserving food by the use of urine. They had another formula for creating drinking water from urine that had been invented decades before by their greatest thinker named Leonid.

As Rafi ate and drank from the strange tasting items presented by Ifar, he felt his strength coming back and his grief becoming lessened. After several days of living in the cave with Ifar and consuming everything that he could fit in his stomach, he actually began to relax. The strange girl appeared to have something going on with her left eye. She explained that when the eruption started, bits of molten lava and rock were flying everywhere. When she walked to the entrance of the village cave to investigate, her eye had been struck by an object, which blinded the eye. Rafi thought it coincidental that she also had a blinded eye like him. It did nothing to affect her cuteness. Another coincidence was that Ifar was exactly the same age to the day that he was. As his tender age, he didn't put a lot of thought into the strange occurrences in life. She did, however.

She immediately pointed out the eye and age similarities and how the two of them had been destined by the creator to encounter each other. Rafi listened to the girl and didn't know or care what she was talking about. She definitely seemed to have thoughts about things that he had never considered. All he had ever cared about in life was doing his chores and being happy. Ifar apparently had grown up in a village of people who had different concepts about life than he was accustomed to. He wasn't worried about it though. As long as he was in the fresh air again, it was a start. He was determined to scout around and see for himself if everyone was gone. Even though Ifar had assured him that she had searched an enormous area around them, he still had to see for himself.

They packed up satchels of food and water and headed out each day to look for signs of life. After weeks of searching the lava-covered terrain in ever-increasing radii from the village cave, Rafi was convinced of the doom of the populace. The two of them appeared to be the last people alive in their search area. He stubbornly held out hope that there might be people out there somewhere who had luckily survived as Rafi and Ifar had. There had to be! How can they be the last of the people? Why? What was the creator thinking? Rafi resigned himself to making the best of things with his new companion. At least he was no longer trapped in that infernal cave! Ifar was an incredibly knowledgeable girl for her age, much more so than the girls of his village. Rafi and Ifar would be able to learn from each other and tackle the huge obstacles that undoubtedly lay before them.

After a month of surviving together, Ifar suggested to Rafi that they hike to the top of Mt. Uptoo-Kik. The mountain was named after the wife of the great thinker Leonid. Leonid's wife had been indispensable to the great thinker as his guinea pig for his many experimentations. Without Uptoo-Kik, Leonid wouldn't have had anyone to help him taste test his urine-preserved foods, the urine derived drinking water, the edible poop and many of his other scientific achievements. Leonid's scientific curiosity had enabled his village to become far more advanced than any of the neighboring villages. No one could ever figure out how he came up with such great ideas. Some of his ideas didn't work out as well as others, which was perfectly expected in the scientific world. One of Leonid's experiments had involved his wife ingesting virtually all of the known snake venoms.

Uptoo-Kik barely survived the tests and had lapsed into a coma that lasted for 43 days. When she at last awoke from the long sleep, the silky hair on her head had turned a beautiful shade of turquoise. Her lustrous leg hair had turned a beautiful shade of emerald. Her bushy armpit hair and nether region hair had both turned silver. The other women of the village envied Uptoo-Kik and wished to have similarly colored hair, but it was forbidden by Leonid. He considered the changed hair color to be a result of a failure of one of his experiments. After a year, Uptoo-Kik's various hair colors had all returned to normal. She still suffered from a slight lisp that remained until her passing. Leonid admitted to Uptoo-Kik that he actually liked the lisp, because it gave her an unusual girlishness that he found appealing.

Rafi looked forward to the journey to the mountain, because it would give him another opportunity to look for his lost people. He no longer expected to find any of his friends and relatives, but he refused to give up. Ifar and Rafi packed large amounts of supplies into backpacks and they set off on their journey eastward to Mt. Uptoo-Kik. It required a lot of walking, hiking and climbing, but after 17 days, they arrived at the summit. After living his entire life on the flat lands of his village, Rafi was awestruck by the view of the world up there. He never imagined how immense and inspiring the earth could be. Even though everything was encased in hardened lava, it was still somehow beautiful. Scorched tree trunks protruded through the lava as if to say that they hadn't been beaten by the volcano. Somehow, nature had managed to plant seeds in the lava, because myriad plants had started growing everywhere. The multiple shades of green were inspiring. Life managed to continue.

Birds of many species were in flight, small animals were scurrying about and even some larger mammals could be spotted searching for sustenance. Ifar took Rafi's hand in hers and they silently took in the scene. He began to feel at ease with himself. Ifar began sniffing and whimpering. Rafi had been holding back his emotions, but had been pulled into the fold by Ifar. They both felt the tears trickling down their smooth young cheeks. Rafi gripped Ifar's hand tightly as they began crying together. Perhaps their respective months of loneliness and deprivation had accumulated in their psyches. They experienced the release of enormous

amounts of stress and anxiety as they stood there breathing in the warm breeze. Rafi was so overwhelmed by his new feelings that he slowly rotated his head toward Ifar and discovered that she had been gazing at him the whole time. At that immature point in his life, he sensed that the cute girl whose hand he was holding might be somebody very special. They looked at each other's tear-soaked faces for a moment and then turned back to the view of their world. Something unspoken had been acknowledged by the two of them that would be investigated later on, when they were more capable of understanding it better.

Ifar began to recite amazing stories of her people and all the great accomplishments that were now buried under the lava. With her free hand, she pointed to different locations and described what existed there under the hardpan. There were great orchards here and animal corrals there; there were immense gardens in that spot and the great thinker's mansion in that location. The more Ifar talked about her people, the more Rafi became impressed by her. The people of his village were happy and contented, but were apparently way behind the times. Leonid had devised methods for having plumbing in each hut with hot and cold running water. Rafi hadn't even heard of plumbing. Leonid had created a sewer system that collected all the waste from each hut's toilet and deposited the waste in a huge cesspool far away from the village. Rafi hadn't even heard of a toilet. Leonid had designed a complex lighting system that provided lights for the paths of the village and for the interior lighting of each hut. The lighting system was fueled by the methane gas that was generated by all the poop of the humans and livestock. Rafi hadn't even heard of methane.

As the two children stood there innocently observing the landscape, a flock of vultures had homed in on them. The lead vulture descended to attack. The others followed. The lead vulture swooped at Ifar's head and knocked her to the ground. The 2nd vulture in line swooped at Rafi and knocked him down. The vultures regrouped and prepared to make another run at the kids. As the vultures ascended, the children scrounged around for rocks to heave at their attackers. As the vultures came at them again, Rafi and Ifar began firing the rocks. The vultures were too tough to be knocked down by the rocks and kept coming. Ifar was knocked down again by the lead vulture, but Rafi narrowly avoided his vulture. Rafi picked up a large rock over his head that he hoped would have more effect on the savage birds. The vultures made their 3rd run with a different plan in mind.

The lead vulture grabbed the large rock from Rafi's hands and flew away with it. Four of the other vultures landed on Ifar and each bird latched onto one of her limbs. The 4 vultures flew off with Ifar, who was screaming at the top of her lungs. As Rafi became distracted by hurling rocks at the vultures that had stolen his girlfriend, the lead vulture dropped the large rock onto Rafi's head. Rafi was knocked unconscious and scooped up by the lead vulture and 3 others. When Ifar and Rafi awoke, they found themselves high up in a tree in a bulky nest made of branches and twigs. There were young vultures and vultures hatching from eggs all around them. The

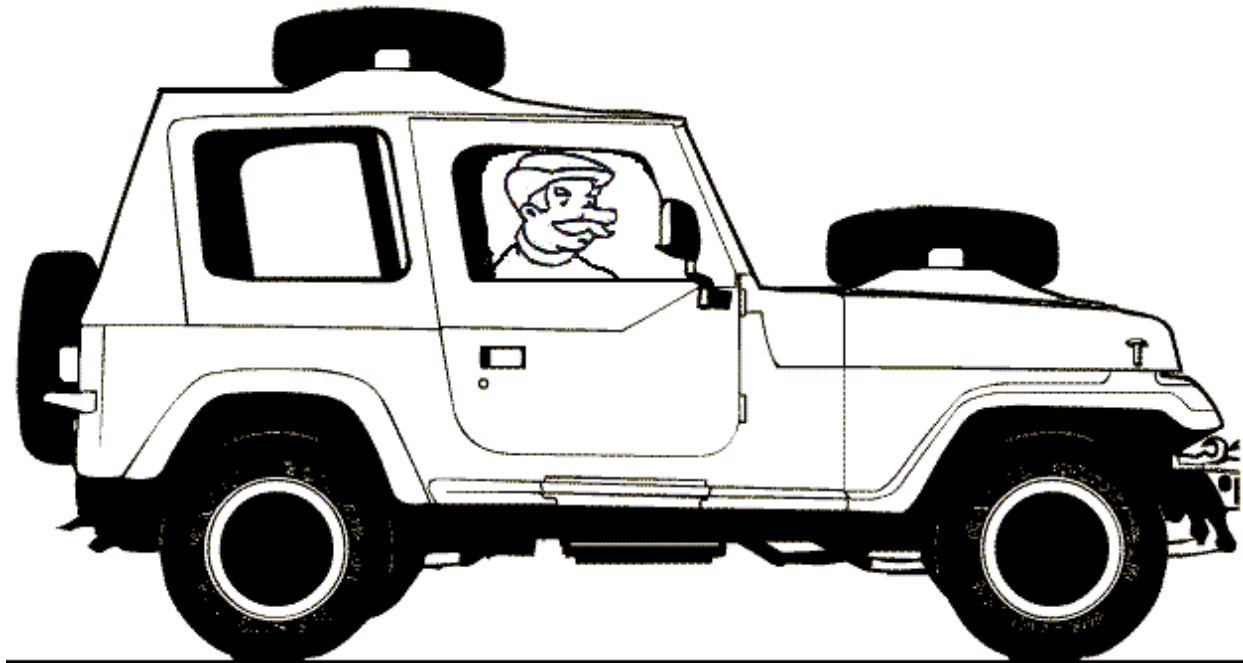
vulture flock had deposited the children in the nest for the young vultures to feed upon. Rafi wasn't going to allow anything to happen to Ifar and he instantly locked each of his hands onto a vulture. He employed the gripped birds as battering rams. In a trice, Ifar followed Rafi's lead and obtained 2 vultures of her own. The children ferociously swung at the young vultures in the nest and knocked them all out of the tree. The circling vulture flock plunged to investigate. Rafi and Ifar had looks on their faces like they meant business; so did the vulture flock members.

As the lead vulture casually arrived at the nest expecting a swift end to the children, the bird was dealt a smack to the face. The lead vulture was knocked out by the impact and plummeted to the ground. The remaining flock members attempted to destroy the feisty children, but all met with the similar fate of their leader. Ifar and Rafi triumphantly laughed and hurled to the ground the 4 deceased vultures that they had used as weapons. The kids cautiously climbed out of the nest and shimmied down the tree to the ground. They stomped the dazed members of the vulture flock until the birds were essentially headless. The children left the vultures where they lay and proceeded back to the village cave, scratched and bleeding, but alive. As they walked hand in hand, they reflected on the saga of their battle and how they would need to prepare themselves against future animal attacks in their obviously dangerous new world.

They spent the next several days creating bows, arrows, knives, spears, slings and other weapons of defense. Something transpired in the world that had turned the surviving animals into violent beings. The struggle for survival had a way of doing that. Rafi and Ifar were the only humans still standing and it was up to them to remain alive and kicking. They didn't know it at the time, but they were the new Adam and Eve. The human population would have to be started anew by them. It would be some time before nature would become apparent to them and work its magic on them. In the meantime, they had to survive to get to that point. Luckily, they had plenty of food and water preserved in the village cave by Ifar's people. Rafi thought it strange that it hadn't rained since he had been out of his secret cave. Perhaps the climate had somehow been altered by the eruption. Ifar had been wondering about the same thing.

Rafi concluded that the water trickling down into his secret cave must have been from latent moisture in the soil and not from freshly fallen rain. After months of eating the preserved food in the village cave, Rafi gradually became accustomed to the odd flavor. Ifar talked often about the many recipes used for flavoring the food. When Rafi asked Ifar about all the heaps of human bones and skulls strewn about the cave, she nonchalantly stated that the bones were from her people. Rafi inquired why the deceased of Ifar's village weren't buried in a cemetery somewhere. Ifar said that her people didn't bury their deceased; they ate them. Rafi's eyes opened as wide as the eyes of an owl that was landing on a mouse at midnight. Ifar told Rafi that she and he had been eating the preserved remains of her people since the first day that she extricated him from his secret cave. At first, Rafi recoiled in horror, but then admitted to himself that for the first time in a long time, he was happy.

152. Icky's Gold 2



152. Icky's Gold 2

After the last kangaroo of the herd had finished stampeding over Icky, it was the rhino's turn. The rhino skidded to a stop in front of Icky. Instead of stomping on Icky, the rhino paused for a moment of apparent reflection and stood there looking down at the dazed Icky in the water. The rhino seemed to have feelings of sorrow for Icky lying there so vulnerably. The great beast began squinting its eyes as if it were attempting to hold back tears. A rhino biologist on the scene might have become emotional at seeing the leathery behemoth appearing to be kind, which was rare for the creatures. The rhino turned itself 180 degrees so that it was facing away from Icky. Was it so taken by Icky's situation that it could no longer view the human in distress? Did the rhino wish that it could somehow help Icky? What was that rhino thinking about? The rhino inhaled a large amount of air into its huge lungs and exerted a great pressure on its innards.

When the rhino had started the kangaroo stampede and had run along behind the kangaroos, its gastrointestinal system had liquefied the contents of its large intestine. The rhino was at the point of no return. The rhino issued a final satisfying grunt. Twenty-eight pounds of steaming rhino diarrhea spewed from the rhino's anus onto the back of Icky's head. Even though Icky had been delirious from the kangaroo attack, the smell and sensation of the rhino diarrhea spurred him into action. He leaped up from the stream and jumped back from the laughing rhino. Icky unzipped his pants and proceeded to piss on the rhino's face. Even though the rhino felt insulted by Icky's action, it felt content that it had done enough by pooping on him. The rhino knew that Icky would stench for many weeks as a result of the rhino poopoo bath. The rhino mischievously galloped off into the distance and disappeared in a cloud of dust.

Icky intentionally fell down into the stream and tried to rinse off the best that he could. Since he was already accustomed to being perpetually smelly, the stink didn't bother him all that much. He acknowledged that he would probably stink horribly for a number of weeks, but no worries. Since he rarely encountered people for extended lengths of time, it didn't bother him. He resumed singing in his terrible voice and after a bit, completed the assembly of the sluice system. He hoped that Josephine was going to be the source of his greatest gold wealth. Little did he realize how large the source would be. He unleashed the water flow to the system and began the process. In mere moments, he spotted gold dust flowing along with the debris and water. It was rare to visually see the specks of dust in a stream system, because the particles were typically camouflaged by silt. To actually see gold dust was a good sign indeed.

Perhaps it had been his lucky day to survive both a kangaroo stampede and being pooped on by a feisty rhino. The luck was promising to continue. The creator certainly worked in mysterious ways! He began singing louder and louder until his voice was so distorted that dingoes could be heard howling from miles around. As Icky retrieved the dust at the end of the long sluiceway, he quickly realized that he was certainly onto something big. The amount of gold particles in that

stream was so prodigious that in 3 hours, he had accumulated 400 grams of gold worth approximately \$1,000. At that rate of production, he could possibly amass \$8,000 per 24-hour day. He became so involved in the gold collection process that he couldn't pull himself away from his beloved Josephine. He worked continuously for 48 hours, without eating or drinking. He pissed and pooped in his pants once and then removed and tossed the soiled clothing to the side in order to work bottomless. As long as he kept his head and upper protected by the sun, he felt safe enough from sunburn. As bad luck would have it, he of course obtained a proper sunburn on his ass, but the money that poured forth made it worthwhile.

Icky had witnessed for himself and heard many tales about how a gold mine had to be monitored when it started producing, especially when it generated a lot of gold. The mine might continue to push out gold or it might stop at any second. The key was that it needed to be milked continuously for all it was worth. Icky was in the zone and planned to keep running the sluice until he keeled over, if necessary. He began weakening after 55 hours and paused briefly to eat, drink and put on some pants. His early estimates for the gold output had been eclipsed by higher actual numbers and as he munched on some dried foodstuffs, he weighed out about \$31,500 of gold dust. He was in the money! He continued singing until his voice had completely gone and the dingoes stopped howling. He began whistling and humming instead. He enjoyed passing the time while performing labor-intensive work by somehow creating melodies. It made him happy.

He acknowledged that he was a much better singer than whistler or hummer, which wasn't saying much. Even with occasional stops for sustenance, the sheer workload was beginning to break him down. As physically fit and capable of hard manual labor as he was, he feared that he was approaching a collapse. However, he simply couldn't bring himself to stop working. He could accept almost any physical malady that would be a result of a physical breakdown. He was willing to take his chances. Josephine was the goldmine of dreams; he had been searching for such a mother lode for a long, long time. He was in the midst of such mental excitement, that he was almost hallucinating. Gold miners the world over would claim to gladly give certain body parts to be in his current position. Icky was as addicted to the gold as a bee was to honey or a lion was to a zebra.

He worked faster and faster and found that if he increased his breathing rate to just short of hyperventilating, he was able to sustain his industrial pace. The controlled breathing was working for him. The hallucinations were staved off. He continued stopping for sustenance at short intervals and maintained the sluice system at full efficiency. After 71 hours, he calculated that he was \$51,750 richer. It was the stuff of Australian gold miner dreams. To Icky's utter astonishment, the stream continued producing gold in increasingly higher amounts. He was so tired at that pint that eating, drinking and controlled breathing weren't cutting it. One side of his brain was beginning to crave sleep, but the other greedy side wouldn't permit it. It's funny how people can become the victims of their own gray matter.

Icky soldiered on through the exhaustion into the 4th day of production. Icky wasn't sure if the gold output was actually diminishing or if he was becoming too bleary-eyed to accurately measure the weight. He rested for an hour to gather his thoughts and re-measured everything. The flow of gold was unfortunately slowing down. By the end of the 4th day, at the 97-hour mark, he weighed his gold and estimated his profits at \$96,890. It was the greatest thing to ever happen to him. He was now ready to retire in a relative life of luxury in accordance with his meager living standards. He was so tired that he barely had the strength to bury his treasure. The gold had to be concealed as he slept, to safeguard his newfound wealth. The experience had burned him out. He only cared to bury the gold and sleep without doing anything with the sluice equipment. He didn't foresee himself as being a gold miner any longer. He was done.

When he awoke the next day, he abandoned the empty Josephine gold mine and headed to town to cash in his fortune. Someone could find that sluice system in place someday and have their way with it. Icky wished them well. He doubted that the stream had any gold left in it, which was the way it was out there. The sluice system could be disassembled and would be useful to someone as spare parts. Icky was exultant beyond all his expectations. He had to keep pinching himself to prove that he wasn't dreaming. He had heard about old timers hitting it big with mines out there, but nothing like he had just hit. He was verging on becoming the stuff of legends. When the townsfolk heard about the amount of gold that he mined, the word would spread like wildfire. Everyone would want to know how he did it, where it was and other trivia. He didn't intend to reveal any of the details pertaining to Josephine. The other miners would have to remain in the dark. He had struggled to find that mine through sweat and toil. He wasn't about to make it easy for someone else to become rich.

He fully realized the potential danger that he will be putting himself into when he cashes in the money. There were many nefarious people out there in the Australian wilderness that wanted easy money. Not everyone was as willing to work as hard as Icky was to get it. He planned to immediately book a flight to Florida to live in the wilds of the swamps, where no one would be able to find him. He could easily live for the rest of his life on his money. He would find a nice simple country girl who didn't want for much who would be able to stand guard with him. Together they would live in the heat and humidity of Florida and be happy. It seemed like such a great idea. As he drove, he planned his future and envisioned better days. First, he had to cash in the gold.

Roo-boy got his name, because he loved eating kangaroo. He grew up in poverty in Australia along with his brothers and sisters. His entire family subsisted on kangaroo meat, because it was basically free. Kangaroos were everywhere and there was no limit on hunting them. He was one of the few family members like actually liked the taste. His siblings only ate it because it was all they had on their breakfast, lunch and dinner plates each day. Roo-boy never worked an honest day in his life and didn't care to. His means of survival consisted of observation and conquer.

He scouted for opportunities and waited for other people to do all the work of obtaining wealth and then he swooped in to quickly abscond with it. Roo-boy had heard about Icky's gold mining exploits from an old miner and had been following Icky out of sight for the past several months. Roo-boy's only possession of real value was the high-powered binoculars that he had swiped from an avid bird watcher. With the precision device, Roo-boy was able to surveil Icky from miles away.

As Icky carefully motored along in his jeep, a flock of large Australian honeybees was in the process of flying from one side of his roadway to the other. Two of the bees were trapped in his jeep with him. As he instinctively swatted at them, one of the bees stung his forehead above his better-seeing eye and the other bee stung his better-seeing eye. He thought he felt pain before and was a tougher bloke than most, but those bee stings made him cry like a baby in need of a diaper change. He stopped the jeep and sat there weeping as his better-seeing eye swelled shut. The limited vision in his lesser-seeing eye was suitable for driving, but not for doing anything that required detailed viewing. He began to feel that his immense luck with the gold mine might be on the downturn. He resumed driving guided by the blurred view of his lesser-seeing eye.

As Roo-boy sat on a boulder watching Icky being stung by the bees miles away, a snake had slithered unseen into the shade created by Roo-boy's legs. The snake was perfectly complacent in the cool shade until Roo-boy shifted his position for a better look at Icky. The snake whipped its poison-fanged head and bit Roo-boy's calf. Roo-boy leaped up from his seated position and ran as fast as he could away from the boulder. He looked down at his calf and noted the 2 bite marks that looked like a vampire had just chomped on his leg. The pain was enormous and beyond excruciating, if that was possible. He saw the bite marks quickly discolor and become ugly. The snake must have been laden with some neurotoxin, because Roo-boy's head began twitching uncontrollably. It was just enough of a continuous twitch to affect his eyesight. When he tried to view Icky through the binoculars, he couldn't focus properly and only saw a jagged image.

Crockie obtained his name from his love of alligator meat. As long as he could remember, he had always enjoyed eating the stuff. Many of his fellow lowlife acquaintances also ate crocodile, but not as much as he did. There was something to the flavor that did it for him. The best thing was that the meat was free for the taking, since the animals were a plentiful nuisance wherever there was a source of water. Crockie always had several pounds of croc jerky in his knapsack, on which he could survive for weeks at a time. He had also heard about Icky from an old miner and had been tailing Roo-boy. Crockie was the lowest of the low type of criminal who existed at a level beneath Roo-boy. Crockie's successful scheme was to skulk in the shadows while a thief like Roo-boy skimmed the wealth from someone. Crockie would then skim the wealth from the Roo-boy thief. Crockie preferred to be farther down the food chain to avoid the possibility of being spotted by a passer-by.

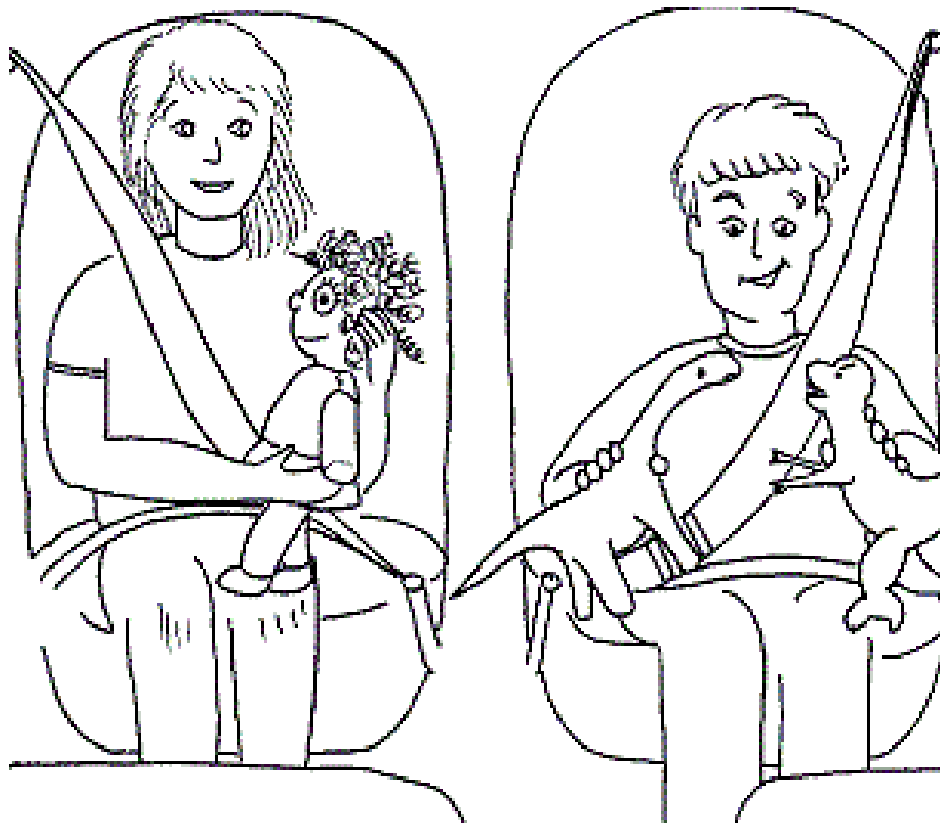
As Crockie sat in his jeep viewing Roo-boy through his stolen telescope, he felt a strange sensation in his fingers. His fingers began quivering. He didn't know what was happening to him. He was unusually healthy for someone who lived in the outback and subsisted primarily on crocodile flesh. That morning, he had encountered a large croc on the side of the dirt road. He was too hungry for the fresh meat to think about the atypical presence of the beast. Healthy crocs were usually careful with concealing themselves. When Crockie had dispatched the croc and began eating the succulent raw hunks of meat, he detected a slight off-taste, but was too hungry to question it at the time. After gorging 2 pounds of the rabid croc meat, he got on his way again.

The finger trembling was beginning to bother Crockie as he struggled with the jeep's steering wheel. His hands began trembling. What was going on? He became nervous. Would he be capable of skimming the gold from Roo-boy after Roo-boy skimmed it from Icky? He forced himself to focus and concentrate on driving. He would worry about how to execute his plan when the time was ripe. He still had to wait for Roo-boy to make the first move. Crockie hoped that he would be capable of using his crossbow as necessary. The device required some force to cock the bowstring into position. Putting the arrow into place was no big deal. Holding the crossbow and accurately shooting the arrow was the issue. He only had one shot and the shot needed to be spot on the target.

The pain in Icky's bee-stung eye had become so unbearable that he was compelled to pull over to apply a special poultice on it. The recipe for the poultice was given to him by an old aboriginal woman, with whom he had a secret friendship. The ingredients were readily available in the Australian wilderness and were harvested from 6 or so wild plants. The plants were ground to powder and some urine was added to make a paste. He wrapped the paste in some cloth and wrapped the poultice around his head to cover the throbbing eye. The pain subsided immediately. Through his binoculars, Roo-boy managed to discern a shaky image of Icky standing vulnerably in the open. Roo-boy stomped the accelerator of his jeep.

Through his wavering telescope sight, Crockie somehow spotted Roo-boy moving in for the skim. Crockie drove as quickly as he could manage the steering wheel without crashing. As Icky stumbled toward his vehicle, he heard Roo-boy's jeep approaching. Icky grabbed the crossbow from the back, cocked it, loaded it and stood there waiting for the inevitable. Roo-boy arrived, jumped out with his loaded crossbow and demanded Icky's gold. The 2 men stood there "aiming" their crossbows at each other. Crockie soon appeared, jumped out with his loaded crossbow and pointed it at Roo-boy. The 3 panicking men alternated their crossbow targets from one man to the other. They were at a nerve-wracked standoff. They each had one trigger click and one chance for survival. Icky could barely see, Roo-boy's head was wobbling and Crockie's hands were trembling. One would survive, 2 would survive or all would survive, if they all missed. The rabid crocodile meat in Crockie's gut percolated and caused him to accidentally flatulate. Click! Click! Click!

153. Solomonno's Seat



153. Solomonno's Seat

Solomonno walked down the narrow aisle of the commercial airplane and dreaded every moment. He had taken many trips via airplane in his lifetime, mostly due to his work as a sales rep for a major pharmaceutical company. He could easily manage any person-to-person interchange on a business level, but he despised having to tolerate close contact with strangers in public encounters. Solomonno occasionally thought back to a time when he was placed on a Greyhound bus by his adoptive parents and he was forced to endure a 20-hour bus ride all alone at the age of 16. The bus trip left an indelible scar on his fragile psyche. Between the chatting people who only talked about nothing, the smells of the man next to him and the rattling of the old bus, Solomonno was near insanity by the time the bus pulled into Biloxi, Mississippi.

A terrifying train trip at the age of 21 nearly drove Solomonno to a nervous breakdown. It rained, snowed, hailed, thundered and lightnined; the train tracks were flooded at 3 locations. The passengers of the train were ordered to evacuate the train when a herd of cows had blocked the tracks for 4 hours. Solomonno was full of hellish stories involving waiting in lines at the DMV, banks, ticket centers and clinics. He hated traveling on airplanes more than any other form of transportation, but the expediency of the trips was a necessary part of his well-paid position at his sales firm. Who was he to complain about making so much money? All he had to do was work for the company for another 6 years and he would have his nest egg complete. He had considered consulting with someone about his social inadequacy, but decided to keep it hidden inside himself. He had always heard that it was worse to hold in anxiety than to let it out, but he coerced himself to play the game as unperturbedly as he could muster.

He had laughed hysterically at the many comedic movies involving airplanes and flying by airplane. When he watched the movies from a safe distance and wasn't actually on the plane featured in the movie, it was easy. Being on an airplane and being subjected to the many tortures of flight was unfortunately a different matter. Solomonno felt that young children shouldn't be allowed on airplanes, because let's face it, no one, not even the parents of a screaming child wants to hear that screaming. Even the holiest of nuns and most reverent of priests find themselves cursing the parents of a screaming child for bringing the devilish creature on board the craft. Solomonno had written countless letters to every airline to have them ban young children from flying, but profit was too precious to the few remaining airlines for them to consider forbidding any passengers willing to buy a ticket.

Solomonno hated the passengers who had spent too much time at the airport bar, imbibing on the ridiculously overpriced alcohol. Solomonno didn't drink, because he had been brought up by parents who knew better and didn't drink alcohol, in order to prevent presenting their children with a bad example. When the drunks boarded Solomonno's flights, they made themselves obvious to the other passengers by their burping, farting and loud voices. Some of the drunks

also emitted a profound stench of alcohol that was so toxic that a match might have ignited their exhaled breath. Solomonno remembered a particularly annoying flight when a drunk had sat next to him and talked non-stop for 2 hours and 37 minutes. The man had foul untoothbrushed breath to begin with, which when combined with several alcoholic-laced drinks had become a Los Angeles type of smog. The man had spat hundreds of times onto Solomonno's cringing face the entire unbelievable flight while explaining how he had closed an amazing deal on umbrellas.

Since Solomonno's seats were purchased by his company at no charge to him, he had to sit wherever the random seat happened to be. He walked to row 21 and found his seat at 21B, which unfortunately was the middle seat. He tossed his carry-on into the overhead bin and sat down at his seat. As he sat down, Solomonno always made a point of quickly glancing at the people in his area of the plane. The people who sat behind him were composed of a family of 2 Hawaiian parents and a 4-year-old child who sat between the parents, directly behind Solomonno. The people in the 3 seats in front of Solomonno were composed of 2 Bostonian parents, except that the child in the seat directly in front of him looked to be about 3 years old. The person to the right of Solomonno was already sitting there in the window seat. The man was drunk and yelling something about the convention that he was heading to on the flight. The person to the left of Solomonno on the aisle seat was a woman who was clutching the paper barf bag already, even thought the airplane was still on the ground.

The woman with the barf bag babbled on and on about how unsafe airplanes were and to Solomonno's great discomfort, recited the gory details to him of every major plane crash in the world, since the 1960's. The people on the airplane who sat within earshot of the woman couldn't believe how someone could be on a plane while uttering such inane chatter. The woman went on and on, until the plane finally took off. The woman squeaked into her barf bag as the plane angled skyward. Fortunately, the take off was fine as far as turbulence and wind sheer. The plane gradually attained its cruising altitude and the captain mumbled into the PA system the usual banter about airspeed, altitude, temperature and flight time. No one on the plane could understand a single word of what the captain said and no one cared.

The Hawaiian kid behind Solomonno stood up on his seat and rested his head on the space between Solomonno's seat and the drunk man's seat. Solomonno disliked the fact that the kid's parents would allow the kid to stand there like that, but the plane was flying level and easy. The kid yelled to the Bostonian kid in the seat in front of Solomonno. The Bostonian kid stood up on his own seat and looked back at the Hawaiian kid. The parents of the 2 kids thought it was cute how the 2 kids could be so friendly to each other. The Hawaiian kid was chewing bubble gum quite sloppily and when the kid tried to blow a bubble, the gum fell into Solomonno's hair. The kid tried to remove the gum, but only got it stuck more. Solomonno was outraged. The Bostonian kid tried to reach to Solomonno's head to aid in the gum removal, but the gum was just too sticky for words.

Solomonno rose from his seat and went to the lavatory to somehow remove the gum. After 3 minutes of making the gum get stuck even deeper in his hair, he decided to try to comb it out. After 7 minutes of tearful struggle, he managed to remove most of the gum. He returned to his seat to find the woman with the barf bag still holding the bag to her mouth, as if she were preparing herself for the inevitability of barfing. The woman resumed her discussion of the perils of plane travel and continued talking to Solomonno with her barf-bagged voice. The Bostonian kid and Hawaiian kid were both still chatting to each other and the drunk ordered his 2nd drink from one of the flight attendants. The usual snacks and beverages were handed out to the airplane's passengers and everyone seemed a little bit happier with their free goodies. It's always comical how people will pay hundreds of dollars for a plane ticket and actually be joyful to receive 33 cents worth of junk food from the airlines.

After about 34 minutes of smooth travel, the captain rang his seatbelts warning bell and mumbled something about turbulence. The flight attendant captain spoke into the PA system about the seatbelts warning and the upcoming turbulence. The flight attendants never wanted to create undue alarm in the passengers about the real hazards of heavy turbulence that could result in a passenger being slammed into the ceiling. People who were flying for the first time had enough to worry about and people who were prone to air sickness didn't need any extra coaxing to make themselves nauseous by psychological means. The barf bag woman stopped orating about plane crashes and began squeaking louder and louder into her barf bag. Solomonno attempted to ignore the woman, because based upon his own experience with other airsick prone passengers, it was better to not talk about it. The sickly people would have to deal with it on their own. They knew the situation they were in and becoming embarrassed by barfing on an airplane was always at the forefront of their thoughts.

Flight attendants attempted to make the woman more comfortable, the she would have none of it. The barf bag woman actually seemed to want to barf and no one was going to talk her out of it. Naturally, no one on an airplane ever, ever wants to be near someone who is airsick. It is like an unwritten rule. Unfortunately, it's the luck or unluck of the draw when it comes to airplane seats. We never know whom we will be sitting near. The flight attendants had the 2 seat-standing kids sit back down and put their seat belts on. The parents of the kids were advised to watch their children for their own safety. The drunk man burped loudly and foully as he finished his 2nd drink. Then the drunk farted loudly and foully and laughed at the sound and smell of the ripe fart. Solomonno winced. The Hawaiian kid behind Solomonno laughed. The Bostonian kid in front of Solomonno laughed as well. Kids couldn't help but laugh when they heard a fart. That's the beauty of children; they don't hold back their laughter. When something is funny, it's funny and farting is funny.

When the kids smelled the fecal fart, their laughter turned to disgust and they both grunted. The drunk man continued laughing and the pressure made him fart again and again. The kids began

laughing even harder; they couldn't help it. The kids laughed so hard, that they began farting. Solomonno wasn't exactly enjoying any of it. He was one of those people who pretended that farting in public wasn't funny, even though he always laughed as his own farts in private. The parents of the 2 kids attempted to calm the kids down, which they soon did. The barf bag woman didn't seem to react to the smell of the farting; perhaps it was because she had her face in the barf bag. Solomonno admitted to himself that the sounds of the farts were decidedly funny, but the smells were inhuman. The farts from the kids weren't that bad, kind of fruity actually. The drunk's farts were something else altogether.

Solomonno was essentially born with allergies and it being allergy season, he had ingested some allergy medication before the flight. He always used the prescription variety of any medicine, since he always found that the stuff prescribed by doctors was the most potent available, even though nearly all prescription medications come with side effects. All he wanted was for the medications to work; if he became a little nauseous or groggy, so be it. There was nothing worse to him than sitting in sales meetings with his eyes itching and nose running. His supervisor had advised him many times about the importance of appearance when in the presence of clients. Solomonno wasn't at his current level within his company for nothing; he always toed the line and played by the many rules exactly as they had to be played for optimum success. As the flight entered into the 2nd part of the 1st hour, he began to feel drowsy, but he was accustomed to the sensation.

Because of the time of year being so windy due to weather fronts, he had also ingested some premium prescription airsickness medication that he had appropriated from a co-worker who swore by the pills. The pills were guaranteed to prevent all airsickness. The co-worker had admonished Solomonno about possible issues related to mixing the pills with other medication, but Solomonno wasn't worried. In the high-powered sales industry, the salespeople did what they had to for the company's survival. If that meant drinking large amounts of coffee to stay awake or going without breakfast or lunch, the employees did it. In Solomonno's current case, he had 2 prescription medications circulating through his bloodstream and the drugs were verging on combining. Against better judgement, Solomonno decided to have his 1 free drink that was paid for by his company and he opted for a drink similar to what the drunk in the window seat was drinking. The drunk happened to order the same drink at the same time as Solomonno and the 2 toasted each other with the drinks brought to them by the flight attendant.

Four minutes after his drink was consumed, Solomonno began to feel strange. His eyes became slightly blurred and his mouth became dry. He wasn't sure what was going on as he slipped into a slight dream state. In his groggy state, he found himself beginning to panic that the airplane was going to crash for some reason. Unbeknownst to Solomonno in his grogginess, the plane had entered a turbulent patch of air and was beginning to heave up and down somewhat. It might have been the turbulence of the plane or other factors, but Solomonno was becoming more and

more nervous. Solomonno's lack of reasoning and judgement compelled him to unbuckle his seat belt and rise to his feet. He scanned the airplane for any problems and detected none. Why was he so flustered? He had flown on hundreds of flights during his years crisscrossing the continent and had never been so bewildered. He couldn't see anything going on, but there had to be something, hadn't there?

He felt the urge to notify the captain of the plane that the plane might not make it to its destination. What would he say to the captain? Solomonno was no pilot. The captain had to know what he was doing. As Solomonno squeezed past the barf bag woman to enter the aisle, he felt glorified. He was single-handedly going to save the plane and its passengers. It was all up to him now. There was no turning back. All he had to do was calmly walk up the aisle to the cockpit, knock on the door and the captain, co-pilot or navigator would let him in. When in the cockpit, Solomonno would explain in detail his concerns to the captain. The captain would then take the proper precautions and everyone would be safe and sound. That was it! Solomonno paused in the aisle next to the barf bag woman. He mustered his bleary-eyed courage and proceeded forward to the cockpit.

During Solomonno's quest for glory, the airplane had actually begun to become turbulent and began heaving up and down. He had no idea of how rough it actually was, because his brain was like a beehive full of honey. The barf bag woman began to dry heave into her barf bag. Because she hadn't eaten anything before or during the flight, her stomach was empty. The sounds of the dry heaving were incredibly similar to the sounds of barfing. The Hawaiian kid thought he heard barfing, which naturally caused him to projectile vomit at an angle towards the drunk in the window seat in front of him. The kid's barf landed on the drunk's head. The drunk then projectile vomited onto the head of the Bostonian father in front of him. Upon seeing their child barfing, the parents of the Hawaiian child projectile vomited as well. The barf bag woman's head was barfed on and the drunk had still more barf added to his already barf covered scalp.

The barf bag woman continued her dry heaving, sparing the Bostonian mother in the seat in front of her. However, the Bostonian kid ended up barfing on his mother's lap. The Bostonian mother then barfed onto the head of the person in front of her. A chain reaction of vomiting erupted on the airplane. It was like a scene in a Mel Brooks movie. All the flight attendants barfed. The airplane stunk so horrifically from vomit that the remaining 5 hours and 17 minutes of flight were destined to be unforgettable for the passengers. When Solomonno reached the locked cockpit door, he was confused by why he couldn't simply walk right in. What kind of airplane was he on that he didn't have easy access to chatting with the captain? Solomonno pounded violently on the door until a barfed-on Air Marshal tackled him to the floor and handcuffed him. Solomonno was dumbfounded by confusion. In his dizzy state of mind, he was helpless. On a lighter note, with the exception of the captain, co-pilot and navigator, Solomonno was the only person on the airplane who wasn't tainted by the vileness of vomit.

154. Teddy's Run 3



154. Teddy's Run 3

As Teddy tried again and again to free himself from the muck that he had fallen into, he grew weak with anxiety. He tried to get loose for 27 minutes until his telephone-poled-brain finally gave out. He gave up trying to escape the mess and simply lay there. He had to rest for a trice until he could try again. A 1969 Charger pulled up next to him and stopped. A kindly 87-year old lady exited the car, walked around to the trunk and removed a long cane. She hooked the cane around Teddy's collar and pulled him from the goo. Teddy could barely make out the features of the woman, but she appeared to be somewhat attractive, even for an older woman. She somewhat resemble a young Elizabeth Taylor from the 1950's. Teddy thanked the woman, whose name was Elizabeth by coincidence. Elizabeth replied that it was nothing for her to rescue him.

In fact, Elizabeth had been following Teddy's progress for quite some time and she had been driving by him on the various roads whenever she could between her many daily naps. Luckily for Teddy, she happened to spot him in his time of need on that day. Elizabeth offered to give Teddy a ride to wherever he wanted, but he explained to her that he was running to California as part of a bet with Bruno. Teddy informed Elizabeth that the bet involved winning a 1962 Cadillac. Elizabeth remarked that the Cadillac would definitely be a nice prize for him, but she preferred the Charger that she had bought at an auction in South Carolina. Teddy admitted that the Charger was nice, but not as nice as the Cadillac. Elizabeth bade farewell to Teddy for the moment and Teddy continued his run. As the days and weeks passed, Teddy entered Arizona on Route 70 and was jogging out of the city limits of Franklin, Arizona when something strange happened. He was one state away from California and his prize of the Cadillac.

Elizabeth sped by in her Charger and tossed a dozen roses out the window at Teddy. The roses hit him in the side of the face and scratched him to no end. He noticed the Charger and assumed that it might be that friendly old lady again. The only problem was that throwing thorny roses at someone's face wasn't exactly a friendly gesture. He continued running as the scratches eventually dried to scabs. He didn't know if he should be cursing Elizabeth or not. She did save him from the muck. What was the woman up to anyway? Elizabeth continued her high rate of speed, confident in the thought that she had delivered a romantic gift to Teddy. Of course, her intentions actually mauled him, but she didn't know about it. All she did know was that she was in love with him and only desired the best for him. She wanted more than anything for him to make it to California to win his bet with Bruno.

As Teddy entered the city of Duncan, Arizona, he stopped at the Walmart for supplies and at the McDonalds for hot food. He ate 3 cheeseburgers, a large fries and a shake. He was full and he was totally capable of running on a full stomach. The weeks of running while empty-stomached or full-stomached had evolved his physiology into an animal type of being. Since animals in the

wild survived on a feast or famine schedule as far as eating, animals were forced by nature to perform at full capacity whether they had food in their stomachs or not. Teddy had become one of those wild animals, of course a human version of it. He somewhat enjoyed being out there like a machine running and running, with nothing on his mind except the Cadillac prize.

As Teddy trotted into San Jose, Arizona, he slowed down a bit to look around at the sights. It was a surprisingly picturesque little municipality. Everything was meticulously clean and maintained. All the grasses were mowed, all the statues were free from bird droppings and all the people were smiling. Teddy didn't think it a little odd that all the people were smiling as they traipsed about the town. Why would they be constantly smiling? Teddy thought that the only time he smiled is when something was funny or when something made him happy. Were all these San Jose people happy at the same time or thinking of something funny at the same time? What was going on? As Teddy pondered why everyone was smiling, he maintained a perplexed thinking look on his face. He certainly didn't blend in with everyone else around him. Everyone seemed to have the same blank smiling expression plastered on their faces.

Teddy thought about the movie, "The Stepford Wives," in which the women of the community were replaced by robotic machines. Teddy thought that it had to be only fantasy. There is no way that an entire community was a bunch of silly smiling robots. As Teddy's thought processes deepened while he ran, his facial expression contorted into a grimace. He absolutely didn't look like everybody else at that point. A local constable attempted to stop Teddy as Teddy ran, but Teddy refused to yield. Teddy increased his pace and ran faster. The overweight constable was unable to catch up to the speeding Teddy, forcing the cop to heave his nightstick at Teddy. Teddy was concentrating on evading the constable and didn't notice the stick being thrown at him. The stick hit Teddy in the back of the head and caused him to stumble and fall to the ground. As Teddy's wits came back to him, the cop came a running.

Teddy wasn't able to run away. Suddenly Elizabeth came zooming along in her Charger. She screeched to a stop next to Teddy. Teddy was just clear-headed enough to get up, open the door and drag himself into the car. Elizabeth sped away in a cloud of burning rubber, dust and oil smoke from the engine. The constable felt foiled and didn't bother to pursue Teddy any longer. Teddy sat in the Charger and looked at Elizabeth, who had a weird look on her face. Teddy had seen that look before, the look of women who had something romantic on their minds. The thought initially upset Teddy and he barfed. Elizabeth surmised that Teddy had been stressed out by the knock to the noggin and didn't for an instant think about his real reason for vomiting. As the car exited San Jose, Teddy requested to be dropped off. Elizabeth granted Teddy's wish; she didn't want him to lose his bet by cheating in a vehicle. Since Teddy had been maintaining a communication connection with Bruno over the weeks, it would be obvious to Bruno if Teddy had been doing anything but running to California.

Teddy had no intentions or schemes of cheating while on his run; he had always wanted to win the bet fair and square. He never cheated when he was in school and had always been very proud of the fact. He had been indoctrinated with the great values that all of today's kids should possess. Elizabeth had a slightly forlorn look on her face as she sped away in the Charger. Teddy didn't care how forlorn the woman was; he wasn't about to get it on with an old woman. Teddy was again grateful to Elizabeth for rescuing him from a situation, but he had to draw the line there. Elizabeth understood in her mind that she might be a tad old for Teddy, but she continued to hold out hope that someday he would see the light. The only light that Teddy was seeing on that day was from the sun setting in the west. His almighty quest was the west.

Teddy ran through Solomon and Safford without any issues and in his mind, he was beginning to smell the aroma of the old Cadillac. There was something about the smell of a car. When a car was new, it had that unmistakable new car smell. After a while, a new car loses its new car smell. On the other end of the scent spectrum was the smell of an old car. Depending on how old the car was, old cars had a distinct smell of their own. If an old car had vinyl seats or leather seats, it affected the smell. If a car was really old and had those mohair seats, that was yet another smell. The smell of Elizabeth's Charger was unique to the cars of the era with the vinyl seats. Teddy thought the Elizabeth's car had a miniscule essence of Ben-Gay, which was to be expected. Elizabeth was getting on in years and probably applied the ointment to the various joints of her decrepit body each day. The smell of Bruno's 1962 Cadillac would be like the smell of perfume to Teddy. So far, he had invested a lot of time and physical suffering to obtain the Cadillac. He couldn't wait to claim his prize.

As Teddy ran, he neglected to worry about much of his personal hygiene, including his hair. After months of running, his hair had grown about 3 inches. He was beginning to look like a redneck with his long greasy hair dangling from his hat. Thatcher was an old-school city with old-school values. The city loved and stuck to the values of the 1950's, which involved men wearing their hair short. No men in Thatcher were permitted to wear their hair long. It was actually written into the city's charter. Naturally, Teddy knew little about the various cities that he jogged through. Some of the cities were plain looking and others were nicer. Whatever went on behind the scenes of the cities didn't concern Teddy. He only stopped for provisions and food. It wasn't his problem if a city had a hair code for men. Or was it?

When Teddy walked into the Arby's in Thatcher, the conversations stopped and everyone looked away from their meals at Teddy. His long hair caused an instantaneous red flag to go up. Teddy casually strolled up to the counter to order and before he could order, mayhem broke out in the Arby's. Everyone in the joint began screaming, "Hippy! Get a haircut! Get out of here, you freak!" Teddy was pelted by hamburgers, French fries, apple pies, cokes, shakes and cookies. In minutes, he was covered from head to toes with fast food and bruises. He turned and tried to run out of the restaurant as fast as he could, but he slipped on some special sauce. The patrons began

kicking him, even the youngest of the children. Elizabeth soared to the site at full speed into the Arby's parking lot and smashed through one of huge front windows. She screamed at Teddy to get in the car. Teddy was able to escape as the fiendish people were momentarily shocked by the Charger crashing into their tumult.

Elizabeth jammed the Charger in reverse and backed out into the street at about 40 mph. She then launched the vehicle westward on Route 70. In seconds, Elizabeth and Teddy were safe out of town and on their way toward Central, Arizona. Teddy thanked Elizabeth profusely for her rescue effort. Elizabeth replied that she would do anything for him; all he had to do was ask. She soon dropped Teddy off at the road shoulder to allow him to continue his running. Teddy thought about the savages of Thatcher and how even today, people still clung to the old values. Teddy opined that there was nothing wrong with the old values, but those rednecks in Thatcher were probably the type of folks to vote for a billionaire to be president. Old values were one thing; old, feeble, unrealistic minds were something else. Teddy thought about how Elizabeth kept saving him at just the right moment. She must have been following him and waiting to swoop in for the save. Did Elizabeth have something in mind for him? He thought about what might be under the mounded wool blanket in the back seat of her Charger. Naw ... couldn't be anything.

Central, Arizona was famous for its many dog show winners. Teddy had personally never heard of the city until the day that he galloped into it, but the accolades were everywhere. Congratulations to this dog owner and that dog trainer and the other dog breeder; blah, blah, blah. As Teddy entered the city, a puggle came out of nowhere and made chase after him. Teddy increased his running pace in the hopes of escaping the feisty creature, but couldn't. The puggle managed to sink its teeth into Teddy's right sock, just above the sneaker. The dog's teeth held tightly to the cotton socks, but also scraped on the skin of Teddy's Achilles area. Teddy screamed in agony as he ran. He couldn't shake the dog loose. He felt like a letter carrier on the mail route. In a minute, another dog came flying down the street towards Teddy. It was a scary-looking Jack Russell and it was barking and snarling as it approached Teddy at full gallop. Teddy had no choice but to face the oncoming attack, because if he stopped, the puggle would probably adjust its grip higher up on the back of his leg.

The Jack Russell arrived and immediately jumped at Teddy. The dog took a hold of Teddy's left thigh and bit down hard. Teddy screeched. What kind of a city was this? Just because they had so many show-winning dogs, it didn't give them the right to allow the dogs to run loose! Being proud is one thing; being psychotic is another. Teddy continued running and screaming with the 2 dogs clinging to his flesh. Teddy had thought that he had felt pain before, but not like the pain of multiple simultaneous dog bites. The saliva that the dogs were drooling into Teddy's bloodstream as they mauled him, probably added to the sting of their sharp teeth. Teddy heard the growl of yet another dog to his right, but was afraid to look. As a Basset hound approached

with its yellow teeth flared and its distinctive deep howl echoing into the street, Teddy wanted to close his eyes and slip into a dream. Teddy burst into tears and then he heard the familiar growl of the Charger. Yes! It was Elizabeth coming to save him again!

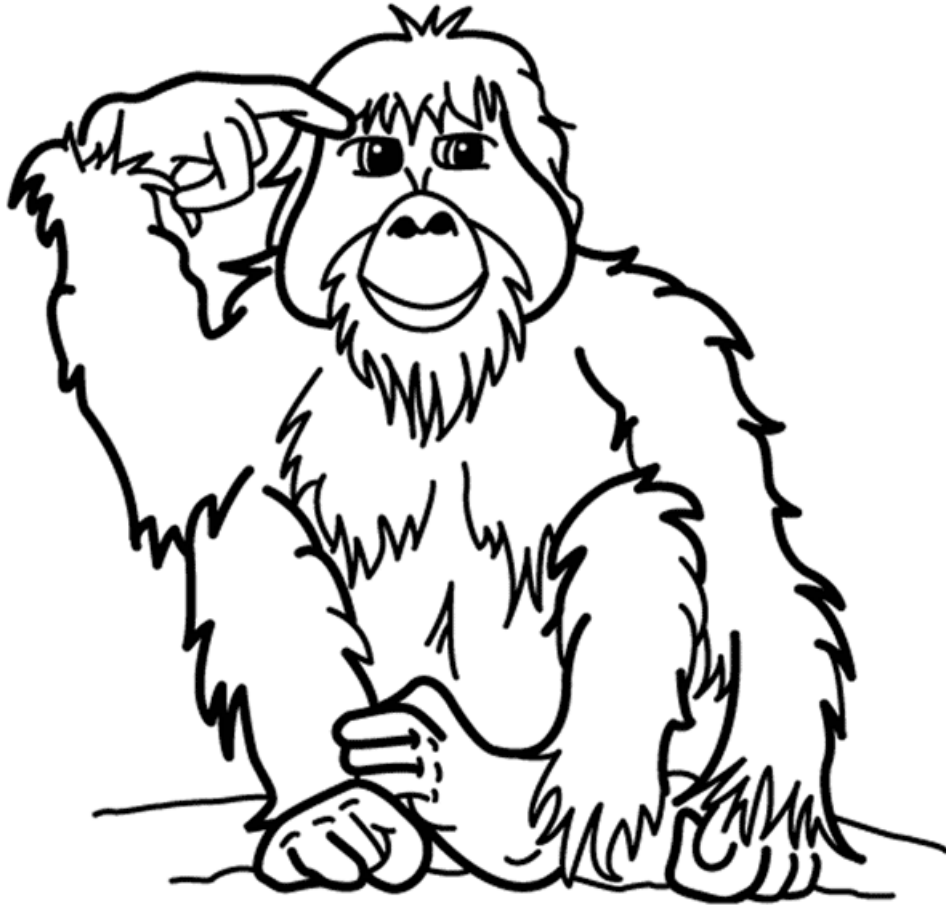
Elizabeth gunned the engine of the car, sped up and then skidded to a loud tire squealing stop next to Teddy. The 3 dogs all ran off in different directions with the tails between their legs. Teddy collapsed with pain and relief. Elizabeth ran to him and dragged his bleeding body into the car. She raced away from the scene as fast as she legally could, without drawing too much attention. Elizabeth put the pedal to the metal when they exited the city limits and the speed limit changed. Teddy looked pretty gory with the teeth marks on his legs and she pulled into a nice park when they reached Fort Thomas. Elizabeth patched his wounds with materials from her extra large first aid kit. She claimed that she had been a nurse of sorts in her youth and she did a great job with the patching.

Teddy allowed Elizabeth to do what she had to do to fix the wounds on his left thigh, but he cautioned her to stay in the area of the injury. She frowned, but allowed herself the pleasure of actually being able to touch and caress Teddy, even though it was only in a nurse/patient manner. After an hour of resting, Teddy thanked Elizabeth and headed back to the road to continue the trot to California. Teddy appreciated the help that Elizabeth provided, but things were beginning to become mysterious like a Columbo TV mystery. Teddy felt like he might be on the verge of becoming a victim of some sort. As Teddy ran, he thought back to all the troubles he had while running and why Elizabeth wasn't always there to help him. He also wondered if she were in fact following him, why did she wait so long to respond when he was in trouble? It seemed that she liked him to suffer a little before she would come to his aid.

She was most likely just a nice little old Catholic lady who only wanted to help people. But, what if there was more to the story? As Teddy ran, he had a long talk on the phone with Bruno about Elizabeth. Bruno laughed at the bombasticity of Teddy's trepidations. Bruno claimed that it was the months on the road that had twisted Teddy's mind, not Elizabeth's. Teddy maintained that Bruno had to be in his shoes for a while to be able to feel what it was like out there alone. Bruno acknowledged that Teddy had a point there. When Teddy hung up the phone with Bruno, he felt a lot better. Bruno admitted that he was going to hate to relinquish the Cadillac to Teddy, but it will have been well earned by Teddy. Teddy agreed.

Teddy jogged without incident for a while until he switched over to Route 60 in Globe, Arizona. As the route changed, the maintenance jurisdiction of the road changed as well, because the conditions of the road and shoulder became crappy. Teddy found himself actually slipping and tripping on the loose gravelly roadway shoulder. After some hours, he spotted a vehicle pulled over way up ahead. Was that the Charger? Was it? No it couldn't be! Was that Elizabeth lying naked on the trunk of her car? It was! No!!!

155. Ute's Guy 2



155. Ute's Guy 2

The passing of Ute's human father Guy greatly affected Ute. Agatha and the girls Britney and Chelsea did what they could to console Ute, but he missed caring for humans. Ute had spent so much time training, caring for and living with humans that he missed it. Ute finally realized that he needed to go back to being with humans. Living in Guy's house with his beautiful orangutan family was fine, but Ute craved to do what he was created to do. The agency kept in regular contact with Ute even though Ute had retired from duty. A member of the agency had consulted with Agatha about Ute's disposition and Agatha had communicated that Ute wasn't happy. The agency representative returned to the agency to find a new assignment for Ute.

Even though Ute technically didn't have to work another day for the rest of his life, the agency felt Ute's pain and wanted him to be happy. Based on Agatha's remarks about Ute's depression after Guy's passing, the agency decided to step in and help. Since the latest thing in today's society was all about keeping people living longer, there were millions of old people everywhere. Nursing homes were becoming overpopulated with people and the ratio of caregivers to residents kept getting lower and lower. The agency jumped at any chance to better utilize their highly trained workforce.

After a month of continuous begging and cajoling, Agatha managed to talk Ute into a meeting at the agency. The agency maintained that there were always opportunities available for their staff to work wherever and however they wanted. At the meeting, Ute came back to the world and expressed his desire to keep on working. Ute emphasized that he loved human beings more than life itself. There was simply something within him that craved to help human beings and assist them to survive. He didn't know what it was or why he felt the way he did. All he knew was that he wanted another Guy. The agency knew all too well about the tendency of their trained orangutans to fall in love with the concept of helping humans. The orangutans were chosen in the first place as the ultimate service animal for humans. There was an unconscionable aspect of orangutans that made the beasts born to serve.

Ute and Agatha met with psychologists from the agency who were able to explain to Ute that it was perfectly normal for him to feel the way he did. It was okay for Ute to miss Guy. The agency wished only the best for Ute. Obviously, the agency would prefer Ute to continue to serve the agency's clients as he was originally trained to do. The fact that Ute had been bestowed Guy's estate essentially freed Ute from having to work again. The agency was fully aware of that. However, the agency only wanted Ute to be happy and they knew he needed to get back out there into the caring field again. Ute became elated that the agency actually knew how he was feeling and that they only wanted for him to be happy. Agatha and the girls wanted their Ute to be happy as well, obviously more than the agency.

The agency decided to assign Ute, Agatha and the girls to care for an elderly couple who had

both suffered an accident that left them unable to care for themselves. Ute was overjoyed. He couldn't wait to get back to work again. He knew all too well that he could be setting himself up for another emotional event, but he would have to worry about it later. Ute remembered reading about how cowboys would fall off their horses and become injured. Some of the cowboys would become too afraid to ever get back on a horse. Even though a cowboy's livelihood depended on their ability to ride a horse, some of the injured just couldn't get back in the saddle. For the ones who summoned the courage to climb back up on the horse, they felt it was the best feeling they ever had. Facing and overcoming fears was the most important concept for human growth and functionality. Ute felt like one of those fallen cowboys. He could do it. He could get back on the horse. Agatha and the girls would be by his side; he wouldn't be alone.

Mantah was the name of the elderly man and Jubileee was the name of the woman. Jubileee insisted that her name was spelled with 3 letter E's on the end, not 2. Mantah insisted that his name ended in the letter H. It didn't matter to Ute and Agatha what letters the elderly couple's names ended in, because the orangs didn't write. For that matter, Ute and Agatha never pronounced the odd names either. Britney and Chelsea similarly had no issues with the strange names. After a meeting involving Ute, Agatha, the agency representative, the girls, Mantah and Jubileee, it was determined that Ute would care for Mantah and Agatha would tend to Jubileee's needs. Britney and Chelsea would perform the cooking and cleaning tasks. Within a week, Ute and his family had moved into the home of the elderly couple and began caring for them.

Mantah weighed close to 400 pounds and Jubileee weighed about 350. Since Ute and Agatha were so naturally strong, it was no problem for them to haul the old couple in and out of bed, the toilet, the dining chairs and other locations in the house and vehicle. Ute was an unusually tolerant orangutan and could put up with just about any kind of teasing or physical torment. Mantah had a habit of latching onto Ute's balls whenever Ute would pick him up out of bed or out of a chair. Ute figured it was Mantah's way of gaining some leverage in order to assist Ute in lifting. Sometimes, Mantah would squeeze Ute's balls a little too hard, causing Ute to grunt slightly. Mantah smiled whenever he made Ute grunt in that way. Mantah didn't have much to make him happy and it was the little things each day that made all the difference.

Jubileee had a habit of spitting in Agatha's face when being lifted in and out of chairs, etc. Agatha was probably even more easygoing than Ute when it came to such things. Agatha made a game out of Jubileee's spitting. Whenever Jubileee spat in Agatha's face, Agatha would spit back on Jubileee's face. The 2 would then erupt into great waves of laughter. It did Ute's heart good to see Agatha getting along so well with a human; it made Ute think back to his days with Guy. Britney and Chelsea found it unusual the way Ute and Agatha would put up with being ball-grabbed and face-spat. When Britney asked Agatha about it, Agatha explained that it was really no big deal. The humans were trying to be affectionate in any way they could; that was all. Britney talked with Chelsea about it and the 2 girls thought it was slightly demeaning for humans

to grab the balls and spit in the face of orangutans. Since the girls were still new to the process of caring for humans, they didn't realize what was expected. After a while, they caught on and relented in their concerns.

Since Britney and Chelsea were new to the health care business, they were limited in their physical contact with Mantah and Jubileee. After some time and training by the agency, they would be allowed more contact. Whenever Mantah saw Britney passing by with the laundry, he would whistle at her with a sloppy attempt at a whistle. Mantah liked Britney and thought she was cute, even as an orangutan. It didn't bother Britney at first, but one day when Mantah called to Britney and said, "Come here little monkey," she became upset. Britney slapped Mantah's face and he grabbed her by the wrist. Before Britney could pull away, Mantah kissed Britney's cheek. Britney slapped Mantah again and he laughed. She immediately realized how harmless it all was and kissed Mantah on the face. Agatha was glad to see Britney getting along so well with the clients.

Chelsea witnessed the event and thought Britney shouldn't take things so lightly. Britney assured Chelsea that it was their role as orangutans to accommodate the humans, even when the humans were occasionally too forward in their actions. Chelsea reckoned if that was the way it was to be, then she planned to have some fun with it. Britney and Chelsea took turns with their many cooking and cleaning tasks and when it was Chelsea's turn to cook again, she added something to the food at suppertime. While snooping around the house, she found some laxative. She added a slightly above normal dosage to the meals prepared for Mantah and Jubileee. That night, the elderly couple suffered from looser bowels than usual and they both pooped in their clothing. Mantah and Jubileee were both thoroughly soiled, as was their bedding. Ute and Agatha had more than the typical amount of work in the morning cleaning up the old couple. Chelsea laughed when she came to the old couple's bedroom and saw Ute and Agatha dealing with the large mess.

Of course, Chelsea's little trick backfired on her, because she had to launder all the fouled clothing and sheets. Chelsea told Britney about her little trick and Britney decided to play a trick of her own. Britney knew how Jubileee liked to assemble jigsaw puzzles. Somehow Britney had acquired a special puzzle that when assembled, portrayed the mating anatomy of a large male gorilla. As Agatha worked with Jubileee assembling the puzzle over the weeks, Britney and Chelsea would peek from the doorways to watch. When the puzzle was complete, Jubileee burst out laughing at the enormous balls of the gorilla in the puzzle. Agatha's face changed color with embarrassment. Britney and Chelsea squealed and squeaked as only mischievous orangutans could. When Agatha confronted the girls about the puzzle, they denied involvement. Agatha realized the girls were just playing innocently with the humans and no real harm was done.

Ute was glad to see that his daughters were getting along so well with Mantah and Jubileee.

However, Ute wasn't confident how well, or even if, the girls would adapt to a life of servitude. He had noticed the girls playing their little tricks right from the beginning. He had always been a playful orangutan since birth and appreciated comedy. Britney and Chelsea were getting a little too far ahead of themselves as far as human interaction and he thought that the girls needed a taste of their own medicine. He thought about a suitable trick to play on the girls and when he finally got it in his head, he had to modify his diet a little to pull it off properly. He started eating massive amounts of canned tuna fish in oil. As anyone who understood anything about orangutans knew, tuna fish made the poop of the oranges really smelly and gloppy, like wet pizza dough.

On the 6th day of eating nothing but tuna fish in oil, Ute put his plan into motion. Mantah had a birthday party that day for his 97th birthday. As usual, Britney and Chelsea made the cake and other dinner items. Agatha wrapped all the presents, except the ones prepared by Ute. After the luscious dinner, the cake and ice cream were brought out. After the cake and ice cream were devoured, the dinner table was cleared for the many gifts. Some of the gifts were mailed to the house by the friends of Mantah and Jubileee, the 2 or 3 friends that were still alive. Mantah began opening the gifts and Jubileee read the cards. When Mantah arrived at Ute's gift, the present seemed a little heavy. Mantah unwrapped the paper and opened the box to find a steaming heap of Ute's tuna-derived orangutan poopoo. When everyone looked at Ute, Ute acted as if he didn't know what was going on. Ute looked at Mantah and then he motioned his eyes at Britney and Chelsea. Because the girls had been doing so much practical joking lately, Mantah assumed that they had switched Ute's present with the pile of poop.

Ute giggled to himself as Mantah scooped out a large handful of poop from the gift box and nailed Britney in the face with it. He then heaved another handful of the wretched mess at Chelsea. Ute could contain his mirth no longer and burst out laughing. He laughed so hard that his tuna-loosened bowels had caused him to fart and poop like crazy. Britney and Chelsea started laughing, wiped some of the poop from their faces and threw it at Ute's face. Some poopoo landed in Ute's open laughing mouth. Jubileee started laughing and scooped some of the poopoo from the gift box. Jubileee threw it at Agatha and because Agatha was already laughing, she was hit in her open mouth with the poop. Agatha cleaned some of the poop from her face and threw it at Jubileee. In seconds, it was an all out riot of poop throwing at the dinner table. Ute kept pooping violently in his chair, so that he had a more or less continuous supply of fresh hot poopoo to launch at everybody.

Britney and Chelsea lurched up from the table, because Ute was bombarding them with so much poop that they were almost unidentifiable as orangutans. The girls made their way to the front room in the hopes of avoiding Ute's bombardment. Agatha and Ute ran to the front room to continue the poopoo fight with the girls. The family of orangutans began making so much noise with their gleeful growls and squeals that a passerby had phoned the Police. The person outside

the house thought there was something unbelievable going on in the house. There was. As the Police arrived, Britney and Chelsea had just made their way onto the front lawn. Ute was at the point of pooping directly into his hand for his ammunition. Ute didn't see the cop standing behind Britney when he threw the poop at her. When Britney ducked, the poop hit the cop in the face.

The police officer started laughing, wiped the poop from his face and hit Ute in the face with it. Agatha ran outside and began pelting Ute, the girls and the cop with poopoo scooped from the gift box. They were all laughing and pelting each other with poop. Since Mantah and Jubilee were in their motorized carts at the dinner table, they motored themselves outside to join in the fun. The cop wished Mantah a happy birthday, because he saw the poop-smeared birthday hat on Mantah's head. Neighbors from next door and across the street came over to the front yard to join in on the merriment. The neighbors all brought over handfuls of dog poop collected from their front lawns. The scene then involved a combination of dog and orangutan poop being tossed about. Mantah and Jubilee reached into their diapers and scooped out some of their own fresh poop to add to the show. It was really a scene to behold.

Some of the neighbors ran back to their homes to gather cat and bird poop from their pets. There was so much poopoo flying around hitting faces, necks and arms that it was like being in the monkey cage at the zoo. Eventually, the smell of all the different poops began to morph into a toxic fog. The combatants were beginning to get queasy from the smell. There were things occurring chemically with the poop combinations that even the greatest scientists hadn't imagined. It was only logical that someone would barf from the queasiness. That someone was Ute. He projectile vomited onto the face of the cop. The cop instantly barfed on Chelsea, who then spewed on one of the next-door neighbors. The poop pelting festival became a barf festival. It couldn't get any worse. As Ute vomited, he continued pooping, because the tuna diet had taken a toll on his gastrointestinal tract like he couldn't believe. Ute vowed to never eat tuna fish in oil again.

Ute wasn't sure if he had taught his daughters a lesson or not, but it was an incredibly memorable day anyway. Agatha told Ute that night that she was head-over-heels happy living with him and their girls. She couldn't wish for a better life. Ute shared some emotions with Agatha that he hadn't uttered since their earliest mating days together. Ute agreed with Agatha's every heartfelt statement, but he had to run to the bathroom to poop. Agatha could hear the girls laughing in their bedroom at the sounds of their father grunting and groaning on the toilet. Agatha giggled as quietly as she could as well. The girls won again, because the lesson that Ute had tried to teach them had backfired on him. It was all in good fun though. Agatha heard Ute farting in the bathroom and then she heard him laughing, because farting always made Ute laugh. Agatha then heard Ute's explosive diarrhea, brought on by the tuna diet and the pressure from laughing. Agatha loved her orangutan husband; he was a genuine character.

156. Norberto's Pool



156. Norberto's Pool

Norberto had been a swimmer for most of his life; in fact, he taught himself to swim at the age of 5. He swam every day in the pool at home; he was on the swim team all through school. He loved swimming. When he got older, he had been forced to live in the city for financial reasons and he had to resort to living in an apartment. He had to enter the much talked about world of public pools. He figured he if could get to the local pool early enough, he would be able to do his laps with relative ease. Of course, that wasn't the case. Public pools were the most sought out entities in the summertime. Norberto was determined to swim, in spite of the crowds. His local pool was named after Abraham Lincoln, arguably one of the greatest men in history.

On the first day at the Lincoln pool, Norberto arrived at the 9:00 am opening time and to his amazement, he had to stand in a long line to get in. The line was clogged with young kids on their summer vacation from school. There were some adults of all ages as well. The kids were all chattering at the top of their voices, as kids do. Norberto didn't see any infants or toddler kids, which was a good sign. Of course, those younger characters might appear later on. The lifeguards were already milling about inside the fence, performing some last minute pool cleaning, as was part of their duties. Norberto doesn't remember ever seeing a lifeguard anywhere actually rescue someone. He had heard that the lifeguards in California really earned their keep. In Minneapolis however, the lifeguards mainly did a lot of whistle blowing in their feeble attempts to maintain some kind of pool order.

When the gate was unlocked, the kids in line cheered and Norberto impatiently made his way into the large fenced pool area. The Lincoln pool was huge. Obviously, a big city needed large public pools to handle the bulging population of swimmers. Norberto laughed to himself how referring to pool occupants as swimmers was a misnomer. The average person in a pool doesn't swim; they kind of bounce along and flap their arms about. When the kids attempted to swim, it was usually only for 10 feet or so, during which time they essentially made a splashing ruckus with their arms and feet. The adults usually only clumsily "swam" for a few feet and then resorted to bouncing along. Norberto had always been proud to be one of the few true swimmers wherever he swam. One of the many facets of public pools was the limited amount of space for people to swim any real distance, assuming they could swim, that is. Norberto had hoped that he would be able to swim the pool length in spite of the many bodies, but it was difficult.

He didn't care; he wanted to swim his way. He put his towel down on a chair and headed to the pool. He scanned the large pool and saw a boatload of people. He climbed done the ladder at one end and attempted to swim. He always wore swim goggles when swimming to keep the water out of his eyes. The public pools were so heavily chlorinated that goggles were a necessity. At first, he was actually able to make it to the end of the pool, but as he flipped to do another lap, he encountered resistance. When people were in pools, they didn't care about anyone else in the

pool, unless they knew the person. The kids were always in their little cliques. If 3 or 4 kids were together playing in the pool, they were oblivious to anyone trying to swim a lap. Even when adults were in a couple talking together, it was rare for the couple to break and allow a space for someone to swim through.

Public pools were not suitable for true swimming; that was all there was to it. Norberto was adamant however. He demanded his right to properly swim in a swimming pool. He boldly swam in his straight-line laps. He encountered kid cliques that refused to break and he broke through. He smashed his way through couples. He bumped into anybody who stood in his path. He didn't care. He was there to swim and achieve valuable exercise from the motion. Some of the people who Norberto bumped into muttered under their breaths. He didn't hear their mutterings. He had every right to be there and to swim. On the long list of pool rules on the big sign outside the gate, there was nothing there about pool occupants bumping into each other. There was nothing on the list about courtesy. It was understood by most public pool people that if someone were spotted swimming along, a reasonable space would be created for the swimmer to swim through. The problem again was that no one truly cared.

All the churchgoers who babbled their various hymns, prayers and chants were usually the first people to stubbornly block the passage of a real swimmer in a public pool. The real swimmers only demanded their rights and nothing more. Once in a while, an older person would slap Norberto on the back when he bumped into them, but Norberto ignored the slap. The lifeguards were usually the first to see what was going on as Norberto did his laps. There was little that they could do to stop him from swimming and bumping into people. It was a pool designed to be swam in. The lifeguards all loved swimming and actually applauded Norberto's efforts to swim the way that he did. A public pool wasn't really the proper venue for doing laps though. Norberto began to actually enjoy bumping into and pissing off people who stood in his way.

Occasionally a macho type would purposely stand in Norberto's path and be bumped into by Norberto. The macho fool would say, "Hey, watch it buddy!" Norberto would say nothing in return, pretending not to hear the bozo. Norberto defined the macho types as those of low self-esteem who hid behind a mask of macho. The "macho mask" was typically defined by people with earrings or other piercings, tattoos, tee shirts with the sleeves ripped off, "wife beater" shirts or by cigarette smokers. The machos drove motorcycles and vehicles with loud exhaust systems. Because of their low self-esteem, the machos decorated themselves in some way to mask their hidden low self-esteem induced inferiority. The macho types reckoned that by wearing their macho masks, the men with self-esteem would be intimidated or set back just long enough until the macho dudes could escape the confrontation, before their hidden inferiority could be revealed.

As the summer progressed, Norberto had actually become acclimated to the public pool, as

difficult as it was to swim in. One day, a surprising emergency occurred when Norberto bumped into a little old man who was treading water. The man was probably about 5 feet tall and utilized the pool for exercise. The pool was only 3 feet 9 inches deep all around, but the little guy treaded water in such a way that his large Charlie Brown head was barely above the water surface. The little guy probably shouldn't have been in the pool in the first place, but his doctor had recommended swimming for better health. The little guy had been treading water for a while and as Norberto approached on his lap, the little guy's back was to Norberto. Norberto gently bumped into the guy and upset the guy's concentration. For whatever reason, the little guy stopped treading and went under the water. Norberto kept swimming as he usually did after bumping into someone. He had no idea what happened.

Suddenly, whistles were blowing and lifeguards were barking orders and jumping into the water. It was chaos. The kids were screaming and the pool was emptied. Norberto climbed out at the end of the pool as he finished his lap. Everyone watched as the lifeguards resuscitated the little guy as they waited for the EMT's to arrive. Norberto thought nothing of the goings on and proceeded to eat a Snickers candy bar that he had extracted from his backpack on the chair. He liked the Snickers bars, because they had the peanuts. Norberto liked the Three Musketeers bar as well, but that bar didn't have the peanuts. He towed off and observed with the dozens of other pool goers, as the little guy was stretchered away. After a quick pool check by the lifeguards, the pool was reopened and the pool people were once again freely frolicking. Norberto climbed down the ladder into the pool and continued his laps.

On Saturday, some kids decided to play the old Baby Ruth bar trick, popularized in the movie *Caddyshack*. One of the gang of 4 sneaked a Baby Ruth bar into the pool via his swim trunks. The demonic youth then worked the bar out the bottom of his trunks and into the pool. Another of the fearsome foursome announced the discovery of the faux piece of poopoo. Whistles were blown, the pool populace shrieked and the pool was emptied of people. Even though it was a classic trick to play in a pool, the gang of 4 fools actually ended up reducing their hours in the pool by 2. The public pools had a strict policy concerning several biohazards, such as human feces. Even though the pools were already contaminated with the maximum allowable amounts of chlorine, a piece of alleged poop was always a red flag for evacuation and sweeping. The 4 kids initially had a little laugh at their childish display of power and afterwards realized how dim-witted their efforts were.

Norberto chuckled at the silliness of the kids, but silently rewarded them for their efforts. It was the rebelliousness and recklessness of those 4 kids that made life more interesting for the average, tow-the-line people who existed in vastly greater numbers. The many blah pool goers went home that day and had a little story to tell about the unknown rotten person or persons who had slightly ruined the pool day. It was funny how life for the most part was the same old thing. Even though the average person enjoyed living life at a moderate safe pace, it was nice once in a

while for something to happen that spiced things up. If an average someone's life could actually be spiced up by having a story to tell about being evacuated from a pool, that average person quite possibly needed to get a life, as the not-so-average people would think. Of course, many people choose to fill their lives with as many trivial activities as possible in order to list those trivial activities on a flyer mailed out at Christmastime. We must all remember that the great Thomas Jefferson's "pursuit of happiness" phrase was to be determined by each individual, as inalienably given to the individuals by the creator.

On a Wednesday, the inevitable took place. A toddler wearing a swim diaper had jumped into the pool, breaking one of the many pool rules. The little girl must have had to poop at the moment that she jumped into the pool. Who knew? The girl knew, but she wasn't about to announce it to the world. The swim diapers were engineered to contain all but the most unwieldy poopoo scenarios. Jumping into a pool wasn't one of those scenarios. The girl's diaper tried as hard as it could to keep all the slimy substance within the engineered diaper, but alas, it failed. No one noticed at first, except the mother of the polluting child. The mother's face immediately became red with embarrassment. She hoped against hope that she would be able to enjoy having her kid in the pool without creating a huge melee. The mother of the diaper-leaking girl moved away from the brown water as quickly as she could, but it was just a matter of time before the discovery of the mess. A 9-year old girl who had been indoctrinated by her parents to spot poop in a pool had screamed bloody murder.

The lifeguards whistled and the Lincoln pool was evacuated. Norberto had just started his laps when the evacuation had taken place. He only had 3 laps in when the whistles were blown. Not having any kids of his own, he was unable to relate to the wishes of a parent to have her child be happy on a hot summer day. Norberto didn't care; he just wanted to swim his laps. He was beginning to wonder just how phony people were who would go to church and blather this and that and then go out in public and really not care about the other people around them. For a parent to allow their diapered child into a pool should be considered a crime of some kind, even with a swim diaper. Norberto just wanted the pool to be cleaned and blessed by the lifeguards. He needed to get back to his swimming. If people had to have it their own way and not care about others, so be it. It was a public pool after all.

Norberto had noted with some satisfaction that the mother of the pooping child had been singled out by the other mothers. The other mothers had rightfully chastised and berated the guilty mother for not having her daughter clothed in a swim diaper. When the guilty mother had pleaded that her daughter had in fact been wearing a swim diaper, the other doubting women spat on her, swore at her and eventually drove her out of the pool area. When the pool was reopened, Norberto felt that justice had been served. He resumed swimming his laps in the chlorinated, feces-laden pool. It was somewhat comical that a swimming pool polluted by human fecal matter could be made safe again by some sweeps of a pool sweeper and a short passage of time.

When it came to big city, busy public pools, modern technology took a second place to user satisfaction. There were various health standards in place that ensured the safety of the occupants of a public pool and that was good enough for most folks. People didn't care. When it was hot during the summer, those kids needed to be cooled off. The pools provided a place for the kids to burn off a lot of energy that would ensure the kids sleeping good on those summer nights.

Once while swimming his laps, Norberto was hit in the head by a poorly thrown ball. Two teens were playing catch in the pool with a small football and one of the kids made yet another errant toss to the other. Norberto had never seen anyone throwing any kind of ball in any body of water where the throwers were at any good at throwing and the catchers at catching. It seemed that everyone thought they were Terry Bradshaw or Jerry Rice when they were in the water. Even though it was clearly listed on the long list of pool rules that no objects were to be thrown in and around the pool, someone always did it. Usually, the perpetrators only got away with it for a few tosses, because the lifeguards were very diligent and whistles were blown rather quickly. Norberto felt the ball hit his forehead; he stopped swimming and threw the ball over the pool fence into the adjacent park. An unleashed dachshund grabbed the ball as it rolled and ran off with it. The 2 teens were pissed and approached Norberto. Before there could be any altercation, 3 lifeguards swarmed to the pool edge nearest Norberto and the 2 teens, to break it up. After that, the 2 teens intentionally stood in Norberto's path as he swam his laps. He bumped into them every time.

It seemed that kids liked more than anything else to jump into the water. Jumping was forbidden in the relatively shallow pool in order to prevent injuries, but the kids always tried it at least once until they were caught. The pool rules were enforced. When someone broke one of the rules, they were warned. If the person broke the same rule again, they were expelled from the pool for the day and their name was taken. If they came back to the pool on another day and broke the same rule again, they were banned from the pool. Of course, the lifeguards weren't exactly asking anyone for ID, so the concept was only loosely enforced in reality.

As Norberto swam his laps on one scorching day, a kid of about 5 jumped into the pool and landed on Norberto as Norberto was doing his turn-around flip at one end of the pool. Norberto was so startled that he jumped up and the kid was thrown out of the pool onto the concrete sidewalk next to the pool. The kid burst into tears and Norberto continued his laps, chortling all the way to the other end of the pool. Norberto became so frustrated at the large number of kids in the pool on that hottest day of the year, that he pooped in the pool to get everybody out, including himself of course. That would show those brats, Norberto thought. He pooped in the pool 3 times for a total of 6 hours that the pool was closed for cleaning. Since the pool was only open daily for 9 hours from 9:00 am to 6:00 pm, it ended up being a short day in the pool for the kids. Too bad, Norberto giggled. People were funny.

157. Spar's Flock 2



157. Spar's Flock 2

Spar dodged to his left just enough to avoid contact with the leaping lion. Spar got a running start, ascended into the air and flew up to meet up with the flock. Since Spar hadn't managed to finish eating the remains of the zebra, the lion would be able to feast for at least an hour. Since lions were notoriously slow eaters, it always took them longer to eat than other carnivores. It was believed that the big cats preferred to be able to taste and enjoy their food and not just gulp it down to fill their bellies. The lion was incensed that he missed snagging that big vulture. That goony bird ate most of his succulent rotting zebra. The lion was a bit old as far as lions go and as it ate the stinking zebra flesh, it wondered if it was losing some of its edge. The lion had always been a great hunter in the past, but never missed capturing a vulture. The lion had been thinking about eating the tasty zebra bits all day. That vulture had eaten the lion's favorite parts, mainly the vile smelling organs. The lion wasn't going to forget the lesson dealt to him by the vulture. That vulture had better watch its back, growled the lion.

Spar's flock members all thought him to be a goner and were overjoyed that he had escaped from the lion's claws and jaws. Spar cackled that there wasn't a lion alive that could outwit or catch him. Spar felt that the lions were merely brutish beasts that relied more on force than intelligence when obtaining prey. The flock members agreed that the lions were indeed less intelligent than the vultures, but the lions were so immensely powerful that the mere sight of a lion scared a typical vulture. Spar and the flock circled above the lion as the lion feasted. Spar wasn't about to let that lion off so easily. Since Spar hadn't eaten so much in the past hour and his bowels were about to burst with poop, he suggested to the flock members that they bombard the lion with poop. The flock members loved the idea and worked up as much intestinal pressure as they could muster. Spar nodded to each flock member as they readied to drop their loads and then Spar ordered, "Bombs away!" With that, Spar and the flock flung open their butt holes and poured out the milky intestinal porridge.

The lion was too intent on eating and plotting his revenge to notice the poopoo precipitation. In seconds, the lion was completely covered with vulture poop. The lion roared its angriest roar and looked up to see Spar and his flock laughing their loudest screechy vulture laughs. The lion's typical color was a tannish light brownish hue. The flood of vulture feces had altered the lion's fur color into a peculiar looking whitish color. The lion actually resembled a rare albino lion, which naturally occurs in nature in every 3,000 or 4,000 lions. Even the lion's long tail had been whitened by the vile vulture liquid. The enraged lion began running in a circle and kicking up huge dust clouds. The circle grew larger and larger, until the lion was running and roaring in a circle that was of a diameter equal to the length of a football field. It was really a sight to see by the laughing vultures up in the sky. The lion had been foiled again. First, that vulture ate a large part of his succulent rotting zebra and then the vulture went to the bathroom on him. The lion continued running in an ever-larger circle for 3 hours until it had finally collapsed from

exhaustion.

Spar had always been a patient vulture and he saw his plan executed perfectly by the lion. Spar had known that the lion would have a tremendous fit after having been pooped on and would likely run amok, which the lion did. As the lion slept from exhaustion on the desert floor, Spar and the flock descended to have some fun. Spar knew the locations of all the waterholes for miles around and remembered one in particular that was only a mile away. Spar ordered the flock to help him drag the lion to the watering hole. Since the lion probably weighed about 490 pounds, each of the 7 members of the vulture flock would be required to pull about 70 pounds. The vultures clasped their talons in strategic locations about the lion and began the drag. It wasn't nearly as easy as Spar thought it would be. After 17 hours, they arrived at the watering hole.

The vultures dragged the unconscious lion into the muddy water and drowned it. The lion never knew what happened; because it had been so exhausted by maniacally running, it never awoke. The vultures dragged the perished lion back out of the water and began feasting on it. Spar's flock camped out at the watering hole for 13 days and ate heartily from the lion carcass each day. The ravenous vultures even ate the thick lion skin. By the time they were done, only a skeleton remained. Spar felt that the lion skeleton would be a nice memorial at the watering hole for thirsty lions to observe. Spar's flock each plucked a prime feather to stick into the lion skull's eye sockets. Any future lions drinking from the watering hole would see the lion skeleton decorated with the vulture feathers and take some kind of note. Most of the lions would scoff at the sight, but a few would take heed. All Spar intended to do with his gesture was to leave a message. Spar wanted all the animals of the area to know who the boss was. Spar and his vulture flock were superior to all the other animals. Spar and his flock were invincible.

Spar and the flock camped out at the watering hole for another morning and discussed the future. They all agreed that a large animal would provide the flock with the most sustenance for the longest time, but large prey were difficult to come by. Other than a lion, hippo, giraffe or rhino, the largest animal out there was an elephant. Of course, how would they ever bag an elephant? As powerful and cunning as Spar and his flock were, an elephant was just too big. Spar drank some water from the watering hole in a clear spot near the corner. The clarity of the water must have meant that it was the cleanest. Spar drank about a quart of the stuff and within minutes became delirious. He fell over and drifting off into a trance. The other flock members attempted to revive him, but couldn't. The vultures felt that as long as Spar's eyes were still open, he must be ok. In Spar's delirium, he had a vision of an elephant that was walking along slowly. The other elephants of the herd were unable to convince the slow one to keep up.

For some reason, the slow moving elephant seemed to want to be left alone, which was unusual for the gregarious elephants. Normally when an elephant had some kind of issue, there was

always another elephant willing to lend a large ear for support. The members of an elephant herd stuck together like glue and formed an almost indomitable entity. The slow elephant drifted off the beaten path of the jungle, through which the herd was stomping. Soon, the slow elephant had disappeared from sight and was never again heard from by the herd. Spar was somehow in his vision with the elephant, following it. The elephant continued along through the immensely dense jungle growth until the canopy actually shut out the rays of the sun. The elephant stopped at an area next to enormous heaps of huge bones, elephant bones. The elephant felt that its time had come and had headed into the legendary "elephant's graveyard" to pass away peacefully.

Before Spar could see what happened in his dream, he awoke to a hot shower from the flock members pissing on him. As invigorating as the hot vulture piss felt on his body, Spar didn't really enjoy the smell of the stuff. The piss smelled a little too much like curry and he hated curry. The flock members were overjoyed to see their leader come back to life again. Even though Spar wasn't actually deceased, the flock felt lost without him. Spar excitedly explained the details of his vision about the elephant. All they had to do was find an elephant herd somewhere and follow it until one of the elephants drifted away into the graveyard. Once in the graveyard, the elephant would kick the bucket and the flock could begin the essentially endless feast. The flock could live for months on the flesh from an elephant, maybe even a year. The flock agreed that it sounded like a great scheme, but elephant sightings were rare in there part of Africa. Spar added that all they had to do was to pick a direction and fly until they found some elephants.

It seemed like a simple solution. After 11 days of flying due west, the flock hadn't seen any signs of elephants. They managed to keep their bellies full by snacking on remnants of animals left behind by lions and hyenas. Even though the pickings had slimmed down from the great lion feast, they kept their hopes up. The lion feast was a great accomplishment for the flock. There weren't many vulture flocks, if any at all, that could claim an entire fresh lion for their very own. Spar thought back to that lion every waking hour of the day as they flew along. His flock could be quite proud of that event. Spar wondered why he had the vision of the elephant. Was it pure coincidence that he had drunk that clear water? Had he been lucky or just fortunate to be in the right place at the right time? He always felt that he was a special vulture. He always felt superior to other vultures. Between the lion extravaganza and the elephant idea, things were really clicking for him. He could do no wrong. It seemed destined that he and his flock would soon locate an elephant herd. It had to happen; it was in the cards.

The flock flew due west for another 33 days, with no signs of elephants. Was it going to happen or not? The flock members began to mumble among themselves that Spar's idea might not come to fruition after all. They were still eating well as they flew, but they were miles away from their typical stomping grounds. They stopped at watering holes and told other vultures the lion story. No vultures believed the story. Spar cared not. He and his birds knew what had happened. If

nobody believed them, it was their loss. When they told the lion story, the other vultures were initially amazed at the concept, but realized the impossibility of it. Some of the larger vultures challenged Spar for telling such a ridiculous tale. When Spar and his flock could take no more ridicule from the other vultures, they really lit into them, dispatched them and ate them in front of the other animals at the watering hole. Spar and his vultures were impressive and weren't to be taken lightly.

After the flock had flown another 77 days, they finally found what they were looking for. A herd of approximately 23 elephants came into view one fine morning. Spar was overjoyed and immediately released his bowels onto the herd of elephants below. The rest of the flock did the same. The backs of the elephants were splattered with random splotches of white vulture paint. The elephants looked up at the arrogant vulture flock, trumpeted and flashed their ivory tusks at the birds. Elephants felt that they were the kings of all animals, which they were. Their sheer size guaranteed it. For some ragged looking birds to poop on them from above was an enormous insult. What could the elephants do though? The vultures were way up in the sky and the elephants were on the ground. The elephants would just have to tolerate the sacrilege for the moment. If those pesky vultures ever got within trampling distance of the elephants, lightning quick justice would be served. The bull elephants would mash the vultures into the ground and defecate hundreds of pounds of elephant poopoo onto the vulture carcasses. That would show those ugly birds. The elephants argued with each other about what to do with the vultures.

Spar felt justified with his decision of many days ago. The flock members were again glad to be led by the great Spar. All the flock had to do was wait for one of the elephants to get that instinctual feeling and head off into the jungle alone. Spar didn't know anything about elephants, except that they were huge. He didn't know how to tell the age of elephants. He had noticed how some elephants were more faded looking than the others. Maybe the more faded looking ones were older and those were the most likely to soon pass away. Time would tell. The elephant herd was in a sparse jungle growth when they were first spotted and the tree growth gradually thickened as the elephants meandered. Spar and the flock descended to the ground to follow the herd. It would be easier to observe the great beasts. The tree canopy was getting too thick to see through from above. It was more risky for the vultures to walk along the ground, but it was essential for keeping the elephants in view.

As the days, weeks and months passed, the vultures followed the healthy elephant herd. The flock managed to survive on eating bugs, small birds, spiders, monkeys and other small jungle creatures. The elephants kept a watchful eye on the vulture flock that was following them for some reason. The bull elephants wanted to turn around and lay waste to the vultures, but they knew the vultures would be ready. All the elephants could do was to go about their business and forget about the ragged flock that was trailing them. The elephant herd was an incredibly destructive lot. They ate as much of the foliage of trees as they could reach and then they pushed

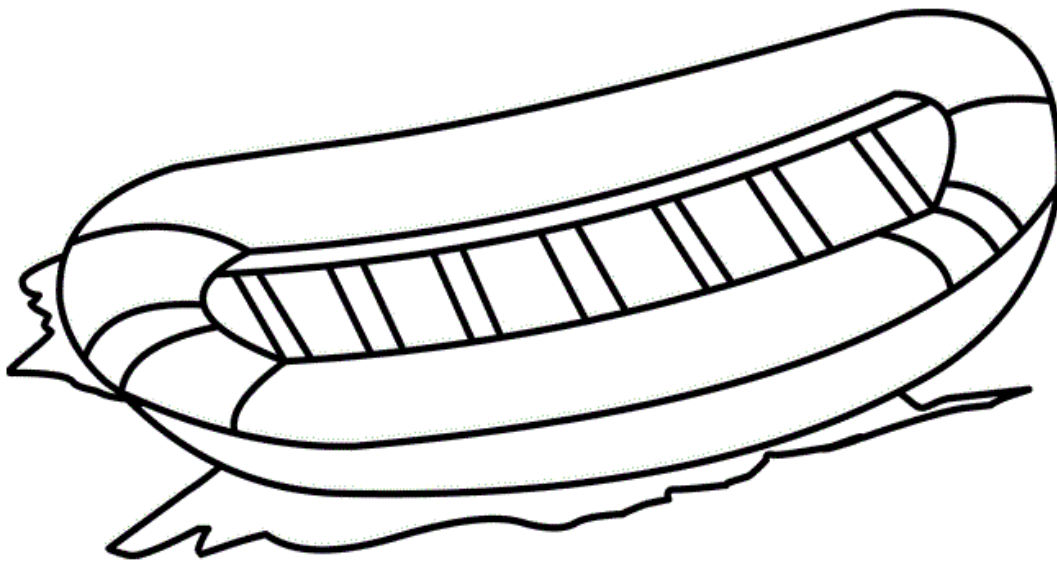
the trees over to defoliate the tops of the trees. Spar was amazed at how savagely the elephants treated the plants. Spar and his flock couldn't relate to how the elephants required such enormous amounts of vegetation to survive. Spar and the flock were primarily meat eaters and it seemed so much more efficient to them. Of course, since vultures were much smaller than elephants, the vultures didn't require as much food to survive. That fact escaped Spar, but he didn't care.

Spar and the flock were becoming impatient with the elephants. When was one of the giant animals going to head off alone? The great memory of the lion feast and its unlimited binge eating had worn off in the memories of the vulture flock. The piecemeal eating that they were doing in the jungle was becoming annoying at the least. Where was that great promised elephant feast? When Spar heard the comments of his flock, all he had to do was look at them with his cool look. Spar had a steely-eyed look like Steve McQueen. It was hard to look directly into Spar's eyes for too long. He never blinked or looked away. When Spar looked at you, it was for a reason and he meant business. It always seemed safest to voice opinions when Spar wasn't looking or when it was thought that he couldn't hear the comments. Spar heard everything. His flock wasn't capable of keeping any secrets from him.

Spar fully understood the concerns of the flock and he was beginning to realize himself that it might be a while before one of the elephants decided to bite the dust. Spar recanted his vision to his flock each night about how he had been awakened before he could see the outcome. They all had to be patient. How long could those elephants live anyway? Eleven months passed in the jungle with Spar and the flock still in hot pursuit of the elephants. The elephants were at the point of paying no never mind to the vultures. Those nasty-looking birds didn't appear to know what they were doing. Finally, one of the older faded-looking elephants began to walk more slowly than the others. Spar immediately noticed. Yes! The time was nigh. It was about to happen. His great vision was true. The old elephant gradually walked slower and slower and one day it veered away from the others. The others let it go. The other elephants knew.

Spar and the flock followed the old loner at their same safe following distance as before. The vultures didn't want the old elephant to become alarmed in any way and possibly head back to the herd. Spar and his flock followed the old slow elephant for 6 days. The trees of the jungle were incredibly thick. The canopy overhead shut out the sun. It was just like in Spar's vision. It would only be a short matter of time. It had to be. It was so dark in the jungle that Spar and the flock were getting nervous. They had never been in such limited light during the day. An African rock python had been observing the elephant from a distance. Then the python spotted the puny vultures. The 19-foot snake dropped down onto Spar and began to squeeze. The other vultures began to peck insanely at the snake and they all became wrapped in the snake's thick coils as well. The old elephant continued its slow walk and disappeared into the heavy growth. Spar and his flock were trapped in the grips of the massive snake. Now what?

158. Taciano's Raft 2



158. Taciano's Raft 2

As Marzano and Sangria floated in the water, the 8 girls cried out from under the tarp. The girls peeked from under the tarp one at a time to see what was going on. Taciano's girls, Tajuana, Talitha, Tamala and Tamatha peeked first. Paco's girls, Palmira, Parthenia, Patrina and Paulita then peeked from under the tarp. The girls stared in horror at the floating bodies of Marzano and Sangria. Tajuana immediately jumped into the water to swim toward Marzano and Palmira jumped in to swim toward Sangria. The floating bodies were farther away than the swimming girls thought. Luckily, the swimmers eventually reached the floaters. The swimming girls returned to the boat with the unconscious Marzano and Sangria in tow. The journey so far had been fraught with one disaster after another. The kids didn't need the tragedy of losing one of their siblings.

Marzano and Sangria were alive, but semi-comatose. They were carefully placed under the tarp next to their unconscious parents. It was up to the remaining girls to help everyone survive. Tajuana told a story about how she had helped her father Taciano one day at the market. Taciano liked taking Tajuana with him to the market, because she was born a wheeler-dealer. The markets in Cuba were operated on a strictly haggle-for-the-price protocol. The tourists who visited Cuba would pay what the seller wanted for various goods and they always paid too much. Tajuana always got the best price for the produce and chickens. She told the vendors stories about her younger sisters and how they were starving. She would tell the sellers stories about how her little sisters couldn't come to the market, because they had no clothing. The sellers always reduced their prices.

Tajuana remembered one time when a new produce seller in the market was unusually stubborn with their pricing and refused to reduce the price for the plantains. Well, Tajuana lit into the plantain seller full force. She was crying, screaming and carrying on to the point of embarrassing Taciano. Eventually the vendor reduced the price for the plantains low enough to satisfy Tajuana. Taciano had rewarded Tajuana for her bargaining efforts by giving her one of the discounted plantains. Instead of having to wait to get home to share it with the rest of the family, the precious starchy fruit was all hers. She couldn't believe it. She never thought she would see a day when she would have in her possession a whole fruit of her own. On the long walk home from the market that day, Tajuana slowly nibbled the succulent plantain until it was gone 3 hours later. It was the greatest day of her life. As she told the story to the listeners in the tragedy-destined boat, the girls obviously envied her. Tajuana was proud to tell the story, because she knew that her bargaining skills were a valuable commodity in a country that was so full of strife and hardship.

Palmira remembered a story about her father Paco when Paco had brought her to the grape vineyards one day to watch him pick grapes. She was only about 3 years old at the time and was

really excited about going with her father to watch him work. Paco had advised Palmira to stay a safe distance from him and the other workers, because there was a lot of quick grape shearing going on. The grape bunch-cutting device was especially sharp and could easily cut someone who wasn't careful. Palmira quietly observed Paco as he proceeded down each row of grape vines. He was definitely a fast worker and as efficient as a human could be at picking grapes. In the afternoon of that day, Paco paused to have a quick lunch with Palmira in the shade of a great old olive tree. The tree was a favorite of the workers for resting or eating lunch or any other moments out of the hot sun. Even though the tree provided shade, it was still hot and humid, but a heck of a lot more comfortable than being in the searing sun of the Cuban afternoon.

Paco and Palmira snacked on their lunch of cheese, bread, salami, water and olives. Everything they ate was made at home by Margherita, except for the water of course, which came from the community well. As Paco and Palmira ate, Paco told her a story of how his father had brought him to an orchard one day to pick some kind of fruit. Paco didn't remember what kind of fruit it was, other than it was just some kind of fruit. Palmira asked Paco what kind of fruit it was and he flared at her that he couldn't remember what kind of fruit it was. It didn't really matter to the story what the fruit was. Palmira was just one of those people who demanded the details. Whenever someone told her a story, the story dragged on for much longer than the teller of the story had ever intended, because of her constant questioning. Paco yelled at Palmira to stop asking questions about the story and just to listen to him telling it. She frowned and sat quietly as Paco told the story.

As Paco orated to Palmira, an unseen snake had slithered along the ground of the grape vineyard. The snake was completely concealed in the tall grass of the vineyard and was a hidden hazard. The snake made its way to the olive tree where Paco, Palmira and others were eating various homemade goods before returning to the drudgery of the grape picking. The snake arrived at the guy sitting on the ground next to Paco. The guy moved and the snake bit the guy. The guy screamed and Palmira jumped into action. She leaped to her feet and grabbed the snake by the tail. She swung the snake at the olive tree like a bullwhip. The snake was shattered on impact with the tree. Paco and some of the others saw what Palmira had done and congratulated her on her victory. The guy who had been bitten survived with minor side effects from the snake venom.

The snake-bitten guy had given Palmira a gold chain and cross from around his neck. Paco was surprised at the generosity of the guy's gift. The guy reckoned that had Palmira not grabbed the snake when she did, the snake might have continued to bite him. The guy felt that Palmira had saved his very life. The least he could do was to give her the gold chain and cross. When Palmira came to the part of the story about the gift of the gold chain and cross, the listeners in the boat oohed and aahed. Everyone had thought that Palmira was wearing the gold chain and cross as a gift from one of her grandparents. None of them would have imagined that she had received

the gift for allegedly saving someone's life. Palmira's status in her family had been solidified by her surprising heroism.

Talitha chimed in with a story about her mother Margherita. One morning when Talitha and Margherita had been doing the laundry at the river, a wild boar, evidently rabid, had appeared at the river's edge. The other women who had been beating their laundry on the rocks hadn't noticed the boar at first, because of the roar of the river and the slapping of the clothing being pounded on the rocks. The crazed boar had latched onto one of the infants of the washwomen. The infant belonged to one of Margherita's friends. Luckily, the baby had been wrapped in swaddling clothes, or the infant might have been injured by the boar's attack. The boar squealed and began to run back toward the woods, from whence it came. Margherita had lived long enough to always be on the lookout for wild animals. When the boar was discovered running away with her friend's baby, Margherita stripped off her burqa-like robe and found a large rock. She fashioned the burqa into a sling and placed the rock into the folded part of the weapon.

Margherita swung the sling around and around, like David about to conquer Goliath. Once enough sling momentum had been achieved, Margherita launched the large rock in the direction of the speeding boar. Margherita briefly thought to herself that she might accidentally hit the baby with the rock, but that was a chance that she had to take. It was better to have a child with a bruise than no child at all. As long as the large rock didn't hit the child in the head, that is. The rock sped through the air and hit the boar in the back of the head, instantly sending the animal to boar heaven. The perished boar released the swaddled baby and the infant went rolling on the dirty ground. A sizable dust cloud was created as the baby rolled. The mother of the infant ran over and scooped up the child. The child was dirty-faced, but alive, even though it needed a diaper change, big time. With her heroics, Margherita had become a hero in the little village. As a gesture of thanks, the other village mothers volunteered to do Margherita's laundry for a month.

Parthenia started next with a story about her mother Mojita. Mojita made money by selling articles of clothing that she created by hand; she was an extremely talented seamstress. She had been working on a nice little dress for a friend of a friend of hers, a blind woman. Mojita had felt sorry for the blind woman and wanted the dress to be something special. The blind woman was planning to pay for the dress with some leather that she had tanned. The leather was made from wild boar hides. It seemed that the wild boars were everywhere. The blind woman had been born with extra teeth in her mouth and was able to chew on the hides more efficiently than the other village women. Mojita was going to trade the dress for the leather and then make a nice purse from the leather. Mojita could then sell the purse at the market for a tidy sum. The purses made from boar's leather were highly sought by the wealthier women. Mojita made many items from boar's leather, but the purses brought the most money.

Since Mojita hadn't seen the blind woman and only knew about her through a friend, Mojita had

no idea how many teeth the blind woman had. When the dress was finished, Mojita brought the dress to the market, where many such exchanges took place. Mojita's friend was there with the blind woman. When Mojita noticed how the blind woman had so many teeth that it was scary when she smiled, Mojita felt sorry for her. Mojita gave the blind woman the dress free of charge. The blind woman was so touched by the offer of the free dress that she gave the boar leather to Mojita anyway. Mojita and the blind woman talked for about an hour at the market about this and that. They eventually decided to create a secret business venture, in which the blind woman would supply the leather for Mojita's handiwork. They would split the profits down the middle.

Tamala had a story involving her father Taciano. It wasn't anything spectacular except that it was the first time that she learned how to whistle. Whistling wasn't very common in the village, because most of the people had teeth missing, except the blind woman, of course, who had extra teeth. Taciano's father had taught him a special way of whistling with a turd. It could with be with any turd, but the most common pieces of turd lying around were from the many chickens. Depending on the size of the turd and the animal it came from is what determined the melodic sound that the turd made. The chicken turds produced a cleaner sound than say, dog or boar turds. The training came about one day when Tamala was pouting about how she couldn't sing or whistle or make any musical sounds. Taciano took her aside and showed her the secret of whistling with a turd.

There was a special way of holding the turd to the mouth just so and then the person blew air through the turd as if they were blowing out the candles on a birthday cake. A hole was made in the turd with a nail, preferably not rusty. The smoother the hole was, the better the sound. Additionally, the person using the turd whistle had to spit just the right amount of saliva onto the turd to make it respond musically to the air being blown through it. If too much saliva were added to the turd, it would be messy when blown through. If too little spit were applied, the sound would be obnoxious. Taciano gathered some choice chicken turds, a not-too-rusty nail and he showed Tamala the process. Naturally, it would require a lot of practice on Tamala's part to master the chicken turd whistle. She tried for weeks to get it right and eventually managed to whistle a nice rendition of "Guantanamera." Taciano was proud of Tamala and it gave her loads of self-esteem.

As the hours and days passed in the boat, Patrina told a story about her father Paco in which Paco had won some food in a pineapple-eating contest. The contest involved eating as many whole pineapples as possible in 20 minutes. Every part of the pineapple had to be eaten, including the harsh outer husk. Paco had been working in a pineapple plantation and there was a large pile of pineapples that were unsuitable for export. The rejected pineapples were usually given away to the most productive pickers. Occasionally, pineapple-eating contests took place to break up the monotony. Paco had a reputation for having a bit of an iron stomach, which probably started when he ate a dead alley cat as a child and didn't become sick as a result. Paco wasn't the largest

man, but he was able to tolerate the roughness of the pineapples in his stomach. A new group of migrant workers had arrived at the plantation on that day and one of the guys was a big fellow who claimed to be able to out-eat anyone.

The contest occurred just before sunset, after the day's picking was done and there was a nice pile of pineapple rejects for the 3 contestants to eat. The winner of the contest would get to take home as many of the pineapple rejects as they could carry. Paco, the big fellow and another picker started eating when the whistle was blown. After 14 minutes, the big fellow was leading, with Paco in 2nd place and the other guy in 3rd. It was just a matter of time that the harsh outer rind and spikiness of the pineapples would affect the stomachs of the eaters. The big guy's face became green and he vomited pineapple all over the side of Paco's face. The other guy became sick at the sight, sound and smell of the vomit and he barfed out all his pineapple. Iron-stomach Paco just kept on eating pineapple until the whistle was blown. Paco could have stopped eating after the 2 other men retched their pineapple, but he was a show-off. Paco managed to carry home 43 pineapple rejects that evening. Mojita and the girls were ecstatic.

Tamatha told the story about how her mother Margherita had rescued a bull. Cuba had a tradition that was similar to Spain's tradition of running bulls through the village before the bulls participated in the barbaric bullfights. Margherita had been returning home from the market when the bulls were turned loose in the village. She had forgotten about the event and shouldn't have gone to the market that day. When the bulls ran through the village streets, some of the bulls escaped through the barriers and ran through the countryside. Margherita had been traipsing along with her heavy baskets and tripped in a chuckhole. She fell to the ground and dropped her goods. As she gathered her stuff and put it back into the baskets, she heard a galloping sound.

One of the bulls was galloping down the dirt road toward her. The bull had a crazed look in its eyes. It looked like the bull was planning to run until it was out of sight of man. As the bull ran past Margherita, it stepped on her left foot. The pain was enormous. The bull kept running and ran through a wooden fence next to a creek. The bull mustn't have seen the water and it ran right into it. The bull started floating down the creek, which had been cresting from the recent heavy rains. Even though Margherita was in agony from her injured ankle, she managed to run to the creek downstream of the floating bull. After tying one end of a rope to the fence, she threw the other end of the rope into the water. The rope became caught on the bull's horns, which enabled the bull to climb on shore.

On a fateful morning in the boat, Paulita began telling a story when suddenly the boat crashed to a stop. Without realizing it, the girls had lost track of time while telling their stories to each other. Since they were under the tarp most of the time taking care of the unconscious family members, they hadn't detected the approaching land. They made it to Florida!

159. Delbert's Drive



159. Delbert's Drive

As Delbert backed his car out of the driveway, he slowed to a stop at the end of the driveway to check for traffic. His neighborhood didn't get much traffic and the traffic that existed was mainly from the residents on their way to and from work or their children's schools. He looked to the left and to the right; yep, it was clear. He backed out into the street while looking into his rear view mirror. The rear windshield of the car was dirty and difficult to see through. As he backed toward what he thought to be the neighbor's car across the street parked in their driveway, he realized that the neighbor was backing out. Delbert slammed on his brakes just in time to avoid a collision. He drove forward into his driveway to allow the neighbor to maneuver. The neighbor waved at Delbert as he drove away down the street. Delbert hmped to himself, waved at the neighbor and backed out into the street again when it was safe.

As he drove down his street that was crowded with cars on both sides, a kid on a skateboard suddenly darted out from between 2 cars parked on the right. Luckily, Delbert was alert enough to stop before hitting the wayward youth. The kid waved at Delbert and nonchalantly skateboarded down the middle of the street, probably on his way to school. Delbert politely waved back at the child and proceeded on his way to work in a direction opposite to the skateboarder. Initially, Delbert thought about how careless that kid was, but then Delbert remembered how careless he used to be as a youth. Delbert thought back to the days when he skateboarded, roller-skated and rode his bicycle down the middle of the street, without a care in the world. Ah youth! He noted the letter carrier on her morning route, delivering everyone's junk mail and People magazines, which Delbert also considered to be junk mail. Delbert spotted the milkman delivering the milk, cheese and other special custom dairy products to the neighborhood.

The milkman was one of only a few remaining in Delbert's town. Delbert's town appreciated the value of the dairy products, which were produced organically by the local dairy farmer. Delbert's townsfolk believed in supporting local business and had always voted "No" to all box store propositions. The milkman was one of the brothers of the dairy farming family. They also made the best ice cream anywhere on earth, which was most likely the best due to its higher than average fat content. Everything tasted better with more fat in it. It was only human nature to like higher fat foods better than lowfat or nonfat foods. Delbert saw the papergirl tossing the morning papers and he laughed when one of the thrown newspapers landed on a pile of dog poop. As Delbert reached the 4-way stop sign, incredibly there were 3 other vehicles that had arrived at the same instant. The theoretical protocol for same arrival 4-way stop signs was that the person to the right had the right-of-way. Of course, the concept of right-of-way had always been a subject of much discussion. Typically, the person who was the least in a hurry or the most submissive would yield to the other stop sign contestants.

Since Delbert was an unusually submissive and yielding character, he usually waited for everyone at a stop sign to go first. In the instance on that morning, everyone seemed to be as timid as Delbert was when encountering traffic impasses. None of the drivers moved. Delbert waved at the person across from him who was looking at the person to their left. The driver to Delbert's left was looking directly across the intersection at the person to Delbert's right. No one moved. Delbert took the initiative to wave at the person across from him. The driver started into the intersection without realizing that the person to their left had waved to the person across from them. Delbert sat there with his foot on the brake pedal as the 3 other stop sign contestants all simultaneously proceeded into the intersection.

The 3 drivers slammed to a stop. Delbert hmped to himself. After 3 seconds of sitting there, the vehicle across from Delbert sneaked forward as the 2 other timid vehicles remained stationary. Delbert allowed the remaining 2 intersection-trapped vehicles to do what they had to do to get through the intersection. When there were no vehicles to be seen, Delbert drove through the intersection on his way to the highway. As he drove along, Delbert thought back to the time when his area wasn't so developed. There were houses everywhere. There were drivers everywhere. There were school busses everywhere when school was in session. With the advent of people ordering more and more products from the internet, there were more delivery vehicles on the roads. Traffic was infinitesimally getting more and more intolerable as the days, weeks, months and years passed. Delbert was finding his daily commute to work to be an annoying task. He remembered when life was easy and he could ride his bike to work. He remembered driving a short distance to work.

When the economy demanded downsizing of companies, Delbert had been forced to drive farther and farther to his place of business. So many times while commuting to work Delbert had daydreamed about a Utopian society where the inhabitants could all live together in peace and harmony. Part of the peace and harmony involved people being able to commute to and from work via free public transit systems. It would be incalculable how many resources could be saved. What if this and what if that? Many people could see the value of the concept of efficient mass transit systems. Unfortunately, there were people born everyday who derived their only self-esteem from driving a vehicle. It was pitiful indeed that the only way for some dumbass blue color worker to feel self worth was to bully other drivers in traffic. Those low-self-esteem characters usually drove a gas-guzzling pickup truck or similarly impractical vehicle with which to drive on the highways and byways.

As Delbert entered the merging lane of the highway, he accelerated. A tractor-trailer was in the right lane of the 2-lane highway. Delbert put the pedal to the medal and attempted to enter the highway in front of the tractor-trailer. The driver of the tractor-trailer must have been having an interesting morning at the instant that Delbert had been trying to enter the highway. The tractor-trailer driver accelerated instead of backing off on the accelerator. The tractor-trailer driver's

actions made it impossible for Delbert to enter the highway as the acceleration ramp ran out. Delbert found himself in the shoulder of the 2-lane highway. He hit his brakes just enough to reduce his speed to enable him to pull in tightly behind the tractor-trailer. The vehicle that was behind the tractor-trailer had pulled up as closely as they could to the tractor-trailer to leave minimal space for Delbert to pull into. Whatever possessed some people? Delbert managed to enter the highway just in front of the vehicle behind the tractor-trailer. The driver of that vehicle leaned on their horn as if to say that Delbert hadn't been allowed permission to enter the highway.

Delbert waved at the person of the vehicle that he had inadvertently cut off to enter the highway. The person gave Delbert the finger on one of their hands while still holding onto their cell phone with the other hand. Delbert wondered to himself how that person had performed that feat. Which hand was steering the vehicle? After 40+ years of commuting to work, Delbert shrugged it off. He had developed a phrase over the years that "People are assholes and then you die." Repeating the phrase to himself whenever he had driving issues was the only way for Delbert to cope with all the lunatics out there. When Delbert was in his right lane, he was as contented as he could be. He preferred the right lane, even though he had to deal with people entering and exiting the highway. The left lane was for the people who were late for work or for the traffic bullies who had no other way to have power over other people.

Delbert had thought many times while he was pooping in the morning before work how power was such an overrated concept. Life seemed to involve more low-self-esteem people than those with average self-esteem, if there were such a thing as average self-esteem. When Delbert was in the moment of struggling to push out a large turd on the toilet each morning, was when he had his greatest insights in life. On that particular morning, he had more trouble than usual to force out a larger and longer turd than usual. He held his breath and pushed, as if he were a pregnant woman giving birth. Even though Delbert had always heard that it was unhealthy to force poop out, he couldn't help it. He simply had to get that brown stuff out of his body. If he had to suffer some kind of alleged side effects, so be it. As the giant turd finally splashed into the toilet that morning, Delbert had the revelation that he needed to feel sorry for the people on the highways and byways, who obtained their power by bullying other drivers.

As Delbert contentedly motored along in his right lane, he kept up with the speeding traffic at whatever speed they were all going. He noticed that the tractor-trailer in front of him was actually one of those really long dump trucks. Something was leaking from the trailer part of the dump truck, something grayish and slimy. The substance was leaking through the space between the trailer's tailgate and the bed of the trailer. The stuff was dripping onto the highway and ending up on Delbert's windshield. Delbert hated having to drive in the left lane and so he decided to put up with the gray stuff on his windshield. It would only be for another 10 to 15 minutes or so. Then, he would exit from the highway. Whatever it was that was leaking from the trailer, it required a lot of windshield wiper fluid to keep Delbert's windshield clean. Delbert

was one of those people who were fanatics about driving with a clean windshield. He hated when all the bugs would get on the windshield in the good ol' summertime.

As much as Delbert despised driving in the left lane, he was beginning to wonder if he was going to run out of windshield washer fluid. The dashboard of his car indicated no such flashing light or anything, but you never really know how low the fluid level is at any given time. All a driver knows is when they actually run out. After 8 minutes of more or less constant wiper use, he began to consider moving into the left lane to pass the tractor-trailer. The gray liquid was starting to leave a slight film on Delbert's windshield, which somewhat distracted him. As he reached his right hand to adjust the radio volume, a pickup truck suddenly cut in front of him from the left lane, narrowly missing his car. Delbert instantly backed off a little on his gas pedal to allow space in front of him to regain the proper following distance. The pickup truck driver in front of Delbert was smoking a cigarette and was flicking the ashes out the window. As Delbert began to roll up his window, the pickup truck driver flicked the still-lit cigarette out of his window. The cigarette flew through the air and hit the window that Delbert was rolling up. Whew! That was close! In another few seconds, Delbert might have been hit in the face by the cigarette.

Delbert noticed the pickup truck driver lighting up another cigarette. Delbert also noticed one of those "Jesus saves" fish stickers on the rear bumper of the pickup truck. How comical it was that someone who was supposedly religious enough to display a "Jesus saves" sticker would flick a lit cigarette out of their vehicle's window. Delbert noticed a loud booming sound emanating from the pickup truck, probably from an excessively loud stereo. The pickup truck driver probably had to have the stereo volume turned way up to hear it over the noise from the pickup truck's loud exhaust. Delbert wondered why so many fools would modify their vehicle exhausts to make the vehicles louder and themselves deafer. Delbert forgave all of the pickup truck driver's transgressions, because the pickup truck was blocking the dripping gray liquid from the tractor-trailer. Delbert used his windshield wiper fluid one more time to clear the windshield and the low wiper fluid light came on. The pickup truck in front of Delbert suddenly swerved to the right and exited from the highway at the exit. Delbert was behind the leaking tractor-trailer again.

Since he had no washer fluid left, Delbert was forced to get into the left lane to pass the tractor-trailer. It required several seconds of waiting, but an opening came up and Delbert took it. Someone immediately began tailgating Delbert as he proceeded to accelerate to pass the tractor-trailer to his right. As Delbert accelerated, the tractor-trailer seemed to accelerate along with him. The tractor-trailer driver happened to be one of those drivers who liked messing with people. Delbert found it difficult to get far enough ahead of the tractor-trailer to pass it. The vehicle behind Delbert continued to tailgate him. There was also a vehicle in front of Delbert that prevented Delbert from getting far enough ahead of the tractor-trailer. After 3 minutes of mania, Delbert was able to hit the gas and pull in front of the tractor-trailer. Yes!

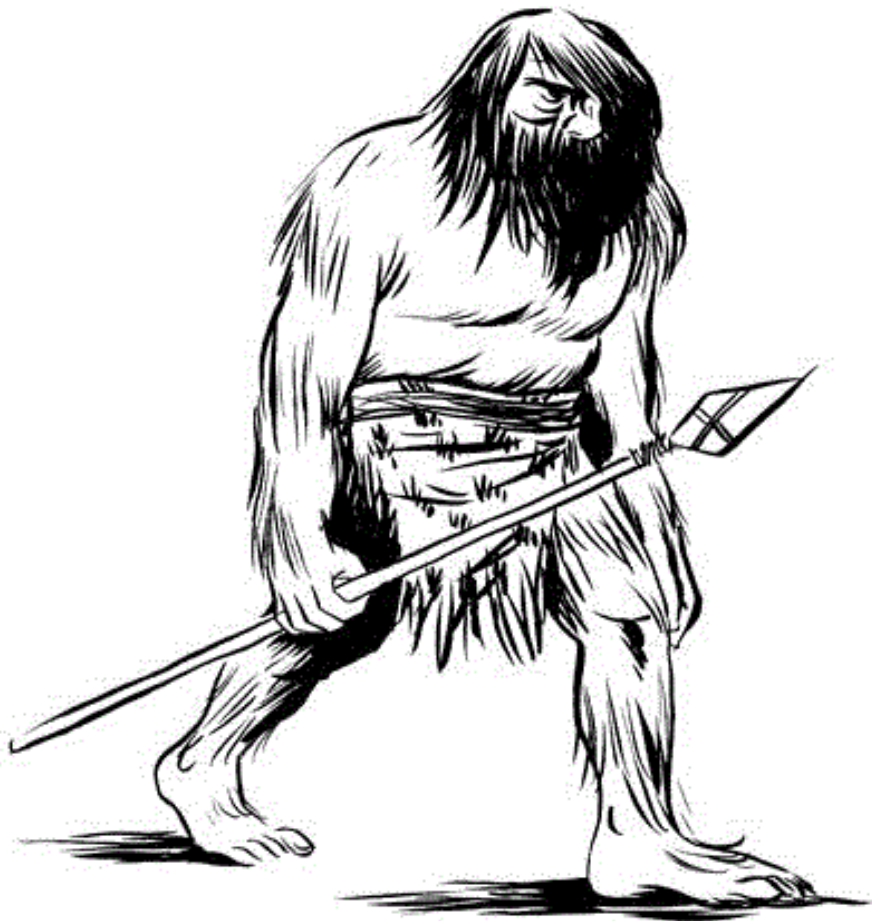
As Delbert cut in front of the large truck, the driver honked the loud horn. At least, Delbert had succeeded in getting in front of the tractor-trailer.

After a few minutes of being tailgated by the tractor-trailer, Delbert noticed the tractor-trailer pulling into the left lane. Oh no! The truck then sped along in the left lane and dove in front of Delbert. Delbert was stuck following the leaking tractor-trailer again. Because Delbert was using his wipers sparingly, a gray film began developing on the windshield. It would only be a little longer until his exit and then he could escape from the tractor-trailer. As Delbert counted the minutes to the exit, he squinted through the haze on his windshield. He saw that his exit was coming up and flipped on his right turn signal. The tractor-trailer did the same! It would only be a little while on the exit ramp and then Delbert could pass the big truck when they got onto the state route that led to Delbert's company. Delbert wished that it would rain, just to provide a little bit of moisture to clean the windshield better. As Delbert and the tractor-trailer followed the exit ramp onto the state route, Delbert prepared himself for a sudden maneuver. When they reached the state route, Delbert floored his car and zoomed past the tractor-trailer. Victory!

It would only be a few miles on the state route and then Delbert's turn would come up into his company. Delbert stayed in the left lane of the 2 lane state route to prevent the tractor-trailer from getting in front of him again. Delbert made a mental note to himself to top off the windshield washer fluid when he returned home that day. In Delbert's flustered state of mind, he failed to notice the reduced amount of vehicles on the road that morning. As a matter of fact, he realized that he hadn't seen any school buses. He surmised that it must be one of the many school holidays and that there was no school on that day. It was Friday, so that's probably what it was. Those kids had it made! As Delbert drove along the state route in the left lane next to the leaking tractor-trailer, he thought about the stack of work on his desk at work. At his job, he was always busy and always left a pile of work for the next day.

He thought about a particularly tricky file package that he been working on, which involved a lot of research on his part. He had to dig through numerous other files and make countless phone calls in order to process the file to completion. His supervisor had been nagging him for days to finish the file. Even though Delbert's boss knew that the files could only be processed at a certain pace, Delbert's boss seemed to single out Delbert more than Delbert's co-workers. Delbert had been so worked up by the commute on that morning that he decided to have a word with his boss. The interesting drive had energized Delbert and had given him an unusual confidence. Delbert hoped that he would still have the confidence when he walked into his office. At the next traffic light, Delbert turned left into his company's parking lot. There were few cars there. Was he that early? Where was everybody? As Delbert drove to the corner of the parking lot where he usually parked, he realized something. The road traffic had been lighter than usual, with no school buses and the parking lot was almost empty. That could mean only one thing. It wasn't Friday; it was Saturday! Dang it!

160. Bone's Clan 2



160. Bone's Clan 2

The T-Rex was running at full-tilt and its eyes were bloodshot and dark red. When eyes of the T-Rex's looked like that, it meant that the dinosaurs hadn't eaten in a while and were incredibly dangerous to all living things, including other T-Rex's. T-Rex's have been known to eat their mates during mating season, sometimes before the mating and sometimes after the mating. When the T-Rex's ate their T-Rex mates before completion of the mating process, it drastically reduced their populations. The savage dinosaur arrived with massive yellow-brown teeth flaring and gallons of drool flowing from its hungry maw. The dinosaur scooped up the closest caveman in its path and flung the poor fellow into the air. The T-Rex's always liked eating their prey in a dramatic fashion, which typically included throwing the victim into the air before chomping down and tearing into the juicy flesh.

Bone and some of the others turned to see the T-Rex just as it got to them. A really old caveman named Oneleg happened to be the victim who was thrown into the air. Oneleg had acquired the name of Oneleg when a Raptor had bitten off one of his legs. Oneleg's previous name had been Shiny, because his face was always so shiny for some reason. Oneleg had reluctantly accepted the name of Oneleg, which was given to him by the clan. He would have preferred his choice of the new name as Stilty, because when he walked on his one leg, he looked like a stilt. The clan had voted for the name of Oneleg and it became history, per clan rules. As Oneleg flew end-over-end vertically through the air, Bone looked in horror and sensed the impending loss of his clan member. Suddenly, Poopoo appeared at the edge of the woods.

Back when Poopoo had been thrown onto the snakes by the cavemen, he panickly pooped such a large amount of diarrhea that the snakes immediately rejected him as a potential food source. Poopoo yelled as loud as he could and pooped a large amount of poop into his cupped hands. Bone and Kid looked at Poopoo and were amazed to see him. Poopoo hurled the fresh poop at the face of the beastly T-Rex and hit the wild animal in the eyes. The T-Rex was distracted just enough by the temporary poop-induced blindness that the dinosaur missed catching the falling Oneleg on his downward trajectory. Oneleg landed on the ground with a dusty thud and he shuffled away from the scene in the direction of the spear arsenal. Bone and Kid quickly followed Oneleg's lead and also ran to the spears. Boomer picked up a huge burning log from the fire and began beating the face of the T-Rex to add further distraction for the dinosaur to cope with.

Butt saw his moment and rammed his big butt into the left leg of the blinded and distracted T-Rex. The T-Rex fell to the ground, but immediately jumped back up again. Leaner began beating the T-Rex's shins with his bulbous skull and seemed to be having some effect on the dinosaur, but then the T-Rex smacked Butt aside, sending him rolling into the nearby woods. Poopoo ran closer and continued pooping into his hands and throwing the poop into the T-Rex's

face. Burpo scurried to the large pile of rocks that the clan had been storing for the eventual construction of a new outdoor fireplace and cooking station. The pile of stones was immense and had been the result of many months of painstaking collection by the clan. Burpo began heaving stone after stone at the T-Rex. Onearm soon joined Burpo in the rock-throwing spectacle. Onearm had lost one of his arms when part of the cave ceiling had crashed down while the clan was sleeping in the cave the previous year. Onearm's arm had become incredible huge and muscular, due to the caveman's excessive use of the single arm. No one could throw stones like Onearm, not even Boomer, the biggest caveman of them all. Within 35 seconds, Threearms joined Onearm and Burpo in the stone throwing. Three arms had been born with 3 arms. No one knew why someone would be born with extra limbs or missing limbs; it just happened.

The cavemen were simple folks with simple brains. They never knew why things happened or cared why things happened. They lived their lives from day to day and were content waking up each morning and eating something by the day's end. If they weren't attacked by any wild animals during the day, it was a good day. Threelegs joined Onearm, Burpo and Threearms in the rock tossing. Threelegs was called Threelegs not because he had 3 legs with feet, but because he had a large leglike footless appendage growing straight out from his left hip. The appendage was useless as a leg. The 3rd leg was mainly useful as a scratching aid. Additionally, when Threelegs leaned onto his 3rd "leg," it gave him extra leverage when throwing objects. The T-Rex was definitely becoming perturbed by the poop and stones being hurled at it, but none of the thrown objects were having any real impact. When Bone, Kid and Oneleg reached the spears, they found that Buggy, Eagle, Nose, Count and Sourpuss were already at the spear stash. Sourpuss had acquired his name because he was always frowning. The cavemen collected as many of the spears as they could carry and galloped back to the battle scene.

Some of the cavemen threw stones and one threw poopoo. A T-Rex was such a sinewy and resilient animal that ordinary spears constructed by ordinary cavemen were of limited value along the lines of fatally wounding a T-Rex. Even a large amount of spears thrown at a T-Rex would usually have limited results. The trick that Sourpuss had discovered many moons before was that when spear tips were soaked in a concentrated solution of piss, the resulting spear tips were verging on being toxic. The piss-soaked spear tips could then be employed to a greater advantage by the cavemen. The only problem that Sourpuss had discovered was that it required hundreds of gallons of caveman piss to arrive at the desired result. Sourpuss had discovered the concept quite by accident actually. He had been preparing a hide from an old jungle boar for tanning, when he absent-mindedly left his spear leaning against the tanning structure and forgot about the spear. It was years later that Sourpuss found his spear immersed in a piss puddle that was formed by years of accumulated cavemen piss.

In the history of any caveman clan, the clan would move from location to location and sometimes

stay at one place for a while. The clan had been at the same spot for a while and had abandoned the tanning station, because everyone had a fur suit. The tanning stations were typically more useful in new expanding clans when more and more new fur suits were required. Sourpuss found his old spear in the puddle of piss while out looking for flint one day. He already had a nice spear in his possession that had been manufactured to the latest standards. He discovered the old spear and picked it up from the piss puddle. Since the cavemen had no plumbing to speak of, piss puddles and poop piles were everywhere. Only the passage of time would work its magic on the poop piles, via the mysterious flies and maggots. The piss puddles essentially stayed around forever and became concentrated.

For whatever reason, Sourpuss sniffed the tip of the old spear. He noted that the smell was unlike any piss that he had smelled before. Could the piss have somehow become concentrated in that puddle over the years? Who knew? It wasn't up to the simple cavemen to figure things out. Sourpuss decided to try out the old reeking spear that afternoon when he went out hunting with the clan. When the cavemen threw their spears at game, it sometimes required numerous spears to ultimately fell the prey and cause its demise. For whatever reason, Sourpuss noted that he was able to fell game with a single throw of his spear. No additional spears were required to fell the game. Mind you, the game animals that the cavemen hunted on an average day were small and nowhere near as large as a feisty T-Rex. Sourpuss had kept his aged piss secret to himself. When a caveman discovered something, which was rare, they usually kept it to themselves. The caveman world was dominated by the ones with the secrets.

Sourpuss had a secret stash of aged piss that he kept in a small gourd. The gourd was kept out of sight from the clan by wearing the gourd under the fur suit and hanging the gourd from a leather string. The leather string was tied around Sourpuss's waist. Sourpuss had always wanted to be the leader of the clan, but at the same time, he desired to keep the aged piss a secret. There was no way for him to have both. The other clan members were too simple-minded to realize that Sourpuss had been utilizing his secret aged piss on his spear tip while hunting. They simply thought that he was somehow a better shot with his spear. When the T-Rex crashed the party, Sourpuss had seen his moment. He decided that he needed to employ his aged piss before it was too late for the clan to survive the T-Rex attack.

While the other caveman clan members were heaving rocks, poop and spears at the T-Rex, Slinger began launching stones with his leather sling. Even though the cavemen were essentially of simple minds, once in a while one of them would wake up in the morning with a revelation. Three months before, Slinger (whose previous name was Boarbreath) woke up with the idea of constructing an apparatus for throwing stones via a long strip of leather. The sling device worked very well for smaller game, but proved to be of limited value against a dinosaur such as the T-Rex that the clan was courageously battling. Each time Slinger slung a rock at one of the eyes of the T-Rex, the stone merely bounced off the dinosaur's tough eyelids. All the efforts by

the cavemen served to keep the T-Rex distracted enough to limit how many of them it was gobbling down. Even though the dinosaur was surrounded by 30 or so attacking cavemen, it was still trying to eat them. So far, Bentears and Cankles had been devoured by the T-Rex during the fighting.

Slingshot had developed a similar device to Slinger's on the very morning after Slinger had developed his weapon. Slingshot's device utilized a sturdy forked stick with a thin strip of leather attached to the ends of the fork tips. Smaller rocks could be hurled at tremendous velocity. Again, Slingshot's weapon was more ideally suitable for smaller game, such as rabbitauruses, squirrelauruses and smaller birdauruses. Similarly to Slinger, Slingshot attempted to shoot stones at the eyes of the T-Rex. The small slingshotted stones would almost get between the eyelids of the T-Rex, but the dinosaur's blinking instincts were too quick to allow entry of the projectiles into its eyes. Slinger and Slingshot tried as hard as they could and wouldn't stop until it was over. The combination of protecting themselves from the massive T-Rex and the potential of food from eating the dinosaur was a great challenge for the clan. If they could manage to defeat and dispatch the T-Rex, they would have months of meat and much mirthful partying by the fire.

Stumpo was a caveman who had eaten some tasty semi-toxic berries 2 years ago and had fallen into a coma for 3 months. He had lain on his left side on the hard stone floor of the cave for the entire time. His left leg and arm had been cut off from blood circulation, had atrophied and had eventually fallen off when he finally awoke from the coma and stood up. The other cave members were completely flabbergasted by Stumpo's circumstances, but made a careful note to avoid eating those harmful berries ever again. Stumpo was just glad to wake up at all and had coined the phrase, "Live and Learn." It took centuries for Stumpo's phrase to catch on in the world, but great scholars had credited Stumpo with the phrase's creation. The other clan members were so afraid of berries after Stumpo's plight that they had refrained from eating them for a full 11 months. A great depression had befallen the clan during those 11 months, because the cavemen really enjoyed eating berries. The cavemen agreed that in addition to enjoying the sweetness of the berries, they all seemed to poop more regularly.

Stump had lost his legs during the same cave ceiling crash-down that caused the loss of Onearm's arm. The caveman clan had unanimously agreed that Stump (formerly known as Knuckles) would henceforth be called Stump, because he resembled a tree stump. Since Stump had an unusually thick body, he truly resembled a tree stump. He missed his previous name of Knuckles, because he was the best knuckle-cracker of the clan and preferred that name. Stump was such a great knuckle-cracker that he was able to act as the percussionist when Bone would sing. Stump's hands were completely covered in one large callous, which enabled him to drag himself around with great speed. Stump was actually faster at dragging himself in the hundred-yard dash than some of the slower clan members were at running the distance. Stump had been

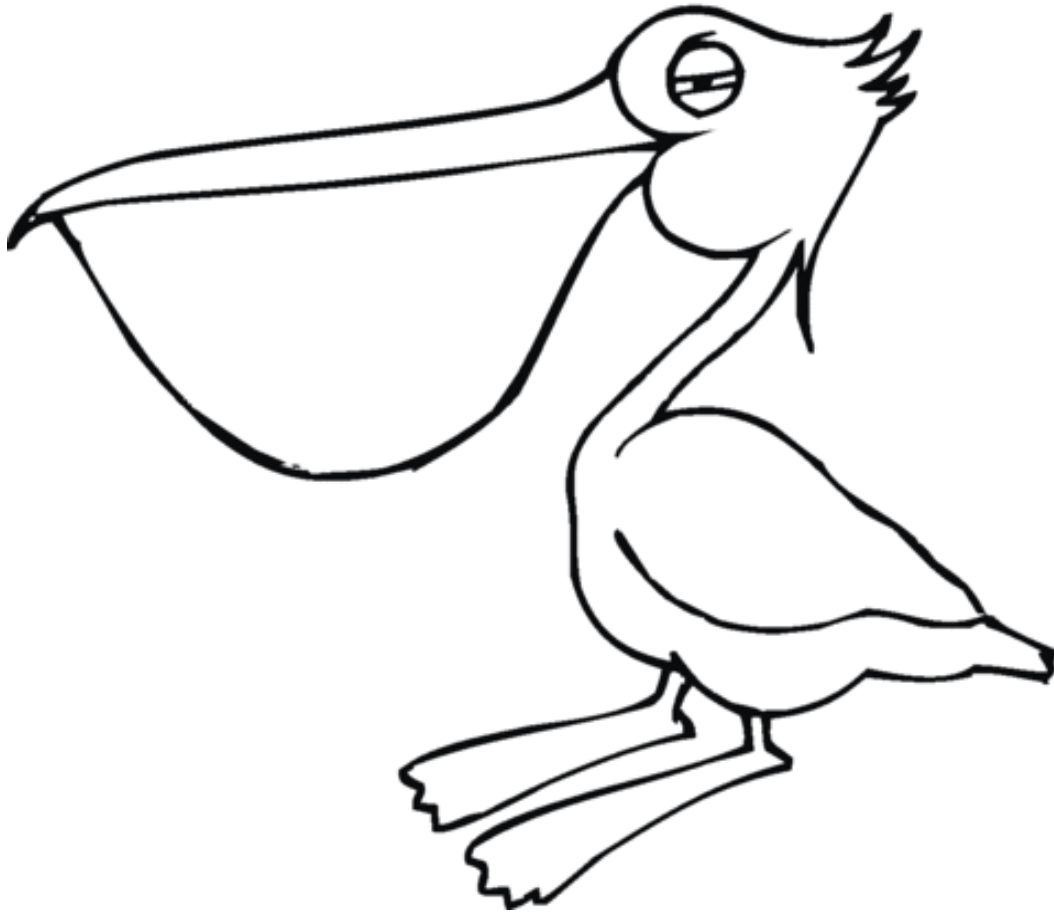
launching huge stones at the T-Rex, some the size of small boulders, but even Stump's efforts could only distract the T-Rex and not injure it.

The clan was becoming frantic as the T-Rex managed to devour Bigears and Smalleys. As hard as the clan tried to bring down the dinosaur, it was just too powerful for them. As Bone, Kid, Oneleg, Buggy, Eagle and Nose heaved spears at the T-Rex, their efforts seemed futile. The hide of the T-Rex allowed some of the faster-thrown spears to penetrate, but the spears could only do so much damage to the dinosaur. Sourpuss finally produced his gourd of aged piss from beneath his fur suit and dipped his spear tip into the liquid. Bone noticed Sourpuss's gesture and wondered what he was up to. Sourpuss's first spear made contact with the T-Rex and seemed to have an immediate result. After a moment passed, the T-Rex began to fart with a high-pitched whine. The whine was so deafening that the attacking cavemen couldn't hear themselves yelling at each other. Bone quickly ordered all the spear throwers to follow Sourpuss's method. The spear throwers heaved numerous piss-dipped spears at the T-Rex. The T-Rex continued blowing farts with the high-pitched whine. The sound was deafening to the point of being disabling.

Bone ordered Stump, Slinger and Slingshot to quickly gather handfuls of fine grass, which was then inserted into the waxy ears of the cavemen. With the fine grass in their ears, the assaulting cavemen were then able to attack the T-Rex with more of a concentrated effort. Sourpuss was elated that his secret formula was actually working. He couldn't believe that he might be on the verge of actually saving the clan. The T-Rex began farting more and more to the point that the sound carried for miles. All the animals of the woods and plains began to chirp, roar, screech and otherwise voice their reactions to the T-Rex's fart sounds. Even though the T-Rex was farting uncontrollably, it still attacked, mauled and ate some of the cavemen. Bone yelled as loud as he could for his clan to continue the assault against the dinosaur. The members of the clan had tears in their eyes from the T-Rex's farts, to the point of becoming blinded. Something had to happen before the cavemen collapsed.

Bone felt that the clan was verging on victory over the T-Rex. They had to keep hurling the piss-dipped spears. It was their only hope. Bigbelly was imagining the T-Rex meat in his stomach and was drooling so much that the front of his fur suit had become soaked with spittle. Bone momentarily glanced at Bigbelly, spotted the drool and for some reason began drooling himself. Bone was so excited at the prospect of his clan acquiring a large supply of T-Rex meat that he began barking, "T-Rex, T-Rex, T-Rex." Poopoo was so excited that he was pooping more than he ever had in his life. It was a classic scene from prehistory. The T-Rex's farting was soon accompanied by uproarious pooping. The toxin from Sourpuss's aged piss formula had somehow catastrophically disrupted the T-Rex's gastrointestinal system. The T-Rex's bowels were flowing like the lava from Mt. Vesuvius. Bone noticed the dinosaur's body beginning to swell and he yelled, "Stand back men!" Without warning, the T-Rex exploded, sending hundreds of meat hunks into the air. They did it!

161. Axon's Prize 2



161. Axon's Prize 2

Axon managed to lift himself and the heavy reel that was still attached to the piece of rod just enough to evade the snapped-shut jaws of the shark. The pelican barely knew what had taken place. All he knew was that he had the shiny reel in his possession. The owner of the cabin cruiser began yelling Axon obscenities at Axon as Axon attempted to gain altitude. The combined weight of the reel and broken rod proved to be too much for the pelican. The cruiser owner was standing in the small boat when Axon dropped the heavy reel/rod combo onto the person's head. The person was knocked unconscious. Axon landed next to the person and happily eyed the shiny reel on the floor next to the person. Axon licked and sniffed the reel tenderly as a lioness would lick its newborn lion cub. Axon had the reel and couldn't wait to get it back to his nest. The titanium reel would make a satisfactory addition to his huge collection of shiny stuff. Axon grabbed the reel/broken rod, flew up to the cabin cruiser and dropped the cargo onto the deck of the cruiser.

Axon walked to the edge of the cabin cruiser and hopped onto the cleat to which the small boat was tethered. He looked down into the small boat and spotted 2 more shiny reels next to the unconscious person! He floated down into the small boat, snapped free the first reel/rod and managed to fly it up into the cabin cruiser. He did the same with the other reel/rod. He paused for a few moments to view the 3 beautiful immaculate reels on the deck of the cruiser. How spectacular they were! Imagine how the reels would look with his other precious objects! He would have to figure out a way to get the reels free from the remaining rod sections in order to fly the heavy reels home. He would have to think about that for a while. Axon was the type of pelican that was exceedingly cunning. If he wanted something, he was going to get it at all costs. If it took him all day, he would figure out a way.

The person in the small boat just lay there like a bag of dirt and was of no concern to Axon. Axon had outwitted so many humans over the years that he considered them temporary nuisances and nothing more. The shark that had nearly consumed Axon was also just an inconvenience to him. He had avoided being chomped by sharks and many other savage fish and felt superior to them all. All he needed to do was flinch a little to the right or left, just like a Sumo wrestler and the momentum of the attacking entity would be avoided. Axon put the issue of how to separate the reels from the broken rod pieces on the back burner and decided to scout around the cabin cruiser, which for the moment seemed to be his possession. With the owner of the cruiser sleeping on the deck, Axon saw it no other way. Axon walked and hopped all over the cruiser and saw so many incredible shiny things that tears rose to his eyes.

He had cried in the past when he had encountered shiny articles, but never like he was now doing. The cabin cruiser had the finest of stainless steel and brass fittings that Axon had ever seen. He had never imagined how stupendously decorated one of those boats owned by humans

could be. Axon felt as if he had perished and had gone to pelican heaven, if there was such a thing. Axon made his way into the cockpit of the boat where the main controls existed. Axon marveled at the shiny steering wheel, myriad gauges and glinting throttle levers. He became so excited at the scene before him that he felt the urge to poop, but he didn't. He couldn't help emitting a small fart. He giggled when he farted because it sounded like a seagull. Axon had always wondered what made the boats of the humans move in the water. How did the boats propel themselves? What made the boats go forward or backward? What made some of the boats move more quickly in the water than other boats? Why were the boats so noisy?

Axon hopped up onto the dashboard of the cruiser and noted the 2 throttle levers on the right side. He had seen the humans pushing the levers and making the boats move forward or backward. He decided to push on one of the levers. It proved surprisingly difficult, even for a wiry pelican. He managed to push the left lever all the way forward and the boat leaped like a cheetah leaping on a gazelle. Wow! The boat moved so quickly that Axon fell off the dashboard onto the floor of the cockpit. The boat was flying! Axon enjoyed the sensation of speed so much that he struggled to push the right throttle lever all the way forward. The boat went even faster! Axon was so amazed at the way the boat was blasting along through the water that he uncontrollably pooped. He always prided himself at his ability to hold in his poop, but the exhilaration was just too much. The boat was going faster than Axon ever imagined. Axon wasn't exactly the faster flier of birds by any means, but he always enjoyed his speedy dives down into the water from great heights. The small boat that was tied to the cruiser was torn away from the cruiser and floated away in the ocean. The unconscious person lying in the bottom of the small boat didn't notice.

Axon felt as if he were flying. It was unbelievable. He had never realized how all those boats from which he had pillaged in the past could move through the water. He walked out of the cockpit and sauntered to the bow of the boat. He stood as far forward as he could in order to feel the wind on his face. It was something like out of another world to a pelican. Axon had watched falcons, hawks, eagles and ospreys diving downward toward prey, but he had never realized the sensation that those birds must have been feeling. The cabin cruiser that Axon was piloting was speeding along at 56 mph out into the Pacific Ocean. He felt himself drifting into a nirvana-like state. He closed his eyes and began to breathe in the wind as deeply as he could. Axon was like one of those dogs with its head out the window of a vehicle on the onramp to a highway. The wind blew so fast in the fast of the dog that as much as it wanted to keep sucking it in, it couldn't.

Axon kept sucking in the wind. What was happening? He was so taken aback by the experience that he began uncontrollably burping, farting and pooping. He had never experienced the 3 simultaneous functions before. It was such a cleansing process that Axon found himself breaking into song. He attempted to sing with his hoarse voice the famous Frank Sinatra song, "New York, New York." Axon didn't know how he knew the lyrics to the song, but he sang it the best

that he could. He would have been embarrassed if any of his fellow pelicans had seen and heard him singing, but it seemed to be the right thing to do at the moment. Axon felt so relieved and free. He couldn't remember the last time that he had been so happy to sing. He had to pinch himself to make sure that he was awake and not dreaming. He was actually singing.

What Axon didn't realize as he fought to move the 2 throttle levers forward was that the levers had lockout buttons. The buttons prevented the levers from being easily moved backward. The only way to move the levers backward was to push down on the buttons while moving the levers. Axon was a cunning pelican, but he was incapable of understanding the concept of the lockout buttons. Once Axon had felt that he had enjoyed enough of the speed of the boat, he attempted to reduce the boat's forward momentum. He deduced with pelican logic that if pushing the throttle levers forward made the boat speed quickly in a forward direction, the opposite must also be true. When Axon tried to move the left throttle lever back, it didn't budge. The lever was locked by the button. Axon stubbornly tried to move back the right throttle lever with the same negative result.

The boat was on its way somewhere at full speed. Axon shrugged his shoulders and decided not to worry about it. He continued walking around the boat to discover new shiny treasures for his collection. He spotted a shiny compass here and a brassy chain there; there were shiny things everywhere. There were almost as many shiny things on the cabin cruiser as in Axon's nest. Axon noticed on the table a glass pitcher with some rose colored liquid in it. Axon had worked up quite a thirst while on the cruiser and hadn't had anything to drink or eat in a while. He stuck his tongue into the pitcher of liquid and discovered a delicious flavor. It was fruity. Axon drank half of the pitcher and quenched his thirst. He ate the 2 sandwiches on the table next to the pitcher. Within minutes, Axon's eyes became slightly bleary. As he talked aloud to himself about his new treasures, his speech was slurring. He wondered what was going on. He found it difficult to concentrate with the cruiser speeding along through the slight waves.

Some instants of the experience he enjoyed and others he didn't. He went back to the bow of the boat and stood in the wind for a while to clear his head. He felt like he was flying while standing there. It was so nice to be able to fly without flapping his wings. He closed his eyes and breathed in the salty wind. He began hyperventilating and became even dizzier than he was before. He tried to calm himself but couldn't. He fell backward onto the deck and landed on a large life preserver. He fell asleep and began dreaming about his childhood. He was only 3 months old and was peeking over the top of his nest with his brother and sister pelicans. Their parents were off finding food for the children to eat as regurgitated matter. Axon always hated to have to eat the seafood barf from the stomachs of his parents. He couldn't wait to be weaned and then be able to eat whole pieces of fish.

From the nest, the 3 pelican siblings could see a lot. Axon pointed out to his brother a shiny Yo-

Yo that some little human kid was playing with. Axon steered his sister to look at a shiny reel that a fisherman was using. Axon's brother and sister only looked at what the humans were eating. Axon's siblings didn't care about any shiny non-food items. They didn't know why he liked those stupid shiny things as much as he did. Axon told his brother and sister that he didn't know why he liked shiny things; he just did. Axon's siblings thought that his head might have been sat on too many times by one or both of their parents. Axon maintained that it didn't have anything to do with his head being sat on. The 3 pelicans got into a big discussion about what was really important in life. The discussion soon erupted into an argument. Axon's bother and sister could take no more of Axon's lunacy and pushed Axon out of the nest.

Axon landed on a hot dog vendor. The vendor had a nice shiny ring on his left hand, probably his wedding band. Axon distracted the vendor by eating 2 of the hot dogs from the hot water. As the vendor reached for Axon, Axon bit the vendor's finger that had the ring on it. Axon was surprised at how strong his beak was, because it bit the finger off. Axon scooped the ringed finger into his pouch and half flew/half hopped away. The vendor began screaming from the pain of having his finger bitten off. Axon's mother had returned to the nest with food for the babies when she heard the vendor screaming below. She peered down from the nest and spotted Axon trying to make hi way into the park. She immediately swooped down and scooped him up into her pouch. As she flew back up to the nest, Axon's father had arrived. When Axon's parents had asked the 3 pelican kids what had happened, Axon's brother and sister maintained that Axon had fallen from the nest. Axon cried that the other 2 had pushed him out.

Axon's parents agreed to chock it up to experience for Axon. Whether he fell out of the nest or was pushed out didn't matter. All that mattered was that he was safe again in the nest. In a few more months, he would be able to fly away and do whatever he wanted. For the next 3 months, Axon had a hard time with his brother and sister. Their parents decided not to leave the 3 pelican kids alone and took turns leaving the nest. Axon felt safer with one of his parents always in the nest, because he had decided that his siblings were psychos and intended the worst for him. When Axon had stolen the ring from the hot dog vendor, it was just the beginning of his collecting. He managed to retain the ring in his pouch and not swallow it. The ring meant a great deal to him and he felt that it was somehow lucky. In reality, if Axon hadn't landed on the hot dog vendor when falling from the nest, he might have been smashed on the boardwalk. Yep, the ring was definitely a sign of good luck.

As Axon slept on the deck of the cabin cruiser, he dreamed for hours. He eventually awoke staring up at the bright sunshine. He squinted momentarily and staggered over to the pitcher of rose-colored liquid. He drank the remaining liquid and ate all the food on the table, including 2 more sandwiches, 4 cookies, 27 potato chips and 14 pickles. Axon noticed how sour the pickles were, but he was hungry and needed to fill his belly. He looked around for something else to eat and found the refrigerator. There was another pitcher of rose-colored liquid in the refrigerator

and he drank the entire pitcher. He was getting really dizzy and began singing from happiness. As the boat continued speeding along, he sang, "California Girls." Since he lived in California, he heard that song all the time and knew all the words. He found it comical that he was slurring his speech while he was singing, but it was funny. He ate everything in the refrigerator, including a huge hunk of ham, a block of cheese, a head of lettuce, a gallon of milk and a jar of pickles. He was starting to develop a taste for the pickles. Their sourness reminded him of the succulent tartness of fetid cod spleens.

As Axon sang and ate, the boat ran out of fuel. Axon was about 330 miles in the Pacific Ocean, northwest of Monterey. It didn't matter to Axon where he was, because he was happy. It would take him a while, but he thought he could fly back to the mainland. In his bleary-eyed state, he didn't realize how far out he was. There was no way that he could carry back his 3 precious titanium reels, assuming that he could free the reels from the broken rod sections. The quiet of the ocean was beautiful to him. The noise of the engines roaring and wind had created a different environment. When things quieted down again, it was much more peaceful. Axon didn't know what those humans saw in those loud boats. The boats seemed nice with all the shiny stuff that you could put on them, but they were potentially really noisy. As Axon sat on a cushion in the bobbing boat, he fell asleep again. He was full of rose-colored liquid and food from the refrigerator.

He began dreaming again about his younger days. He dreamed of the time when he stole the hat from one of those people who stand around with their hats in their hands. Other people would walk along and place shiny objects in the hat. The hat that Axon had stolen was full of shiny round objects. That was a great day. On another day, Axon had stolen one of those red plastic buckets that was full of round shiny objects and pieces of green paper. He had no use for the green paper and only kept the shiny stuff. One time, Axon had stolen the shiny stick from someone who was wearing dark sunglasses. The person had been walking along and tapping the stick on the sidewalk in front of them. Axon had no idea what the person was doing with the stick. Axon enjoyed stealing the small shiny objects that people placed in their vehicles next to the steering wheels of the vehicles. Whenever Axon stole those small objects, the people became very excited and shouted obscenities at him as he casually flew away.

As the cabin cruiser gently bobbed on the ocean wavelets, Axon continued dreaming about his illustrious career of pilfering shiny objects from humans. He had lived his interesting life oblivious to the suffering that he caused. Many of the objects that he had made his own had been emotionally valuable to his victims in one way or another. However, it all meant nothing to a pelican. Pelicans were put on earth to fly the bluish skies, smash their bodies into the ocean waves to feed and to steal everything they could. A pelican's life was extraordinarily difficult. Axon had found his Garden of Eden on that cabin cruiser and had never been more blissful. He felt that he deserved the gift of the cruiser; it was the least that the humans could do for him.

162. Larabie's Letters



162. Larabie's Letters

Larabie arrived at his post office early as usual. He always got there before everyone else who worked his shift, because he enjoyed making other people look bad. Of course, he thought he was making them look bad. In most municipal and government jobs, the norm was for people to show up late for work each day. When those occasional brown-nosers like Larabie arrived early, he was the oddball, not them. He sorted his mail with his typical lightning speed & efficiency, loaded the vehicle and drove out to his route. His route was located in an average community that would be considered city/suburban. The area wasn't as congested as a city and wasn't as sprawling as the suburbs. It had taken him a number of years to get his own route and a few more years to get his dream route location. He hated his days of working in the crowded cities and preferred his current route just fine.

The neighborhoods of his route were laid out similarly, with the houses located in the middle of the lots. The mailboxes were located on the front of the homes next to the front door. The front yards were open and the back yards were fenced. He parked his vehicle at one end of the streets and walked from house to house with the mailbag full of mail. The first house on that day had a guy with a dog that always sneaked out under the fence. It wasn't a very big dog, but it was particularly feisty. Larabie had been bitten hundreds of times while delivering mail over the years and had become accustomed to the experience. The dogs instinctually defended their territories and considered letter carriers, other delivery people and repair people to be illegal trespassers. The dog was a puggle and came flying at Larabie as fast as a puggle could run. Larabie had devised a system of placating the loose attacking dogs by tossing the dogs dog biscuits.

The dog biscuits usually worked until the dog had become sick of that particular biscuit. Then, Larabie had to switch to another variety. He always bought dog biscuits on sale, so it was no big deal to have a large variety on hand for the canines to sample from. He heard the owner of the puggle call the dog, "Mr. Barky von Schnauzer," which Larabie thought was a cool name for a dog. Even though the puggle had a cool name, it was still a nuisance. The dog almost reached Larabie with its barks and snapping, when Larabie tossed a few biscuits at the beast. The dog immediately stopped in its tracks to examine the peace offering from the interloper. Even though the dog had seen Larabie numerous times, it still considered the letter carrier to be a stranger. That must be how dogs thought about people, Larabie assumed. The dog sniffed at the biscuits and ate 1 of them. Then, it ate the remaining biscuits as Larabie walked past it to deliver the dog owner's mail.

The mail for the pug's owner on that day consisted of a magazine, some business envelopes and some "junk mail." The concept of "junk mail" offended Larabie. Who was to say what was junk and what wasn't? Haven't people ever heard of the expression, "One man's junk is another man's

treasure?" To Larabie and most other letter carriers, there was no such thing as "junk mail." All mail was something of value, no matter what it was. The idea that mail could be called junk implied that the mail was trash or garbage. Larabie didn't walk around each workday putting trash into mailboxes. That would be absurd. Yet, that was what the phrase "junk mail" implied. The very thought of it, after all. Just because some people received certain articles in the mail and occasionally deposited those articles into their trash receptacles didn't mean that all such delivered articles were garbage. Many people considered all mail to be the highlight of their day. Some of Larabie's mail-receiving customers would wait at their doors for him to deliver the mail each day. Those people were always happy to get that mail, whatever it was.

Paper mail was similar to email and other electronic messages in that mail of any kind indicated that the recipient of the mail was a somebody. It was like the excitement of seeing one's name, address and phone number in the phone book for the first time. Some of the "junk mail" recipients actually thanked Larabie for delivering the mail to them. Even though realistically there weren't that many people who thanked Larabie for delivering "junk mail" to them, there were still a few around. Since Larabie had to follow strict policies regarding the delivery of mail, he was unable to cross the lawns of the homeowners. With each house to which he delivered mail, he had to use the sidewalks to and from the mailboxes at the houses. Even though the extra walking resulted in a longer workday, Larabie didn't mind. He was such a devoted worker and a believer in a great system that he played along as much as he could.

A few houses down lived a crazed cat. Since most cats could climb over any fence, fences were of limited value to contain cats. The cat in question was owned by an elderly man in his 90's. The cat had given Larabie problems on every day of the route. The cat would wait behind the fence crouched down for Larabie's daily arrival. When the cat spotted Larabie, it ran like a cheetah at Larabie. The cat never intended to bite Larabie, but only graze him. When the speeding feline reached Larabie, it hit him in the shin with only a glancing blow. It was lucky for Larabie that the cat only grazed him, because it was such a large cat. Larabie had never seen a cat so big. The cat looked like it was a mixture of a bobcat and a regular cat. That cat probably weighed about 35 pounds. On that day, Larabie had been prepared for the cat's attack. Since Larabie had adopted the practice of wearing soccer-style shin guards months back, he met the cat head on with his protected shin. The cat made impact with the shin guard and was knocked unconscious. Larabie chuckled and sashayed to the next house.

The next house was inhabited by orangutans. As outlandish as it seemed, orangutans were actually allowed to live outside of zoos. Apparently, orangutans were in high demand for their abilities as therapy animals. The sheer brute strength and docile personalities of the placid creatures made them ideal for administering therapy to humans. Larabie was surprised by the gentleness and cordiality of the orangutans. Each day, Larabie was greeted at the door by the adult female orangutan, Agatha of the family. Oddly enough, Larabie had noticed that the 4

members of the orangutan family all had names. Ute, Agatha, Chelsea and Britney all received mail each day that was addressed to them. Go figure! Agatha greeted Larabie each day with a plate of cookies fresh from the oven. Each day, she would have a different variety. On Mondays, it was chocolate chip, Tuesdays, oatmeal, Wednesdays, sugar, Thursdays, peanut butter and Fridays, incredibly it was fortune cookies. Larabie had never heard of anyone actually baking fortune cookies, but somehow the orangutan woman had figured how to do it.

Larabie wasn't sure, but he thought that the town's regulations forbade the ownership of goats. The goat that lived at the next house was apparently a therapy animal, which made it okay to own. Larabie couldn't imagine how an animal as seemingly stunted intellectually as a goat could be trained for human use. When Larabie Googled "goats as service animals," he discovered that goats were more intelligent than he thought. Goats had a unique ability to sense when a human's cardiovascular system was in disarray. Scientists didn't know how the goats were capable of it. The goats that were designated as service animals were assigned to people with bad hearts, COPD and other such maladies. When the service goats were close enough to their patients, the goats could somehow feel, smell or otherwise detect an emergency. The goats wore special collars with devices for calling 911. The devices had buttons on them for the patients to push, but in the event that the patients couldn't push the button, the goat's energetic bleating would trigger the system.

The goat on Larabie's route waited at the doorway of the owner's house. The owner savored fresh air during nice weather and kept the door open with the screen door closed. As Larabie neared the mailbox on the house, the goat pushed through the screen door. The goat would attempt to head butt Larabie with its horns. When the owner was in sight of the goat, the person would yell something to stop the goat from attacking. When the owner was sleeping or not near the front door, the goat attacked Larabie. Since the first time that the goat had mauled Larabie with its horns, Larabie had adopted the practice of having carrots ready. The goat loved carrots. When the goat pushed through the screen door on that day, Larabie stuffed a carrot into its mouth and all was good.

The next house on the route was inhabited by an obese spinsterish woman who loved talking on the phone. When Larabie reached the house, the bathrobed woman emerged from the house talking on her phone. Larabie found the woman to be annoying. As he placed the mail in the mailbox, she stood there chatting and motioned for him to wait. She spoke on the phone for another 30 seconds as Larabie waited impatiently for her to end her call. She ended the call and held out her hand for Larabie to place the mail in it. He was incensed! He removed the mail from the box and placed it in her hand. She said nothing to him and waddled back into her house. She had just treated him like some kind of a servant. The peculiar thing that Larabie had noticed each day was that the woman always seemed to be on a phone call at the instant that he delivered the mail. Either she actually was on a real call, or she called someone just to have

someone to talk to at the mail delivery moment or she was only pretending to be on a phone call, to emphasize some kind of superiority over him. Whatever the case, he disliked it. Sometimes delivering mail was a tough job, but someone had to do it.

The next house belonged to a kindly enough gentleman who was apparently friendless and lonely. The guy wasted so much of Larabie's time each day that Larabie wished that the guy would perish or move away. The way it worked was the sooner that Larabie finished delivering his mail each day, the sooner that he could go home. He only had to return the mail delivery vehicle to the post office. He didn't have to check back in. The lonely guy always insisted on talking to Larabie for at least 15 minutes. On some days, the guy talked for 20 minutes. If the guy had talked about something interesting, Larabie wouldn't have minded so much. The problem was that guy was a retired theoretical physicist and babbled about topics that only another physicist would find interesting. The guy would go on and on about living on the planet Mars and other senseless topics. On one hand, Larabie felt sorry for the guy, but on the other, he simply didn't care. Larabie had his own life to live and had to get to the next house already.

The next house contained a little old lady who Larabie actually liked and looked forward to seeing each mail day. The lady always greeted Larabie with a smile and a sample of her excellent cooking. After years of delivering mail to the woman, the 2 of them had developed a semblance of a friendship. It got to the point where Larabie didn't have to pack a lunch each day. The old lady would have a nice sandwich or other succulent lunch-sized meal waiting for him. When the lunches were in Tupperware containers, he always returned the containers on the following delivery day. Larabie had managed to tailor his route so that he delivered mail to the lady at approximately noon. She would most times have a freshly made meal waiting for him, hot from the stove or oven. Larabie wished that he had more people like her on his route.

A divorced mom with 4 kids inhabited the next house. The woman absolutely loved Larabie, or at least appeared to. Since Larabie had always been a confirmed bachelor and never intended to wed, he was single. The divorced mom was always friendly and offered him something to drink whenever he delivered her mail. She actually invited him into her house on several occasions, which he politely refused. The only time that he was allowed to enter a household was when he delivered a large package that was too heavy or bulky for the recipient to bring into their house by themselves. On one hot summer day, the woman appeared at her doorway wearing a bikini. She had beads of water tenaciously clinging to her skin. Even though the woman had birthed 4 kids, it wasn't obvious from her incredible physique. She probably emerged from the pool in the backyard and hadn't had time to don some type of cover-up garment. Even though Larabie had enjoyed the show, he thought it to be most inappropriate.

A peculiar little bald man occupied the next house on the route. The man was always waiting for Larabie to arrive. The man would be standing there behind the screen door, tightly clinging to

the leashes of 2 scary-looking Dobermans. For reasons unknown, the man was always covered with sweat beads and the dogs were always panting and drooling. It was as if the little man and the dogs had been engaged in some type of activity just prior to the mail delivery time. The most unnerving thing to Larabie was that the man was standing there shirtless in boxer shorts. Larabie found the little man's glistening pudgy body to be quite disgusting and repulsive. The dogs were usually growling to the point of barking. Larabie was always nervous when delivering mail to that house. It wasn't Larabie's job to judge people; it was his job to deliver the mail.

Another house was owned by a middle-aged couple who had no kids. Without fail, the couple always invited Larabie into the house for a drink or snack. Larabie advised the friendly people that he wasn't allowed into the homes of the mail recipients. They could never understand that he had to follow rules to the letter or else be reprimanded by his superiors. As friendly as the couple appeared to be, they had a mysterious air about them. Larabie couldn't put his finger on it, but he felt that the people were hiding something. They behaved too cordially to be real people. They acted more like what stereotypical people would act like, instead of actual people. Larabie felt like the people were robots, but of course, that would be impossible.

As Larabie walked to the next house, some Girl Scouts were already at the door. Larabie had been a Boy Scout as a youth and had always wondered why the Boy Scouts weren't allowed to sell cookies like the Girl Scouts. Those cookies were good, but they weren't worth the arm and a leg that the Girl Scouts charged for them. Granted, the cookies were sold at a high price in order for the Girl Scouts to make a profit on them, but why not the Boy Scouts? When Larabie reached the door, the middle-aged homeowner was in the process of buying some cookies from the 3 girls. Larabie deposited the mail in the mailbox and decided to ask the girls a question about the disparity. The homeowner had gone to fetch her purse and the girls were standing on the stoop waiting. As Larabie began to speak, one of the Girl Scouts sprayed him in the face with mace and all the girls shrieked, "Stranger, Danger! Stranger, Danger!" The homeowner returned to the front door in a panicked state, wondering what was going on. Larabie hastily scurried away from the scene on his way to the next house.

At the next house, Larabie noticed a rotted smell. Larabie had fished and hunted throughout his lifetime and knew all too well the smell of rotting meat. He was well acquainted with the odors of rotting fish, deer, rabbit, squirrel, raccoon and other game, but had never experienced what he smelled at this house. It was incredibly vile. The composition of the reeking entity made him sick to his stomach. As he approached the mailbox, the tang intensified. What was that? He reached the box and placed the mail. His eyes began watering. He heard loud banging sounds and then, he heard a saw. What the? The stench of decay was so intense that it made him sneeze. As he sneezed, he heard someone stomping toward the front door. Someone was coming! Larabie feared for his life and turned to run away. The front door opened with a resounding crash and he was pulled into the house by impossibly strong arms.

163. Nanko's Dogsled 2



163. Nanko's Dogsled 2

As Nanko shuddered and turned his head, Flip had inexplicably pulled hard on the harness. Flip's instincts related to bears must have kicked in just in time. When Flip pulled, Jupiter naturally pulled back in reaction. A typical sled dog team was such a smoothly flowing operation that any slight movement that shifted the machine off the musher's intended path was instinctively reacted to. The remaining dogs, Bosko, Brutus, Linus and Marie correspondingly pulled correctively as well. The resultant unusual yanking on the harness was just enough of force to move Nanko to the side and throw him off balance. The polar bear's teeth missed Nanko's neck by the thickness of a walrus's whisker. The massive bear's momentum caused the predator's body to continue in the direction that it was proceeding. Much like one of Japan's great Sumo wrestler's in motion, the bear was unable to correct in time. The bear had been running so fast before meeting up with Nanko and the dogs that it was either going to hit Nanko squarely or miss him completely. Luckily for Nanko, the latter occurred.

Upon scenting the polar bear, the dogs immediately began howling and barking so loudly that the sound was actually deafening. Nanko excitedly mushed the dogs onward to escape the scene as quickly as caninely possible. The dogs craved to face down the bear. Nanko was thinking otherwise. A bear of that magnitude would be difficult for 6 dogs to bring down, even though Nanko had seen it done in the past. The bear's momentum had carried its 2,000-pound bulk 100 feet past its intended target by the time it could right itself. The dogs continued their shrill shrieking. Nanko reached for his rifle. The bear stopped and turned to look at Nanko and the sled dogs. Nanko didn't want to shoot at the bear, but the man had a responsibility to protect his dogs and his cargo. If the bear managed to attack and minimize the sled team, Nanko would be unable to deliver the cargo. Nanko's brain was processing the video in slow motion. His dogs were behaving at full speed.

Nanko was unable to do anything at that instant except to bring the rifle to the bear and scope the beast, in heady preparation for the all-important trigger pull. As Nanko drew the rifle to his eye, for an unknown reason he momentarily flashed back to a time when his great-great-grandfather Karl had taken Nanko's father and Nanko out on a penguin hunt. The times had been historically prosperous for the village, because the weather was ideally suited for penguin reproduction. Since penguins preferred certain temperature and weather conditions for their mating to occur, the year had been record-breaking. In Nanko's village, 8 million penguins had been born in 3 months. The weather had been so conducive to penguin reproduction that even Guinness World Records had been compelled to visit the area. The harvested penguins were such a valuable source of meat for eating and oil for burning that it was like nothing ever seen, before or since. Karl had harvested 131,437 penguins himself. It was the stuff of legends. Nanko's father harvested 98,679 penguins. There were so many penguins waddling around that the birds had become a nuisance of unimaginable proportions.

Nanko remembered how at the tender age of 4, he had harvested 3,234 penguins on his own. It was the proudest time of his life. All the men, women, boys and girls had been called to action for the harvest. Even with all the villagers harvesting, the National Guard had to be called in to help with the harvest. It was like nothing that anybody had ever seen. The older women, whose job it was to chew on the seal and walrus hides to make them softer were also called to penguin harvesting duty. When that happened in a village, it was obvious that something epic was taking place. The older hide-chewing women were considered the most precious of all the villagers. It was easy for someone to harvest a walrus, seal or bear. The real work arrived with the hide chewing, which no one except the old-timer women could tolerate doing. Those older female Eskimos were worth their weight in gold. The village had experienced such a boom time that it was similar to the Yukon gold times. Those penguins had yielded such incredible wealth for the village that the village was actually able to build a YMCA.

Unfortunately, the penguin heyday had only lasted for a short time and many of the businesses that had sprung up during the great penguin harvest had dissolved. Due to high maintenance costs, the YMCA had to be closed and it was converted into a bingo hall. The bingo hall only lasted 11 months, since no one had any money to waste on trivial gambling. Various massage parlors and gambling halls had also come and gone. At the peak of the penguin harvest heyday, there were 3 new hair salons in addition to the barbershop. Since Eskimos were never typically known for their hairstyles, that number of salons seemed outrageous at the time, which it was. The salons all disappeared, with the solitary barbershop that had existed before the heyday being the only remaining haircutting business. It was interesting that some unusual businesses had sprung up during the heyday. Nanko remembered a Dairy Queen back then that had enjoyed tremendous business for a while. Who would ever think that an ice cream selling business would survive in Alaska? For a year, it did. McDonald's, Burger King and Arby's restaurants all came and went during that amazing year. Nanko wished that the Burger King hadn't failed, because he always liked those flame-broiled burgers.

Nanko's village had gone through hard times after the penguin heyday, which caused many of the younger folks to leave the area. Countless people migrated to Washington and Oregon to find work in various industries. Every year after the record penguin year, the villagers had hoped for it to come back. Some years had nice weather and other years the temperature was penguin ideal, but no years again yielded the perfect combination of that special year. When Nanko thought back to that year, which seemed so long ago, he sometimes wondered if it had really happened at all. Living in his village in Alaska had always been difficult. Since he had been so young during the penguin heyday, he had trouble remembering all the details. His elders and counterparts had constantly refreshed his memory of the time. Everyone in the village talked of that year fondly. Many legends had been created about how many penguins this person or that person had harvested. There were also legends heralding the amount of penguin meat that was consumed during the penguin eating contests of the era.

There was one giant of a man named Hafthor who was 6 feet 9 inches tall and weighed over 400 pounds. No one knew exactly how much Hafthor weighed, because he never weighed himself. There were no scales around that could weigh him anyway. It was assumed by his massiveness that he must have weighed over 400 pounds. Hafthor had been known village-wide as the greatest eater of them all. When he entered eating contests, the other contestants were allowed to team up. Surely, no single human could eat as much as Hafthor, although many have tried. His eating feats rivaled those of Andre the Giant of wrestling fame. During that penguin heyday year, Hafthor had probably consumed over 150,000 penguins. As impossible and bombastic as the number seems, it was probably true. He participated daily in eating contests that year. The promoters of the events sold tickets at great markups. Hafthor's eating contests actually had ticket scalpers sneaking around in the front of the gates. At the last of the penguin-eating contests, Hafthor ate 347 penguins, which was an incredible 200 more than the nearest competitors. At the end of the contest, Hafthor had managed to wait the required 5 minutes of keeping the penguin parts inside his body.

However, when the buzzer sounded at the 5-minute mark, Hafthor vomited and pooped more than any human had ever witnessed a human performing those bodily functions. Because the gambling public had sensed that there would be some fabled vomiting and pooping, many bets had been placed ahead of time. In preparation for the inevitable release, Hafthor had buckets at his disposal. Buckets were separately labeled for vomiting and pooping. A scale was made ready to weigh the contents of the buckets. Incredibly, Hafthor had barfed 14 pounds of vomit and pooped 27 pounds of poop into the buckets. Nanko's great-great-grandfather Karl came in 2nd place and won a nice seal fur toilet seat cover. Nanko's uncle Reykjavik came in 1st place and won a 1-year membership to the YMCA. A friend of Karl's came in 3rd place and won gift certificates to McDonald's, Burger King and Arby's restaurants. Karl's friend wasn't able to use all the gift certificates because the restaurants went belly-up before he could redeem the certificates.

During the penguin heyday, the older women of the village who chewed the penguin hides had chewed so much penguin leather that their teeth had been reduced to nubs. Since the village dentist had felt sympathetic toward the women, he provided them all with discounted dentures. Everyone in the village cherished the old women and since no one else wanted to perform their necessary tasks, there was a charity created in their honor. The charity provided the full amount of money necessary for the dentures. The charity was cleverly called, "Money for the Masticators." The charity was so successful that not only did it raise the full amount for the dentures, but it also provided money for 1-year memberships to the YMCA. The hide-chewing women loved the memberships, because it enabled them to savor swimming in the warm water of the YMCA pool. Up until that time, the women had been limited to swimming in the still freezing-cold stream waters during the summer. The streams were too frigid to swim at other times of year. More than any of the other villagers, the hide-chewing women missed the YMCA

after it closed.

As Nanko snapped back to reality from thinking about the penguin heyday, his vision cleared and he spotted the bear running toward him and the team. The dogs had been so fired up by seeing the bear in such close proximity that they had torn loose from their long harness. Within seconds, the 6 dogs were upon the back of the bear. The metabolism of the dogs was in the highest gear of their lives. The dogs barked, bit and tore at the bear as viciously as a pack of mothers at a Toys R Us on the Black Friday before Christmas. Nanko ran to the dog/bear battle with the rifle. The last thing he wanted to happen was for one of his dogs becoming injured. The dogs were holding their own pretty well against the bear. As hard as the bear tried, it was unable to make contact with any of the darting dogs. The bear had apparently never encountered sled dogs as powerful, vicious and quick as Nanko's dogs. The bear spotted Nanko approaching and began whining out of a combination of fear and dogbite pain. Rather than being bitten any more by the dogs and risking being shot by Nanko, the bear managed to shake itself free from the dogs. The polar bear launched itself and ran as fast as it could away from the melee.

Nanko yelled as loud as he could to command the dogs to stay and stand motionless. The 6 dogs erupted into a happy song of howling. They were overjoyed at their success over the bear and they sounded like cheerful coyotes barking at the moon. Nanko couldn't believe how his dogs had successfully attacked and obviously frightened the gigantic bear. Any other 6 dogs would most likely have met their makers. Nanko lay down on his back on the snow in the middle of the dogs and they all began gleefully licking his face and neck. After a few minutes, Nanko's exposed skin was covered with a layer of icy dog drool, which really stunk. He was proud of his pooches. They had defended themselves and protected him. He knew at that moment that he could depend on them in any situation. As Nanko walked back to the sled with the dogs, for an unknown reason he again lapsed into a childhood memory.

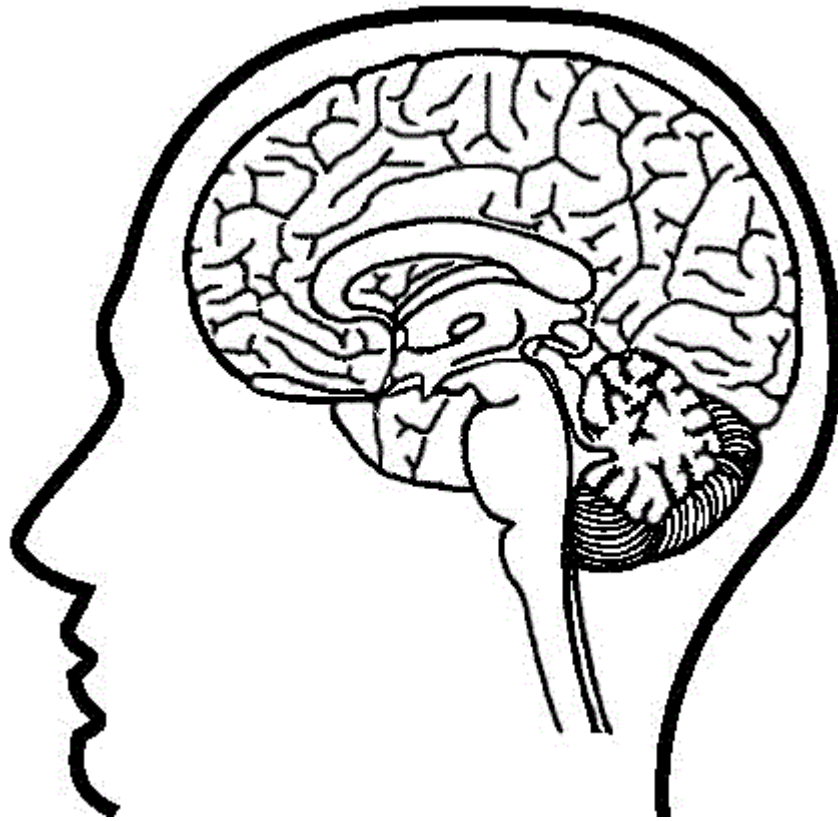
Nanko was 7 years old and was learning how to hunt seals with Karl and a woman named Gluk-Luk. People always pronounced her name as Gluk-Gluk, because they couldn't understand her when she told them her name for the first time. She always got very peeved at people for mispronouncing her name. Even though she could barely speak understandable English, she expected everyone to understand her. She carried a cane-like stick that had been fashioned from a walrus rib. The stick had been in her family for generations. Her mother Aqakuktuq had passed it down to her. Gluk-Luk's mother had gone through her long life constantly smacking people for mispronouncing her name. Karl and Nanko had been smacked numerous times by Gluk-Luk, because she thought they mispronounced her name. Nanko and Karl had insisted each time to Gluk-Luk that they had been pronouncing her name the way she told them to pronounce it. It didn't matter to Gluk-Luk. It might have been that she wasn't hearing their pronunciation clearly enough or it might have been because she simply enjoyed beating people with the walrus rib. It might have been a combination of both.

The reality was that Gluk-Luk's hearing had become impaired by the near-daily beatings to the head given to her by her mother Aqakuktuq. Gluk-Luk's mother had lived a tougher life than nearly all of the other villagers, possibly with the exception of Nootaikok, who had been born with 3 legs. It had been Aqakuktuq's mission in life to instill discipline and demand respect from everyone who had the misfortune of encountering her. Every time Gluk-Luk made the slightest mistake, Aqakuktuq would smack Gluk-Luk with the stick. For obvious reasons, Gluk-Luk was glad when her mother finally embarked on the special journey to the great ice caps in the sky. Gluk-Luk probably maintained her mother's penchant for instilling discipline and respect in the way that she treated people. The only reason that Gluk-Luk had been invited on the seal hunt that day was because Karl owed Gluk-Luk's husband a favor.

Since Nanko was just beginning his seal hunting days, it was always good to have differing opinions on how to carry out the important event. The more that people could learn from other people, the better. Karl had only reluctantly brought Gluk-Luk along, because he had been fully aware of her cantankerousness and excessive use of her stick. It was the first time for Nanko to meet with Gluk-Luk and he had wished that the day had never taken place at all. The women seemed to be a menace. Another of Gluk-Luk's habits was that she always had a piece of seal jerky in her mouth. Gluk-Luk's jerky was made from the toughest and least desirable parts of the seal carcass. Whenever people in the village processed a harvested seal, they always gave the tough bits to Gluk-Luk for her special jerky preparation. She was the only villager who could handle the stuff. She mainly enjoyed it for the sensation of having something in her mouth as an oral fixation, since she had quit smoking seal dung cigars. The salty earthy taste of the jerky made Gluk-Luk's mouth drool constantly so that she had to spit often. It was always easy to know where Gluk-Luk had been walking, because of the brownish drool trail that she left behind her in the snow. In between stick-smacking Karl and Nanko for apparently disrespecting her, Gluk-Luk also spat jerky juice in their faces.

The seal hunting process began with finding a likely place for seals that were swimming under the ice to surface for air. Since ice was everywhere, the seals needed to find thin patches of ice in which small air holes had naturally formed. The seal hunters then augered the holes large enough to be able to pull a seal through. After the water surface of the enlarged hole had iced over slightly, the hunter poked an air hole for a seal to use. The hunter then stuck a penguin feather in the snow next to the hole. When a seal gasped air at the hole, the feather would move slightly. The hunter would then harpoon the seal and pull it up through the hole. After some searching, Karl had located a perfect spot and prepared the hole. Gluk-Luk inspected the setup and didn't like something about it. Nanko stood aside as Karl and Gluk-Luk argued about the proper placement of the feather. Gluk-Luk smacked Karl with her stick and spat jerky juice in his face over and over again. Gluk-Luk became enraged and clumsily stomped around on the specially prepared area. Karl cautioned her to be careful and as Gluk-Luk raised her stick to beat Karl again, she slipped down through the hole and disappeared.

164. Yelloh's Cure 2



164. Yelloh's Cure 2

At the count of 11, which was screamed out by Ali's wife, the great boxer Muhammad Ali arose to his feet. Even though Ali had lost the fight to Foreman via the 10-count and the fight was officially over, Ali felt that he was still in the fight. Ali punched Foreman in the jaw and knocked him unconscious to the canvass. The referee pushed Ali to the side and the crowd rushed onto the ring to celebrate Ali's victory over his illness. The cure for Parkinson's Disease (PD), perfected by Yelloh and applied to Ali by Yelloh, had worked perfectly. Ali noticed that he had crapped in his shorts during the fight, which was a minor side effect of Yelloh's cure.

Within days of the fight, Yelloh had been bombarded by people who wanted to be cured. Yelloh had always claimed to be a scientist and would only grant interviews to scientists. Former president George H.W. Bush was the first person to come forward in search of Yelloh's great wisdom. Bush had been having issues with the disease for a number of years and was able to tolerate most of the symptoms, except for the loss of the ability to reload his ammunition. Since Bush had been an avid hunter and shooter for many years, he exhausted many hundreds of rounds via the hobby. Even though he was relatively wealthy, Bush liked to save money by reloading his own ammo. The PD had limited his ability to operate the delicate equipment, which required a precise touch. The operation had been successfully performed and Bush was able to resume his favorite pastime. Bush began suffering from unusual flatulence.

TV and movie Actor Michael J. Fox called Yelloh as soon as possible to schedule an operation. Fox's main issue with the disease was his limited ability to wipe his ass while pooping. Since Fox felt that he wasn't old enough to require and tolerate a nurse to wipe his ass, it bothered him to no end. Fox still performed admirably in movies and TV show, but the ass-wiping issue was just too much. Yelloh sympathized with Fox. Yelloh himself had issues related to sitting on the toilet, but not during the wiping process. Yelloh's main problem was that he didn't drink enough water and was constipated all the time. As much as his doctor advised him to drink enough water each day to effectively process all the fiber that he was eating, Yelloh simply didn't find the taste of water to be appealing. After the operation, Fox regained full control of his ass-wiping hand and was so overjoyed that he gave Yelloh a lifetime supply of flavored bottled water, of which Yelloh was able to drink more regularly. Fox had to take frequent breaks during TV and movie filming, due to his new habit of burping quite often.

Movie critic Leonard Maltin, best known for his 2 thumbs down critique of the movie "Titanic," which became one of the highest grossing and most highly rated movies of all time, approached Yelloh after Yelloh's success with Fox. When Maltin reviewed movies, he always watched them in theaters in order to experience the full effect intended by the movie's director. When Maltin watched the movies, he always ate popcorn. The PD had affected Maltin's ability to neatly feed himself the popcorn. Maltin didn't necessarily care that he was dropping half of the popcorn

from the bucket onto the floor. It was the fact that he was wasting the succulent stuff. Maltin had always loved eating popcorn since childhood and truly appreciated its goodness and flavor. Maltin always asked for extra butter when he ordered the popcorn, because to Maltin, the butter was the best part of the popcorn experience. He completely savored the smell as well. The noisy crunch of eating popcorn while watching a movie sealed the deal. Yelloh's operation had restored Maltin's ability to enjoy eating popcorn while critiquing movies. Maltin's aptitude at successfully picking the great movies had returned along with a twitch in his left eye.

"Peanuts" comic strip creator Charles M. Schulz had been cranking out his famous comic strip for decades until PD finally caught up with him. By the time that the disease struck, Schulz already had some people helping him with the animations, which Schulz hated. Charles always felt that "Peanuts" was his creation and that the readers deserved to have the complete comic strip produced by him. Having someone else draw his comic strip wasn't an option. The disease had forced Schulz to take longer and longer to draw the strip and it began to reduce his creativity for new ideas. Schulz approached Yelloh out of desperation and Yelloh performed the operation. Yelloh had informed Schulz how he had always liked Schulz's comic strip. When the cure had been effected, Schulz was back to his younger days again. He was able to come up with many new twists that the public found incredibly funny and entertaining. Since the operation, Schulz noticed that he now had to urinate every hour on the hour.

Actor and comedian Robin Williams approached Yelloh about setting up an appointment for obtaining Yelloh's cure on an evening after Williams had been working in one of his pizzerias. Even though Williams was wealthy and didn't really need the money, he enjoyed making pizzas at his pizzerias. Williams had created the pizza chain one day while filming one of his comedies. So many actors and actresses had been cashing in on the bars, restaurants and other service-related businesses that Robin thought it was time for him to jump in as well. Williams had named his pizzerias "Birdcage" after the hilarious movie. The pizzerias were incredibly popular. Williams loved to work in each of his pizzerias for a few hours each week, because he felt the work to be stress reducing. His high-profile acting career had instilled a lot of anxiety in him and the pizzeria work was helpful. The PD had limited Robin's precision in accurately placing the pepperonis and other ingredients onto the pizzas as he desired. Since Williams had always been a neat person, the loss of the ability to make perfect pizzas nagged at him. After Yelloh's operation, Williams was able to return to working in his pizzerias to make the perfect pizzas that his customers deserved. Unfortunately, Robin found himself spewing vulgarities without warning.

TV and movie actor Alan Alda, best known for the long-running TV show "M.A.S.H.," called Yelloh for a consultation. Since Alda loved playing chess more than anything, save for his family, the necessary ability to move the chess pieces around the board without knocking pieces down was essential. Alda was actually quite the accomplished chess player and had beaten many

computers at playing chess. People attributed Alda's chess ability to his years of acting at such a high level. Alda had always been the most knowledgeable and prepared actor on his many sets. Acting at Alda's level had honed his brain to razor sharpness, which was necessary for playing chess. Alda's disease had caused a tremor in both hands, which made moving the chess pieces around the board a difficult practice. Part of playing chess was the knack of being able to concentrate intensively. Alda's shaking hands limited his ability to concentrate and caused him to start losing chess matches, which he couldn't stand. It had gotten to the point where Alda loved playing chess more than acting. For the disease to reduce his skill wasn't going to cut it. A week after Yelloh's operation, Alda actually noticed his concentration improving to the point where he was again beating computers at playing chess, although he began falling asleep for no reason.

Singer Linda Ronstadt, best known for such songs as "Blue Bayou" and "You're No Good" had reached her limit. She had been a quilter for as long as she could remember and loved quilting. Since she had been a down-home girl, she had been taught quilting by her grandmother and mother. As with most sewing crafts, quilting required a steady hand in order to sew the delicate patterns. Linda had been in the middle of her greatest quilting effort, a bedspread that she was making for Johnny Cash. Linda and Johnny had been friends for many years and had toured together on occasion. Since Johnny had been feeling poorly lately, Linda felt that the quilt would pick up his spirits. PD began affecting Linda's sewing to the point that she was getting sloppy with the quilt. Linda didn't want Johnny going around and telling everyone that he had received a sloppy quilt as a gift from Linda Ronstadt. Linda sent a letter to Yelloh and he agreed to work his magic. After a month of waiting, the surgery was completed. Linda went back to her quilt for Johnny Cash and fixed the sloppy parts. After another month, the quilt was complete. She presented the quilt to Johnny on his birthday and out of gratitude, he wrote a song for her to use on her next album. After the surgery, Linda's feet strangely grew to enormous size.

Evangelist Billy Graham had been an archer since childhood and by the age of 7, he was supplying his family with wild game to supplement the food supply. Billy even went on to competing in archery contests, winning many of them. His bedroom was full of trophies. When he became an evangelist, he continued his hobby and traveled the world showing people how to shoot a bow and arrow. Even though he was better known for his preaching, there were countless thousands of people in developing nations that cherished him for teaching them archery. As Billy grew older, archery became more of an obsession than a hobby for him. It got to the point where he began cancelling his preaching engagements in favor of shooting arrows. When he contracted PD, Billy's ability with a bow rapidly diminished. He became very depressed and gave up preaching for a while. After 3 years, news of Yelloh's success with PD reached Billy. Yelloh had heard many great things about Billy and gladly performed the operation as quickly as possible. Billy noticed that the operation had not only returned his steadiness with the bow and arrow, but actually made him a better archer than before. Oddly,

hair began growing from Billy's ears at an alarming rate.

Actor Bob Hoskins, best known for the movies "Who Framed Roger Rabbit" and "Mermaids" was really into staying healthy and exercising all the time. Since boyhood, Hoskins had participated in weight training. He was one of those old-school weight lifters who believed that free weights were the manly way to lift weights, not machines. He never trusted using machines because there was always some advantage involved that altered the actual weight being lifted. Hoskins liked to be able to say that he could curl a certain weight or bench-press a certain weight, etc. When PD sneaked up on Hoskins, he noticed it immediately. He had a hard time lifting the weights over his head in a steady manner. He had been so stubborn to continue that he dropped heavy barbells on his head on 3 occasions, which resulted in 3 concussions. He loathed not being able to lift his free weights. He didn't feel like a man without his weight lifting. A lifting buddy of Bob's had heard about Yelloh and the new cure that was being successfully augmented. Hoskins made an appointment to see Yelloh and the operation was done. During the week following the surgery, Hoskins went back to his free weight lifting and never dropped the bar again. He did however develop "man boobs."

Janet Reno, who was the first woman to serve as U.S. Attorney General, loved racing cars. When she a young girl, her parents had gotten her into go-cart racing and things took off from there. From go-carts, Reno moved onto other larger and more challenging vehicles. Her favorite form of car racing was rally racing, which required tremendous skill, fearlessness and 2 steady hands on the steering wheel. Because of her high profile job in Washington, she had a lot of stress put upon her. Her car racing was the best way for her to relieve the stress. When the PD began to reduce her driving skills, she became stressed and began making many mistakes related to important work-related decisions. The newspapers began chastising her for her poor decisions because she was a woman. She knew full well that the papers were mistaken. She attempted to conceal her disease, because she didn't want the public to think she was a weak woman. When she crashed her rally car on one weekend, she could no longer keep things secret. The PD had caused her to overcorrect on a sharp turn and she rolled the rally car. Her navigator had been badly injured in the accident and Reno felt terrible about it. Reno appealed to Yelloh and he fixed her up. Even though her steadiness had returned when driving, she gave up rally racing and took up drag racing, which was considered to be much safer. Janet could hardly keep up with shaving her mysterious new beard.

When artist Salvador Dali, best known for his painting "The Persistence of Memory," showing melting clocks in a landscape setting contracted PD, he thought his painting career was over. Even though his paintings were never necessarily of a high detail, the shakiness in his hands made painting impossible. Since he had elevated his standard of living so high over the years, he needed to continue painting and selling paintings to maintain the level of luxury in his mansion. Dali was known for having an outlandish moustache, which required an unusual amount of daily

maintenance. Dali employed a person for the specific purpose of keeping the moustache in tiptop condition. Special tools were used to trim and shape the moustache. Special waxes were imported to keep the moustache in a certain position. The moustache maintainer even massaged Dali's facial muscles to help the moustache grow evenly. Dali loved his ridiculous moustache. He loved looking at pictures of himself with the moustache. The only way to keep the moustache maintainer and the mansion was to keep painting new paintings. Dali appealed to Yelloh for help. Even though Yelloh didn't care for Dali's artistic style, Yelloh agreed to perform the cure. After the operation, Dali was so happy with the return of his painting faculties that he specially painted Yelloh's lawnmower shed free of charge. The shed quickly became a priceless creation in the art world. Dali's soon noticed that his arm hair began growing longer than the hair on his head.

Unknown to the public, Actor Vincent Price, best known for the movies "The Abominable Dr. Phibes" and "Edward Scissorhands" was an expert at tying fishing flies. He was also an accomplished fly fisherman. His hand-tied flies enabled him to win many fishing contests. His custom flies have garnered him many state records. When he started selling his custom flies, he created 17 charities with the proceeds. His charities have helped many thousands of people over the decades. Vincent first noticed the signs of PD when his flies took longer and longer to tie. He had to tie flies to keep his charities operational. He became obsessed with the loss of his skill. Yelloh had many friends who were fly fishermen who used Price's custom flies. Yelloh had always wanted to do some fly-fishing, but was too busy in the laboratory. One of Yelloh's fly-fishing friends told Yelloh about Price's problem. Yelloh called Vincent one day and offered to treat the condition on the same day. The very next day, Price was back to tying his flies again. Vincent suddenly had a craving for eating all the fish that he caught raw on the spot.

Pope John Paul II, the first non-Italian pope in more than 400 years was a 3rd degree black belt in karate. The bishops, priests, and deacons of the catholic world had all pleaded with John Paul to learn how to protect himself in case of a security breach in the Vatican. John Paul agreed and immediately learned karate from the best martial artists available. He went through the different degrees of belts so quickly that he even impressed famous martial artists such as Chuck Norris and Steven Seagal. John Paul even went as far as adding the concept of martial arts training to his preaching agenda. He became an inspiration to the masses. Many people had become healthier and more focused in their lives because of John Paul's preachings about the benefits of martial arts. When John Paul first came down with PD, he didn't notice it in time. One morning, John Paul had been violently sparring karate with one of the Arch Bishops and accidentally kicked the Bishop in the neck, paralyzing him. News of the incident spread like wildfire. Revelation of the Pope's condition threw the Catholic world into a panic. Yelloh read about the Pope's PD and immediately flew to the Vatican to perform the operation on the Holy Father. The Pope was cured and the Arch Bishop's paralysis miraculously disappeared. The Pope's only complaint was that when he sparred during karate, he pooped in his robe.

165. Bertram's Banquet



165. Bertram's Banquet

Bertram's wife Adell, father Carmine, mother Dana, father-in-law Edgar, mother-in-law Farrah, grandfather Gabriel, grandmother Hannah, grandfather-in-law Ira, grandmother-in-law Jaclyn and 3 grandkids sat around the large table eating the annual Thanksgiving dinner. The parents of the grandkids were in prison, serving time for money laundering. The kids were temporarily living with Carmine and Dana. Adell cooked the turkey and some other dishes of the massive meal and the guests brought their own specialties. Unfortunately, because there were so many great cooks at the table, the inevitable critiquing of the different dishes was unavoidable. Carmine didn't eat ham so Dana never prepared it at home. Since childhood, the mere smell of ham sometimes threw Carmine into a fit. Farrah brought the ham, because she had won so many cooking contests with her recipe that she always liked to show it off. Bertram thought for sure that Farrah had known about Carmine's distaste for ham, but Bertram couldn't remember.

For years, the Thanksgiving meal had been a challenge in Bertram's family, some years more challenging than others. Edgar got into an argument with Farrah about how Carmine didn't like ham and that she shouldn't have brought it to the banquet. Farrah pleaded ignorance related to Carmine's hatred of ham. Farrah actually knew fully that Carmine disliked ham, but she simply had to bring her prize ham at any cost. Farrah was the type of woman who didn't consider the feelings of others; it was always about her. Gabriel loved turkey and everyone knew how his favorite part of the turkey was the leg. He loved the dark meat. Unbeknownst to Gabriel, Ira had recently switched to an all-turkey diet at the suggestion of his physician. One of the grandkids was already gnawing on one of the turkey legs, which only left one on the bird. As Gabriel calmly reached for the remaining turkey leg, Ira reached at the same time. The 2 hands across the table from each other had both latched onto the turkey leg. Gabriel's eyes opened wide when he encountered resistance while trying to pull the leg off in his direction. Ira glared back at Gabriel with evil in his own eyes.

"Let go!" hollered Gabriel. "No!" replied Ira. Gabriel repeated his command. Ira stood fast and tightened his grip on the turkey leg. Adell noticed the standoff and walked over to the squabblers. Adell asked Ira to let Gabriel have the turkey leg, because it was Gabriel's favorite part of the turkey. She added that everyone knew it was Gabriel's favorite part. Ira shouted that he had to have the turkey leg based on advice from his doctor. Hannah and Jaclyn added their 2 cents, which enraged the combatants even more. Bertram begged Ira to let Gabriel have the turkey leg. Ira refused. The 2 old men continued holding onto the turkey leg. They continued the contest for 4 minutes and both faces were reddening with high blood pressure. The grandkid that was eating the other turkey leg offered it to Gabriel or Ira, whichever one wanted it. Gabriel yelled at the kid to shut up. Ira yelled at Gabriel to stop shouting at the kid. Gabriel took his free hand and grabbed a handful of mashed potatoes from the large bowl in front of him. Ira saw Gabriel's handful of potatoes and became even more livid.

Ira dared Gabriel to throw the potatoes. Gabriel said that if Ira would just let go of the turkey leg, he wouldn't throw the potatoes at Ira. Ira refused. Adell again asked the battlers to calm down. Hannah and Jaclyn also beseeched the men again. The men tightened their grips. The 2 other grandkids crawled under the table and sneakily placed packs of matches on top of the left feet of Gabriel and Ira. Just as Gabriel was about to launch the potatoes at Ira, the grandkids lit the match packs on fire. Where the kids got the matches was anybody's guess. The matches burst into flames and the 2 old men screamed in pain. They both simultaneously let go of the turkey leg. The grandkid who had lit the matches on Ira's foot snatched the turkey leg from the turkey and scampered into the other room. The grandkid immediately ate as much of the turkey leg as possible.

Gabriel and Ira jumped up from the table and ran after the grandkid with the turkey leg. The grandkid wolfed on the turkey leg like a hungry dog gulping down its dinner. It didn't matter to Gabriel and Ira that the grandkid had eaten from the turkey leg. It was about much more than that. The 2 men cornered the grandkid in the living room behind the recliner. The kid continued eating the turkey leg as quickly as possible. The kid even spat on the entire turkey leg in the hopes of turning the appetites of the 2 men away from the turkey leg. Bertram, Adell, Carmine, Dana, Edgar, Farrah, Hannah, Jaclyn and the 2 other grandkids entered the living room. Bertram asked Gabriel to quit already. Adell yelled at Ira that he was ruing the feast. Gabriel and Ira looked at each other for a moment. Gabriel started laughing. Ira started laughing. The 2 men finally realized how childishly they had been acting. The men shook hands and hugged. For some reason, Gabriel had become so overwhelmed by emotion that he kissed Ira on the lips.

Ira's eyes opened wide like someone who discovered that the lottery ticket in their hands was a winner. Ira slapped Gabriel's face. Ira slapped back. Gabriel started laughing again, followed by Ira. The 2 men began laughing so hard that they had to sit down. Everybody went back to the dining room to eat, except for Gabriel and Ira, who remained talking in the living room. After 10 minutes or so, Bertram returned to the living room to check on the men. Ira was asleep on Gabriel's lap. Bertram didn't know what had transpired, but he shook the men awake to invite them back to the feast. The men returned to the dining table and continued eating. Hannah and Jaclyn both brought their versions of candied yams or candied sweet potatoes, however they named the dishes. Hannah always put mini marshmallows on her sweet potatoes and Jaclyn added brown sugar to her yams for extra sweetness. They began chatting about which version of the dish was better. Hannah claimed that Gabriel always preferred the dish with marshmallows. When Jaclyn asked Gabriel if that was true, he merely shrugged his shoulders, preferring to keep out of it.

Jaclyn stated that Ira preferred her dish without the marshmallows. Hannah glanced over at Ira and he looked away to avoid having to voice an opinion. Bertram added that he liked both dishes equally and they were both delicious. Adell echoed Bertram's comments. One of the grandkids

announced that he hated sweet potatoes and yams. He didn't ask for the food to be put on his plate and he didn't have to eat them. The other 2 grandkids voiced similar opinions. Some of the others at the table murmured under their breaths. Hannah and Jaclyn looked at each other with reddening faces. They agreed to try each other's dishes to see for themselves. As soon as Jaclyn tasted one of the mini marshmallows in her mouth, she spat it across the table. Hannah's head had been turned at the time, because she was talking to one of the grandkids. The flying marshmallow hit Hannah in the temple and stuck there like a dart in a dartboard. Thinking that Jaclyn had purposely spat the marshmallow at her, Hannah tossed a deviled egg at Jaclyn. Jaclyn ducked and the egg hit Edgar in the right eye. Edgar had been walking back from the bathroom and was returning to the table. Everyone in the dining room burst out laughing, everyone except Edgar.

Edgar was one of those sensitive people who didn't like laughing or being made fun of. Farrah had been so caught up in watching the tiff between Hannah and Jaclyn that she forgot herself when she started laughing at Edgar. She knew more than anyone how sensitive Edgar was. She immediately stopped laughing jumped up from the table and ran over to Edgar. She escorted him to the kitchen to help him wash the egg off his embarrassed face. The dining room was silent. Hannah and Jaclyn looked at each other and told everyone that they were sorry for their behavior. Carmine encouraged everyone to try some of the goose that he and Dana brought. No one had tried any of the goose yet, because it wasn't something that anyone at the table had eaten before. Everyone knew about the old days when a goose was the celebratory bird on the table. Nowadays, the turkey ruled at large gatherings such as Thanksgiving and Christmas. Carmine and Dana had admitted that they had never eaten goose before, but wanted to try something new. A caterer friend of theirs actually prepared the good for them to bring to the party. One of the grandkids said that he wasn't going to eat any of the goose, because he was afraid of it.

Bertram cut off a piece of goose for himself and sat down to eat it. Adell did the same. After 3 minutes, Bertram began burping. The 3 grandkids started laughing. Kids always laughed when they heard burping and farting sounds. Adell began farting. The kids laughed even harder. What was in that goose? Needless to say, no one else at the table dared to try any of the goose. With Dana's permission, Adell put the goose outside in the back yard for the raccoons to eat later that night. A discussion began about the fabled Turducken or Tur-Duc-Hen, which is a turkey stuffed with a duck, which is then stuffed with a chicken. The first point was how to spell it and the next point was how to pronounce it. After 9 minutes, the discussion turned to how the 3-bird concept tasted. No one at the table had ever tried Tur-Duc-Hen, but all agreed that it sounded pretty good. One of the 3 grandkids said they would never eat it. Another kid said they would try it. The 3rd kid said they were verging on become a vegetarian and that all meat eating was for animals.

The overall opinion at the table was that it would be an expensive concoction. Since Gabriel

loved turkey so much, he promised to bring a Tur-Duc-Hen to the next Thanksgiving dinner for everyone to try. Hannah looked at Gabriel and wondered to herself how Gabriel proposed to keep his promise. She wasn't planning to make a Tur-Duc-Hen; it was crazy talk. Gabriel looked at Hannah and whispered something to her, which made her giggle. The grandkids all looked at each other and laughed. Bertram and Adell looked at each other. Bertram asked Gabriel what he was whispering about. Gabriel said it was just a little something between a husband and his wife. Bertram had been so stressed out by the goings on up to that point that he challenged Gabriel's answer. "You were talking about me, weren't you?" said Bertram. "I don't know what you're talking about Bertram; take it easy." Adell said to Bertram, "Calm down honey." Hannah said, "What's your problem, Bertram?" Bertram stood up from the table, slapped his palm down next to his plate and sat down. The room was silent.

Bertram started laughing. Everyone else started laughing. "I'm sorry everyone; that goose must have made be a little nervous and jerky!" said Bertram. Bertram began burping again. The grandkids started laughing. Adell began farting. The kids laughed even harder. What was in that stupid goose? As prim and proper as Dana, Farrah, Hannah and Jaclyn thought they were, they couldn't help laughing as well. Burping and farting sounds were funny; case closed. Hannah and Jaclyn were the oldest people at the table and were at the age when they had to be careful about their bowel control. As long as they were in command of their senses, they typically didn't crap their pants in public places. On the rare occasions, when they exerted too much, things happened. When the laughter first started at the table related to Bertram's burping and Adell's farting, Hannah and Jaclyn were in control. As the laughing continued, the women found themselves to be in trouble. They excused themselves from the table and proceeded to the bathrooms for freshening up.

Adell's turkey had been a big bit, even though it didn't have the dark brown color that so many people desired. Adell had cooked turkeys and chickens in oven cooking bags since the first days of the product's introduction to the market. The bags kept in all the moisture and tenderness was always guaranteed. When Hannah and Jaclyn returned to the table, a discussion ensued about the lack of brown color on the turkey. Even though some people didn't eat the skin of the turkey anyway, those people insisted that the turkey be of a dark brown color. Adell explained her oven bag technique and said she would never go back to cooking turkeys and chickens without them. Since Hannah and Jaclyn were old-school women who did virtually everything the old-fashioned way, they refused to try cooking bags. They insisted that baked turkeys and chickens needed to have a nice brown color. Hannah looked at Gabriel and Jaclyn looked at Ira. Gabriel opened his mouth as if he were going to speak and then closed it. Ira opened his mouth and made the statement that Adell's turkey was fantastic and if cooking the turkey in a bag was necessary, then so be it.

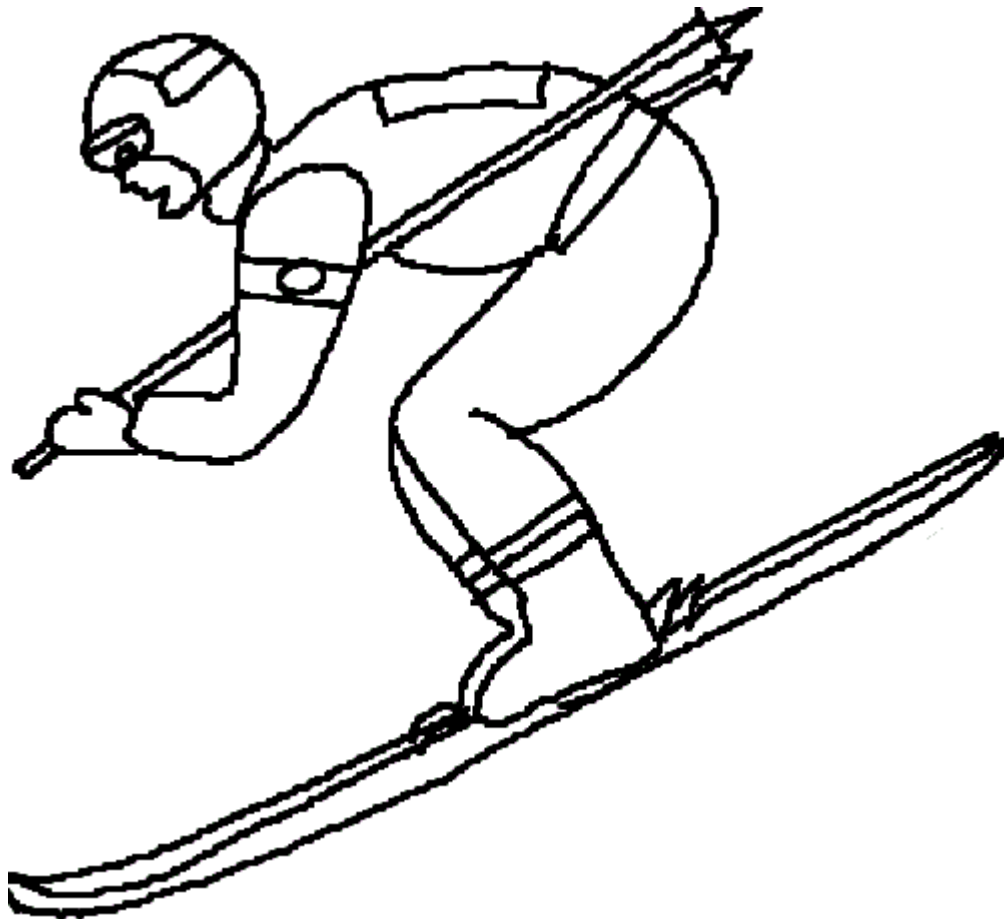
Gabriel opened his mouth and closed it again. Ira looked at Gabriel and winked. Hannah and

Jaclyn spotted Ira's wink and then looked at each other. Hannah asked Ira what the wink was all about. Ira said it was nothing; he had some dust in his eye. Jaclyn demanded to know why Ira winked at Gabriel. To emphasize his point, Ira began rubbing his eyes. Jaclyn pinched Ira on the forearm and wanted to know about the wink. Adell asked if everyone was ready for dessert. The grandkids yelled that they were ready. Bertram quickly began clearing the table and Adell went to the kitchen to get pies, cakes and other desserts. The grandkids were volunteered to help carry in the desserts. Jaclyn pinched Ira again and he yelled at her to stop it. Gabriel started laughing and Hannah pinched his forearm. Adell brought in the following pies: pumpkin, apple, mincemeat, pecan and chocolate cream. The grandkids brought in 4 different quart containers of ice cream: vanilla, chocolate, strawberry & mint chocolate chip and the following cakes: chocolate with chocolate frosting, lemon with lemon frosting, carrot cake and cheesecake. The kids also brought in whipped cream, ice cream toppings and ice cream cones.

The dessert feast was on! Even though the entrees from the banquet had filled up most of the diners, somehow everyone found room for dessert. The grandkids had intentionally eaten lightly at dinner in order to gorge more ravenously on the pies, cakes and ice cream. Bertram hated carrot cake and Adell loved it. Carmine liked all cakes and pies, as evidenced from his large gut. Dana only ate vanilla ice cream. Edgar and Farrah were huge fans of ice cream cones and began eating cones with every ice cream and topping. Hannah couldn't get enough of the pumpkin pie and apple pie with whipped cream. Gabriel liked the chocolate cake with chocolate frosting. He liked to have a scoop of chocolate ice cream on the side. Bertram made himself a huge banana split and an ice cream sundae after that. The kids sampled a little bit of almost everything, except the mincemeat pie, because they didn't want to eat pie with meat in it. Jaclyn ate the mincemeat pie to prove to the kids how good it was. Ira ate a huge plate of pecan pie with a giant scoop of mint chocolate chip ice cream on top. Everyone seemed to be happy.

As Jaclyn ate her pie, she asked Ira again about the wink. Ira ignored her and kept eating his pecan pie extravaganza. Hannah asked Gabriel about Ira's wink and Ira tried to get up from the table. Jaclyn pulled Ira back down into his chair. She wasn't about to let Ira get away without explaining the wink. Ira could see that he wasn't going to get any slack from Jaclyn and he decided to fess up. He proclaimed that he winked at Gabriel because he and Gabriel had grown tired of eating dry turkey and chicken for years and really loved Adell's cooking-bag turkey. The men had always been too afraid to tell their wives about the situation. Jaclyn's eyes widened. Hannah put down her fork. Jaclyn and Hannah looked at each other. They began raving about how their husbands never appreciated them and always took them for granted. All the cooking and cleaning that Jaclyn and Hannah did around the house was never acknowledged. Jaclyn and Hannah blamed Adell for the whole thing. If only Adell hadn't prepared such a juicy, tender turkey with that stupid oven bag, none of this would be happening right now. Bertram tried to talk, but Hannah threw her fork at him. Adell crowed at Hannah. Without warning, Jaclyn and Hannah jumped out of their chairs and attacked Adell.

166. Ignacio's Itch 2



166. Ignacio's Itch 2

The itch felt similar to the many itches that Ignacio had endured throughout his lifetime. Everybody contracts an itch now and then; it was unavoidable. Itches were caused by many things. Sometimes a mosquito, fly or ant bites us. Occasionally, poison ivy can cause an itch. When young, most people are forced to suffer from the itching associated with chicken pox or impetigo. Dry skin will occasionally bring about a bout of itching. The itching that Ignacio had struggled with while wearing his many plaster casts had tortured him to no end. Most people found through experience that the worst itch was the one that couldn't be scratched. Itching was a similar sensation to pain. When an itch first triggered a person's brain, it was something that needed to be dealt with immediately, if possible. If the itch could be scratched, then the sensation was over. As the itch waited to be scratched, for whatever reason, the sensation became painful and began to attack the psyche of the itch victim.

When an itch began on the middle of the back, those itches were typically the most difficult to conquer. Devices such as backscratchers had been invented centuries ago for relieving those itches. Not everyone owned one of those funny-looking things, however. Most of the time, when an itch started in the middle of a person's back, the person would try to contort their bodies to get at the itch. Most of the time, it was impossible to scratch an itch on the middle of the back. If a loved one were present during the itch attack, the loved one could sometimes be coaxed into scratching that itch. If the loved one really wanted to mess with the itch victim, the loved one would delay scratching the itch. If a loved one weren't present at the time of the middle-of-the-back itch, then other means would need to be found to scratch the itch. Bears, livestock and other animals had been filmed rubbing their backs on trees, fences and other suitable scratching devices to relieve their middle-of-the-back itches. Sometimes, the itch went away by itself. Most of the time, it didn't.

The itching that Ignacio was suffering from as he was suspended in his snow container was located on the middle of his back. It figured. Obviously, in Ignacio's current condition, he was incapable of scratching any itch. It didn't matter if he had an itch on the palm of his hand, on his forehead or on his shin. He was completely immobilized by the snow. He thought about how comical it was. He was unable to scratch any itch, but why did the itch have to be in the middle of his back? It seemed that life had dealt Ignacio an interesting hand of cards. Why couldn't the itch be somewhere else? He began to play with his own mind, as desperate people tend to do in times of stress. How could he scratch that itch? The itch that had begun as a minor tickle had evolved into a raging painful demon. He couldn't move. Wasn't it enough that he had become trapped in the avalanche? Why did the creator have to add the additional challenge of an itch? Ignacio had enough problems trying to figure his way out of the seemingly impossible mess without the added distraction of an itch.

He supposed that after all the years of cheating his way through life and avoiding extinction that it was just a matter of time. Sooner or later, something was going to happen to him that would render him powerless. He felt like a newborn baby that had to rely on everyone around it for survival. He could do nothing to help himself. Why had he gone out that day? He had played the same head games with himself after each injury and had always bounced back. This was just another one of those bad times. He was just too wild though. It was his wildness and untamed nature that made him take the chances that he did, year after year. He laughed at the grim reaper. He was invincible. He could do whatever he wanted for a thrill and emerge unscathed or slightly scathed. Naturally, Ignacio's concept of being scathed was different from that of average people. The thrill junkies like Ignacio only feared the day when they were unable to go out and get those thrills. They feared nothing else.

Ignacio was afraid. For the first time in his life, he was afraid. He had to get a grip on himself. Obviously, he was in a tight spot, but he was still alive. He was breathing and functioning as normally as someone lying in a hospital bed. He concentrated and entered his mind. He thought back to a time when he was in a similar situation. He was at home after one of his accidents, lying in bed. He had a cast on one leg and one arm. He was watching "The price is right" on TV, back when Bob Barker was the host. Ignacio loved that show. Even though he had always been an outdoorsy person, he loved watching TV when he was at home. Ignacio was the most outdoorsy person he knew who wasn't afraid to admit that he watched TV. He was eating popcorn and drinking lemonade with his uncasted arm. The showcase was on and the 2 finalists were making their guesses. Ignacio loved guessing the final showcase price. He found himself to be a better guesser than most of the contestants on the show. Ignacio estimated that if he were on the show, he would have won over a million dollars over the years.

As Ignacio dreamed about being in the bed in his home, the itch intensified. What was it about itches that they could become so excruciating? It wasn't as if any skin or nerves were damaged. Why was the skin so sensitive in the first place? Wouldn't it be enough for the skin to report an itch to the brain and then back off a little as the itch victim found a way to scratch the itch? What made an itch get worse over time? Ignacio turned his concentration to figuring out his own questions about itching. It must be that when the body's skin receptors detected an itch, the itch was registered in the brain as an attack of some sort. Whatever was causing the itch needed to be investigated. If a toxin such as the one in poison ivy was attacking the skin, something had to be done about it. If a mosquito was biting the skin, the person needed to get away from the attacking mosquitoes, if possible. The more that Ignacio thought about the concept of itching, the better he felt. He attempted to will away the itch.

He told himself that there was no itch in the middle of his back. He was only imagining the itch. There was nothing there to cause an itch. He then mistakenly began thinking about the llama undergarment that he had been wearing under his shirt. The llama item had been a gift from a

friend. Since that time, the friend had become paralyzed in a snowboarding accident. Ignacio had vowed to always wear the llama undergarment in memory of his friend. The undergarment had always been a little itchy, due to the coarseness of the llama fibers. In the past while wearing the llama item, Ignacio had been able to scratch any itches related to the llama undergarment. Most of the time, after he had skied for a while, the itching went away by itself. When Ignacio became trapped in the snow, the itching found a way to rear its ugly head and he had no means of scratching it. He felt like he was in the hands of some perverted person who had tied him to a chair and was torturing him. The itch was getting worse.

How itchy can an itch be anyway? Wouldn't the sensation of an itch reach some point and then level off? How could an itch get worse and worse? Ignacio attempted to figure out why an itch could get worse over time. He pondered and postulated. The concentration on the subject alleviated the itching somewhat. That was it! He needed to distract himself by thinking about something. He had to find a topic. He began thinking about how dolphins were able to swim so fast. He had been watching a show on the National Geographic channel about dolphins. Apparently, the speed with which dolphins were capable was physically impossible. Nature had bestowed dolphins with a special skin surface. The skin of dolphins had small indentations like that of golf balls. The indentations reduced the friction of the water over the skin of the dolphins, allowing dolphins to swim faster than otherwise possible. The golf industry had applied the same principle to the surface of golf balls. The indentations in the surface of a golf ball reduced the air friction on a golf ball, allowing it to fly more quickly and farther through the air.

Ignacio thought about the skin of dolphins and about that TV show, "Flipper." Ignacio loved watching that show when he was a kid. The only thing about the show was that the dolphin always made the same squeaking sound, no matter what the dolphin was doing. It squeaked the same whether it was catching a bad guy or when it was eating tossed fish. The producers of the show probably thought that no one would notice, but Ignacio noticed. They probably recorded the dolphin making a general squeaking sound and then used the same sound effect for every dolphin scene. Ignacio also wondered if the show only used 1 dolphin or if there was more than 1 "Flipper." Thinking about dolphins for a while managed to distract Ignacio from his itch. Ignacio then thought about how those dolphins could launch themselves out of the water and twirl in the air. How did they train those beasts to do that?

Ignacio wanted more than anything to think about something other than the unscratchable itch in the middle of his back, but couldn't. He instead found himself thinking about itchy events that had tortured him in the past. He remembered one time when he was camping during the summer and decided to go to the beach fishing one evening. All his friends went shirtless, so he attempted to do the same, to not stand out from the crowd. When boys were young, the most important thing was to fit in. Anyone who dared to be different was immediately cast out and punished. They took their fishing rods & bait and skipped their way toward the beach. Out of

nowhere, thousands of mosquitoes descended from the night sky. It was as if the biting insects had been waiting for just the right moment. When the bare skin of the boys had been detected by the mosquitoes, that became the trigger to attack. The bugs couldn't believe their great fortune at discovering so much fresh meat in one location. The mosquitoes landed on each boy and began the involuntary blood drive. By the end of the attack, the mosquitoes had probably extracted an ounce or 2 of blood from each kid. The boys ran screaming back to their tents scratching and crying from the pain. Luckily for the bitten boys, their parents had plenty of Calamine lotion on hand. That stuff was the best thing for itchy skin.

The boys compared how many bites they each had. It was popular among boys to attempt to outdo each other in any contest, no matter what the contest was. On that evening the contest was for who had the most mosquito bites. For unknown reasons, Ignacio had by far the most bite marks on his aggravated skin. Since it was impossible to count every bite, an approximate number had been agreed upon by the contestants. Poor young Ignacio had 347 mosquito bite marks on his body. Many of the mosquitoes had managed to bite through Ignacio's denim shorts, which was an accomplishment on the parts of those insects. The gang had to take Ignacio's word for the bites that he had sustained underneath his shorts. No one actually wanted to see down there. Ignacio was in such agony from the itching that he was unable to scratch all the bites. He essentially covered his entire visible body with Calamine lotion. It took a few moments for the lotion to work its magic. Even with such a liberal application of the lotion, Ignacio suffered through the night with the itching and scratching.

As Ignacio thought back to that fateful mosquito attack, he managed to laugh a little. Those younger days were the best days of his life, with no responsibilities, except for going to school and having fun. He accidentally remembered about the time he had chicken pox and suffered tremendously from the itching. That stupid childhood affliction had abused nearly everyone; it was a rite of passage. It was an unavoidable part of being human. Ignacio remembered sitting in a bathtub covered with Calamine lotion. As much as he wanted to scratch, he had been advised against it. Of course, when no one was looking, he sneaked in a scratch here and there; he had to. The only satisfaction for itching was scratching. Sometimes, the scratching resulted in damaged skin when scratching blisters, but so what. The main thing was to try to somehow stop the itching! If some skin had to be temporarily ruined along the way, then those were the breaks.

As hard as Ignacio tried to move within his snow prison, he realized more and more that his fate might be to perish within the avalanche like some plant or rock that had been carried along with him. It was weird to think that at that moment in his life, he was just a speck. He was a tiny element of the avalanche. He was just part of the mix. How ironic. As invincible as he had previously felt himself to be, he was now just a speck, a morsel, a crumb. He tried to think of the good times in his life, but kept going back to the tough times. Why was he so unable to steer his brain in the right direction? He paused for a moment to realize how complex his brain was. He

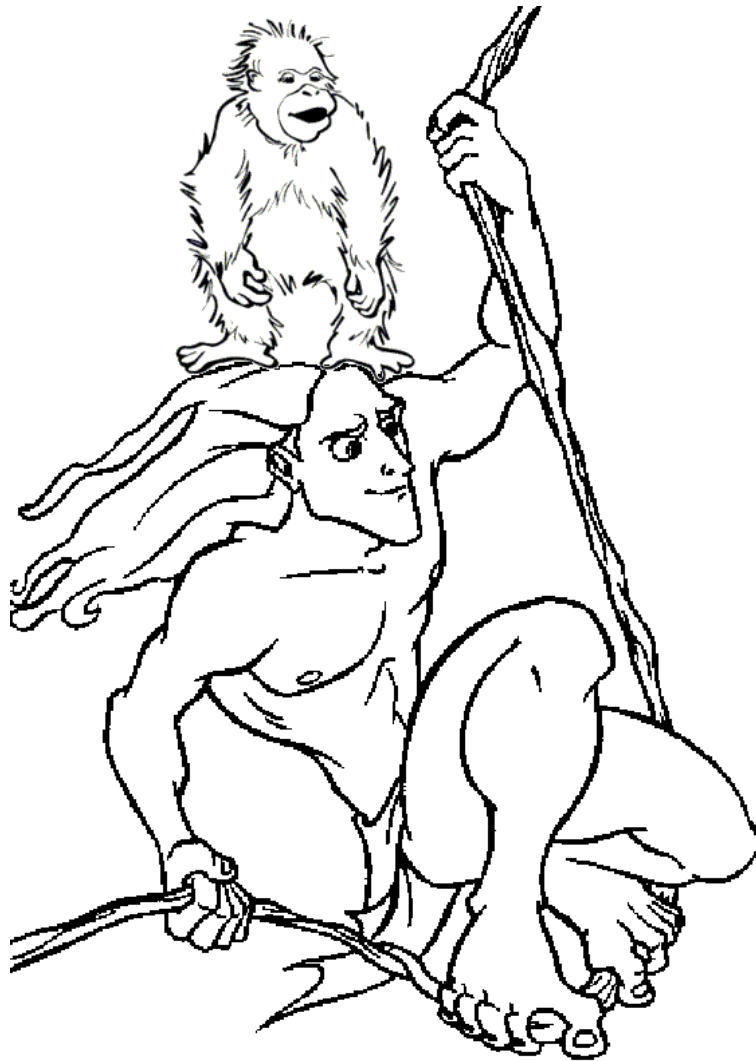
was beginning to think that one part of his brain was messing with him. One hemisphere of his brain was thinking about the present and the other hemisphere dwelled on the ugly parts of his past. Why couldn't he make himself think about the good times? It might be that because he was currently in such dire straits that he was unable to control the morbid hemisphere. Maybe he had to go with the flow. He intentionally thought about the time when he parachuted into an immense patch of poison ivy.

He had just received a free pass for parachuting. One of his adrenaline junkie friends gave it to him. The person assured Ignacio that it would be a blast. Since at that time in his life, Ignacio hadn't parachuted yet, he had to do it. He attended the requisite training lessons and did his solo jump 2 weeks later. It was truly unbelievable. His friend had been right. The sensation of falling down through the air like a rock was amazing. As he plummeted, he told himself that he would definitely do it again. The intended landing area was a nice soft grassy spot. Unfortunately, the wind had picked up as he fell to the earth. He hadn't been experienced enough to precisely steer himself. He figured that he was heading down to a suitable enough spot. Since he knew nothing about the appearance of poison ivy, he thought that he was heading for some type of wild plants.

When he landed in the poison ivy patch, he did his roll and unclipped the chute. He then removed the jumpsuit, because it was so hot on that day. He tripped over some of the chute lines and fell into the ivy. He became tangled in the ivy and the chute lines. As he struggled to free himself, his skin came into excessive contact with the poison ivy. It was bad. The itching started immediately and lasted for another 2 days. His sensitive skin seemed to have a thing for poison ivy. The hospital doctor claimed that she had never seen such a reaction. The itching was beyond excruciating. Even with the pharmaceutical-strength anti-itching lotion, the ivy still itched. Ignacio vowed to never parachute again. As fun as it was on the way down, it was hell on the ground.

As Ignacio attempted to appease the twisted hemisphere of his brain by only thinking about the bad times, he tried to move his body. If he could just get any part of his body moving, he might be able to free himself from his snow prison. After some time, he began to hear something. The sound was faint. What was that? Was that animal trying to dig its way out? Was that someone calling to him? Ignacio's helicopter pilot had been the veteran of many avalanches and had fortunately equipped his helicopter with certain safeguards. The structure of the pilot's helicopter had been reinforced with a roll cage that could withstand a heavy snow load. When the helicopter crashed and exploded, the pilot had only been briefly knocked unconscious. He had been wearing a Bell helmet and Nomex suit. The pilot dug himself out of his snow coffin with his cordless snow auger and had located the buried Ignacio with a special apparatus. The pilot had been calling to Ignacio and augering downward for many hours. Ignacio still couldn't move, but he could sense something directly above him. Was it? It was! It was the pilot!

167. Tatum's Mate 2



167. Tatum's Mate 2

The next morning found Tatum entrenched in an unusually deep sleep, deeper than normal. Charlie surmised that it must have been all the coconuts that Tatum ate the night before. Whenever Tatum ate coconuts, he became excessively drowsy and fell into deep slumbers. Charlie hadn't indulged in the coconuts with Tatum and had instead eaten 3 bananas. As filling as bananas were initially, they didn't have much holding power. By the time Charlie woke up, his stomach was growling and in need of filling. Charlie was beginning to wish that he had eaten some of those coconuts. Charlie pissed on Tatum's face and even opened Tatum's mouth a little. Surprisingly, Tatum refused to wake up. Charlie kicked Tatum in the head and ribs to no effect. Charlie was beginning to wonder if he would be able to wake the man. Charlie decided to put his finger in his own mouth toward the back in order to make himself vomit. He barfed on Tatum's face with a combination of partially digested bananas, water and stomach juices.

Upon sensing the acidic foul vomit on his face, Tatum sprang to life. Charlie urged Tatum to get up so that they could go get some of those papayas on the edge of the jungle. The papayas were a favorite of Charlie's and he always craved them when they were in season. Tatum could take them or leave them, but he wanted to keep Charlie happy. Tatum wiped the sleep out of his eyes, farted, pissed and pooped. He was ready to head out. Tatum nodded to Charlie for the simian to hop on his back and off they went. The papayas were approximately 20 -25 minutes away, depending on Tatum's energy level. In the mornings, Tatum didn't have much stamina, due to having little processed food in his system from which to derive necessary vine-swinging energy. Charlie had the easy role of clinging to Tatum's back as the man swung through the jungle via the comprehensive vine system. Charlie noted that Tatum was definitely still groggy from the overdose of coconuts, because he barely latched onto several of the vines along the way. Somehow, Tatum had instilled a muscle memory connection in his body, which enabled him to employ the vines without having much awareness of actually doing it.

All Charlie knew was that he was hungry and he wanted to savor some of those succulent papayas. Charlie had procured a small branch and used it as a whip to prod Tatum to the destination. At first, Tatum tolerated the whipping, but after a while, it became painful. Charlie didn't care. Tatum cautioned Charlie to back off on the whipping or something untoward might occur. Charlie scoffed. Charlie knew that Tatum would never do anything rash. Little did Charlie realize, but Tatum had been doing some thinking with his limited brain. Tatum admonished Charlie about the whipping once more, to no avail. Tatum turned his head and spat a brownish wad of spit in Charlie's face. The spit was morning spit, which as everyone knew was the worst looking and worst smelling spit of the day. As it was, Tarzan had chronic halitosis, through no fault of his own. He had been born with the affliction. Halitosis combined with an occasionally odd diet gave Tatum inhumanly foul saliva each morning.

When the rank spit hit Charlie in the face, the chimp became outraged. The simian whipped Tatum even harder than before, until the formerly leafy branch had been reduced to a mere twig. Tatum chuckled as Charlie grumbled about the face spit. Tatum felt that he had achieved a rare victory over Charlie. Charlie couldn't believe that Tatum would spit in his face, after all they had meant to each other. The whipping distraction and spitting event had altered Tatum's innate vine grabbing skill. When he turned to spit on Charlie, Tatum accidentally grabbed for the wrong vine. Actually, it wasn't a vine at all; it was a python. Tatum had no fear of any animal that he encountered in his jungle habitat. He was the king of his jungle. He could dispatch any creature at will. The problem was that he had been instantaneously forced to rely on a python as a means of support, which wasn't a good idea. The snake had been clinging to a huge branch in order to snatch some unwary beast for its breakfast.

The snake held tight for a few seconds, just long enough for Tatum and Charlie to swing to the next vine. Tatum breathed a momentary sigh of relief, but then the next vine gave way slightly. Tatum and Charlie began falling. Charlie panicked and slipped down from Tatum's back. Charlie's tenacious fingers managed to grab onto Tatum's loincloth. For an instant, Charlie felt safe. Then, Tatum's loincloth began to slide down. Charlie began shrieking as only a chimpanzee can shriek. The sound was deafening. When Tatum's loincloth had slid down to mid-thigh, Charlie grabbed feverishly for anything that would save his life. Charlie's chimp paw had found Tatum's peepee. Tatum wasn't the shiest of individuals, but had always considered his peepee to be his own realm, not to be touched without his permission. Granted, Tatum knew Charlie was in dire straits, but that didn't necessarily grant the monkey the right to grab Tatum's peepee. That was going too far. Tatum knew everything important about all the animals of the jungle, which included the durability of the animals. Chimpanzees were known for their toughness.

National Geographic had proven through observation that of all the primates of the world, the chimpanzees were the animals most capable of surviving a fall from a tree. Tatum had come by this information on his own as he grew up in the jungle. As dimwitted and simple-minded as Tatum was, he was a master of learning by observation. His knowledge base was actually equivalent on another level to that of theoretical physicist Steven Hawking. Tatum wasn't as concerned about Charlie landing on the jungle floor as Charlie was. At that point in time, that was all that mattered. Charlie was an overweight chimpanzee, weighing in at a healthy 140 pounds. As tough as Tatum was and believed himself to be, the ape hanging from his peepee created an agonizing sensation. Tatum desired more than anything for the pain to go away, but he couldn't allow Charlie to be harmed. Charlie felt the same way. The least that Tatum could do was to tolerate the suffering for a little while, until a better circumstance had been encountered.

Tatum was crying alligator tears as he continued swinging from vine to vine. Charlie clung like a

pit bull dog to Tatum's peepee. Tatum finally spotted relief up ahead in the form of one of the many jungle tree platforms that had been constructed over the years. Tatum had been very proud of all those platforms. As he had painstakingly built each one, he improved the design as he went. The newest platforms had chairs & couches for resting and sleeping. The one that they landed on was an older model that was small. It was good enough. When Tatum and Charlie landed on the platform, Charlie was able to release his death-grip on Tatum's peepee. Tatum and Charlie hugged each other out of an emotional outburst that was beyond them. They didn't know why they did it; they just did it. Tatum pulled up his loincloth, which luckily for Charlie had become stuck at Tatum's knees. Charlie leaned back on the platform and farted. Charlie always flatulated after unusually stressful events. Tatum barfed. Tatum always vomited after excessively painful events. Then, Tatum started laughing. Charlie held back his laughter, because at the moment, he felt that he had just cheated The Grim Reaper. Tatum tried to convince Charlie that the chimp would have survived a fall to the jungle floor.

Charlie asked Tatum how Tatum knew that Charlie would have survived the fall. Tatum told Charlie that he just knew and that should be good enough. Tatum didn't want to get into the details about how he had observed various primates falling on the ground over the years. It wasn't good enough for Charlie. Charlie demanded to know the details. Tatum could see that Charlie wasn't about to let the subject dissolve, so Tatum explained the observations. Charlie was fascinated. Charlie asked more questions. Tatum answered them. Charlie developed a new respect for Tatum. Charlie was surprised how intelligent Tatum actually was. Tatum stressed that he wasn't intelligent by any means, but had become an expert at learning through observation. Tatum's early life had been difficult, even with the limited guidance of Tarzan, who had been as dumb as a doornail. Tatum hadn't inherited from Tarzan very much along the lines of I.Q., so Tatum had been forced to learn on the job. Nevertheless, Charlie had developed a newfound respect for Tatum. Charlie still intended to mess with Tatum's head at every chance, but going forward, Charlie vowed to treat Tatum with a little more respect, not much more, just a little more.

A jungle condor had been spying on Tatum and Charlie as they clumsily swung their way through the jungle. The huge bird hadn't been impressed in the least by the human/ape duo. The condor had seen Tatum and Charlie as food to be eaten. The bird wasn't aware of Tatum's prowess at defeating any animal that he encountered. How could the condor know? The bird was new to the area and had never seen a human in the jungle. The bird saw Tatum as just another monkey, except without the fur on its body. Tatum and Charlie together would make a nice meal for the condor. The bird swooped down to the platform where Tatum and Charlie were resting. Years in the jungle had given Tatum Spiderman-like senses, to the point that Tatum could detect danger approaching from any direction, without having to see it. As the condor descended, Charlie looked up and began screaming. Tatum had already reached for his knife and prepared for the bird's arrival. As the condor roared its unearthly attack wail, Tatum swiftly

slashed out with his shiny blade. Tatum's movements were as fast as those of the great Kung Fu artist Bruce Lee.

Tatum swung his mighty knife-wielding arm 3 times within a second. In the first 3rd of the second, the condor's head was severed. In the second 3rd of the second, one of the bird's wings was removed from its body. In the last part of the second, the other wing was sliced off. Charlie couldn't believe what he had just seen. The chimp just sat there with his mouth hanging open. As the head of the bird flew free from its body, Tatum caught it in his free hand. Tatum bit the condor's head with a great crunching sound. It was part of Tatum's power display over his victims that he performed some disgusting act after dispatching each victim. Tatum then ate the condor's head-skull, beak, brain and all. The sight and sound of Tatum eating the condor's head was too much for Charlie and he barfed.

Tatum had a victory yell that was similar to his father Tarzan's yell, except that at the end of the Tatum's yell, he added a loud, "Yeah!" for extra effect. He triumphantly bellowed his call to the jungle for all to hear. As a chimp, Charlie simply didn't understand Tatum's psyche. Whenever Tatum trumpeted his yell, Charlie muttered under his breath and chuckled to himself until the noise was over. As Tatum and Charlie collected their thoughts on the high tree platform, a flock of bats descended onto them. Perhaps it was the shrill sound of Tatum's victory call that had attracted the bats. It might be that the bats were responding to what they thought to be an animal in distress. Whatever it was, the bats began mercilessly biting. Bats had attacked Tatum many times in the past and through trial and error, he had discovered the only defense - poopoo. He forced himself to poop. He instructed Charlie to do the same.

Tatum scooped up the poop and smeared himself with it. Charlie hated smearing himself with poop, but it had to be done. The bats immediately flew away. An unfortunate side effect of the bat repellent was that while the poop repelled bats, it attracted flies. Within seconds, Tatum and Charlie were covered with jungle flies. The flies were enormous, some the size of golf balls. Fortunately, the flies didn't bite, but instead sucked the poop from the skin of Tatum and Charlie. It was more of a strange sensation than a painful one, but it was still something undesirable. Tatum scooped up Charlie and off they went, vine swinging toward the papayas. They needed to rinse off the poop in the worst way. Tatum splashed down into a shallow part of the river where they could get a quick cleanup and they landed on top of a crocodile. The croc instantly reared up out of the water and attempted to smack Tatum with its tail. Being the veteran of many croc fights, Tatum leaped to shore just in time. Charlie wasn't so lucky. The croc's tail made contact with Charlie's balls.

The sensation was so painful that Charlie was unable to utter a sound. Tatum frantically looked around the jungle for the Bulah tree, the bark of which had numbing properties. Tatum found such a tree and quickly stripped off some bark. He ran back to Charlie who was doubled over

from the pain in his balls. Tatum hastily applied the resin from the inside of the bark to Charlie's aching balls. The resin needed to be massaged into the skin. At first, Charlie tolerated the massaging, because it felt so good, but then he came to his senses. Charlie pushed away Tatum's hands and finished massaging his balls on his own. After a few moments, Charlie was calm again. Tatum chopped down a tree with his knife and the tree fell into the river, scaring away the crocodile. Tatum and Charlie cautiously entered the river to rinse off the poop. A school of piranhas made their way toward Tatum and Charlie in the water. Charlie spotted the toothy fish just in time to alert Tatum to get back on shore.

They climbed the nearest tree and continued their quest to the papayas. Charlie hoped that they would get their soon, because he was getting hungry. His stomach began growling. Tatum hated the sound of Charlie's stomach growling, so they stopped at a honey tree, which had some honey-laden combs perched in it. Tatum had learned a trick to lull the bees into submission. He worked up a good amount of fart gas and then spewed it into the opening of the bee's nest. It worked like a charm. The bees were pacified enough to permit Tatum and Charlie to steal some of the honey. The honey satisfied Charlie enough to quiet his growling stomach. The only problem with the honey was the ants. As Tatum and Charlie sat in the crotch of the tree licking honey from their fingers, honey ants began their attack. The ants felt that the honey belonged to them more than the bees that had created it. The ants began stinging.

Tatum and Charlie made a hasty retreat and swung back down to the river again to rinse off the honey and clinging ants. They looked for crocodiles and piranhas, but forgot to look for pythons. As they stood in the shallow water rinsing off, a large python had slithered through the water and sneaked up on them. The snake's mouth latched onto Tatum's ankle as the coils of the snake began wrapping around Tatum's body. Tatum hadn't been able to reach his knife in time and felt the powerful snake crushing him. Charlie jumped into action. Because the snake had been absorbed with crushing and eating Tatum, it became careless of its surroundings. Charlie reached between the snake's thick coils and procured Tatum's knife. Charlie held the knife with both hands and stabbed the snake repeatedly, accidentally puncturing Tatum several times.

The snake quickly perished from the numerous holes in its body and it released its grip on Tatum. High in the jungle canopy, a hungry leopard had been observing Tatum and Charlie as they struggled with the python. The cat was patiently waiting for the right moment. Tatum and Charlie emerged from the river to rest on the shore. The leopard began cautiously making its way down to the man and chimp. As Tatum hugged Charlie and thanked him for saving his life, Tatum heard a twig snap. The leopard didn't realize it, but Tatum had spotted the cat. Tatum whispered to Charlie and the 2 of them remained hugging each other. The leopard sneaked closer. Tatum whispered again. The leopard was directly overhead. Tatum twitched. The leopard leaped and Tatum jumped to his feet with his knife slashing at the attacker. The lifeless leopard landed on the jungle floor with a thud. Charlie asked Tatum, "Can we go now?"

168. Abe's Arm



168. Abe's Arm

Of all the days to pick to break his arm, why did it have to be on the 4th of July? Abe recited the phrase over and over to himself as he sat in the waiting room of the Emergency Room (ER) of his local hospital. It wasn't as if he had actually picked the day. He broke his arm by accident; no one breaks their arm on purpose, unless they are some kind of a psycho. Some people might risk breaking body parts as part of a childish bet, but Abe wasn't one of those fools. No, Abe was just a simple man with a simple mind, like most people. It was Abe's simple mind that caused the arm breaking. He was standing on a stepladder in his high-ceilinged house attempting to change a light bulb on one of the chandeliers. The ceilings of his grand house were excessively high and required a tall stepladder to reach the ceiling. In Abe's case, reaching the ceiling to change a light bulb really needed a taller stepladder than the one he had chosen for the task.

He had numerous ladders in the house, garage and sheds all around his property. When the bulb went out, he went to the closest ladder that he could remember, which was in the workshop. Abe was confident that he would be able to reach the bulb with the ladder. Unfortunately, when he climbed the ladder, he did the one thing that ladder climbers should never do. He climbed onto the top of the ladder. He knew that he should have looked around for one of the taller ladders, but had been too lazy. He figured he would be able to change the bulb with the shorter ladder; it would only require a few seconds. As he stepped onto the top of the ladder, he became shaky-legged. The ladder was a top quality item, as were all of his tools, but he had exceeded the safe working limits of the ladder by stepping onto the top. His legs began shaking along with the ladder. If he could only unscrew the bad bulb and screw in the new bulb, it would be done; simple.

The ladder began shaking more and more as he unscrewed the bad bulb. He was confident in success. He managed to unscrew the old one and put it in his left breast pocket, but as he reached for the good bulb in the right breast pocket, it happened. Gravity moved in and the ladder kicked out to the left. Abe kicked out to the right and began his freefall to the ceramic tiles. Natural instinct typically tried to help humans, but something always had to give during that process. Abe put out his right hand and landed on it with a crunching sound. The sound of his arm breaking reminded Abe of when he would have his breakfast cereal of Corn Flakes or Raisin Bran. Abe would pour the flakes into one cereal bowl and then with another cereal bowl, mash the flakes down to crush them into smaller particles. He had always liked his cereal that way. The crunching sound of his arm breaking also reminded him of the sound of biting into a Doritos corn chip. The crunchiness of those chips was legendary. The arm-breaking crunch also reminded Abe of the sound of a crackling fire. As Abe lay on the ceramic floor of his big house with his broken arm, he pondered how funny it was that he had thought about all those crunching sounds simultaneously.

The humor of the moment only lasted for a mere second, however. The pain of the broken arm quickly arrived at the scene, like a lightning bolt striking a tall barn. As Abe winced from the pain, he congratulated himself on the fact that he still had the new bulb in his left hand. It was like one of those scenes where someone would be walking along a lawn at a summer picnic with a lemonade in their hand and they would trip and fall onto the grass without spilling the lemonade. As the person lay in the grass, they would triumphantly hold up the glass of lemonade as if they had just performed some kind of magical feat. Most of the time, when those stumblers had managed to avoid spilling a drop, nobody really cared. It was always important to the stumbler, however, to exhibit their prowess at preserving their drink of choice.

As Abe sat in the (ER), he had many emotions. He was in pain and he was able to sense the pain of those around him. He hated that he had been so stupid by breaking his arm while doing something so stupid. He hated the fact that everyone around him was making so much noise with their wails and cries. He was the one who was in pain and that was all that should have mattered to everyone else. The ER of a hospital was a rare place where everyone injured wanted to be important and wanted to have their pain relinquished. All the injured people wanted to be the next in line for treatment. It wasn't like that, however. ERs were forced to operate on the principle that the most injured person was the most important person at that instant in time. If someone stumbled in or was carried in and that person was more injured than the others on the list, then that person would become the most important person of the moment. As Abe sat in the room of hell, he looked around.

He saw adults and children with fingers missing and hands missing. He saw people with arms missing. He even saw people with missing legs. What was it about the 4th of July that brought out the self-destructive tendencies of people? Everyone knew that fireworks were dangerous. Fireworks were basically just gunpowder wrapped in paper and/or cardboard. The fact that fireworks were actually legal in some states was laughable. No average idiot should be allowed to possess fireworks. The laws were as they were and that was all that mattered. Somehow, Abe had managed to sit where he thought to be the worst possible seat in the ER. Directly In front of Abe was a woman with a finger missing. Behind Abe was a man with a missing hand. To Abe's right sat a boy with excessively black fingernails on his left hand. To Abe's left sat a girl a girl with her right arm missing. Everyone immediately around was crying, screaming, bawling, choking or emitting any of the typical pain secreting sounds.

Back when Abe had dragged his feet to his car with his broken arm and drove himself to the hospital, he never imagined how it would be in the ER. Naturally, he had seen many TV shows that depicted ER's, but until you actually sit in a real ER, you don't have a clue how bad it can be. Abe felt like he was on an episode of the TV show M.A.S.H. He felt like he was one of those poor injured agonizing soldiers craving to have their pain relieved. Abe heard a man screaming and he looked to his left to investigate. The right side of the man's face was reddish and blackish

at the same time. The man was screaming that he wanted his brother looked at. Somehow, the man's brother was in worse shape than the man. The 2 had been playing around with fireworks at their annual family picnic and had decided to launch something with the aid of their legally purchased fireworks. Well, as everyone knows, unless you are a trained professional, the larger fireworks aren't something to be treated lightly.

The duo had been attempting to use rockets stuffed into a large pipe to create a makeshift cannon. At first, the 2 clowns had been successful with their invention, but as they became greedy for more, things exceeded their limited control. The crowd at the picnic loved the show provided by the 2 men, so naturally the 2 men became inclined to make the show better and better. When someone from the crowd shouted out to shoot a bathtub, the challenge was on. The older brother found an old cast iron bathtub on the back forty of the property and dragged it to the cannon with the assistance of an ATV. The younger brother gathered up a few rockets and inserted them into the pipe with the fuses accessible for lighting. With the help of several picnickers, the bathtub was placed against the muzzle of the cannon. They lit the fuses of the rockets and stood back. The 2 brothers hadn't been standing far enough back from the cannon, so that when the cannon exploded, the 2 men were showered with red-hot metals and still-burning gunpowder.

A woman sat far to Abe's right with her son and daughter. Somehow, the children had gotten hold of the legal fireworks that had been purchased by their parents. The kids were jumping on the trampoline in the back yard when the girl had decided to play a game with the firecrackers. The game concocted by the girl worked for the first 3 firecrackers, but the 4th cracker was the charm. Both of the kids had been injured by the explosive flash of the firecracker, much to the doting mother's dismay. The woman with the 2 kids had been arguing with the woman seated behind her in the ER that her kids should be seen right away. The woman behind felt that her son with a broken foot was more important than some stupid kids playing with firecrackers. Both women were white-trashy types who didn't take guff from anyone. The woman with the 2 burned kids spat in the face of the woman behind her. The woman behind pulled the hair of the spitting woman. It didn't take long for the scuffle to evolve into an all-out brawl, suitable for "The Jerry Springer Show."

Abe watched the 2 women combating and felt like he was one of those dumbass people who actually watch those ridiculous "reality TV shows." He couldn't help watching the sparring women, because at least it took his mind off the pain of his broken arm. Security personnel rushed to the sparring women and separated them from each other. The women were warned to behave or they would have to wait outside the hospital. At first, the 2 women sat silently in their new locations. After 3 minutes, the woman with the 2 kids sneered at the woman with the broken-foot kid. The woman with the broken-foot kid ran over to the woman with the 2 kids and the fight was on. Security personnel escorted the women outside with their 3 kids. The kids

watched and rooted as their 2 mothers fought each other. It looked as if the 2 women were going to require treatment of their own for their fighting injuries.

After the 2 scuffling women had been removed from the hospital, Abe's arm began to throb and cause him some real pain. He wished that someone would cause a distraction. Someone did. A baldish man was sitting in the ER to the Northwest of Abe. The man's hair looked as if it had been removed by some method other than a haircut. The man was a helicopter pilot who had been rushing to disembark his passengers, in order to fly away to the next pickup. The pilot had violated the number #1 rule of always ducking down when entering and exiting an idling helicopter while the rotor was still spinning. It was really windy that evening and the parked idling helicopter rotor wobbled up and down as it spun. The pilot had taken more airsickness pills than usual and he was a little logy and clumsy. He hadn't been paying attention and the rotor grazed the top of his head. His was lucky that he hadn't been decapitated, but he was more embarrassed than anything else. More importantly, he was losing money by not flying. The pilot was shrieking in the ER that his head felt like it was on fire and he demanded to be seen immediately.

The crybaby pilot managed to distract Abe from his own pain for a little while. Who was that pilot to demand anything? There were many people trapped in the ER who were in much worse condition than that pilot. Abe felt that he deserved to be seen before the pilot, but in the shuffle of so many people, neither Abe nor the pilot knew when they would be seen. At 10:30 pm that night, the ER was full. Abe estimated that there were about 150 people crammed in there. At some point, the hospital would probably have to start turning people away. As much pain as Abe was suffering, he would hate to be turned away from a hospital; that would definitely suck. Imagine! You get hurt somehow and manage to make your way to a hospital and then they turn you away like someone trying to buy tickets at a sold-out movie. Abe had been at the ER for 6 hours and counting. The problem was that people kept getting hurt throughout that 4th of July evening. Someone who might have been already in the ER with some minor injury would get pushed aside by someone with a more serious injury.

The majority of the people in the ER were adults, but you would think that they were all kids, by the way they were all bellyaching. Why couldn't everyone pipe down and wait their turn? Whining about an injury wasn't going to make it go away and it certainly wasn't go to justify be seen sooner by medical personnel. If anything, the bawling and carrying-on that the people were doing was making it worse for everyone. It was like having a room full of quiet babies and 1 of the babies would start crying, causing them all to start crying. Abe debated getting up and checking at the window to determine when he was going to be seen, but he didn't want to lose his seat. He had to go to the bathroom, but held it in. He vowed to be more careful in the future, to avoid having to go to the ER at all costs. Naturally, if he were forced to accompany someone to the ER, he would grant that favor; or would he? Of course he would! He had just as much

sympathy for human suffering as the next person.

Abe observed that the people who were chosen first were the ones with some type of bleeding injuries. It must be that the hospital's triage policy considered bleeding people to be the most important. Well, weren't they special! Abe was wishing that he had some kind of bloody injury that would help him to be seen sooner. Then he caught himself and thought how stupid it was to think like that. As Abe dwelled on his broken arm, a little old lady walked into the ER, lamenting about her left arm. Abe wished the lady good luck, because he had been there first. There was no way that the hospital would see her before him. While the old lady was standing at the window, she screamed at the top of her lungs and her "injured" arm fell onto the floor. Everyone in the ER paused from their own suffering and gasped. People began yelling and shouting for someone to help the old lady.

A man jumped up from his seat and ran to help her. The old lady didn't appear to be on the verge of keeling over, but instead she started laughing. She suddenly pulled her actual left arm from behind her coat. She had been playing a joke! Just as the running man reached her, he slid on something slippery on the floor and crashed into the wall. The old lady scooped up her fake arm and ran out of there, much faster than she had stumbled in. The man lying crumpled on the floor was unconscious and had suffered a broken collarbone to add to the dislocated shoulder that he came in with. Abe decided to never try to help anyone in distress. That little old lady had destroyed the little bit of Good Samaritan that he had in him. People began talking about the joke played by the old lady and how inappropriate it was. An injured woman and an injured man had become so outraged at the old lady's prank that they got up from their seats and left the hospital. Abe wondered what that was all about. Were those 2 people intending to exact some revenge on the old coot? What about their injuries?

At 1:00 am, Abe thought he heard his name called and hurried to the admissions window at the front of the large room. He had been mistaken. The name-calling person had a strong Scottish accent and had actually called someone named Able not Abe. Abe was heartbroken. As he walked back in the direction of his seat, he noticed that someone had stolen it while he was at the admissions window. Great! He found a place next to the wall and sat down next to an obviously homeless man. The sleeping hobo was dressed in filthy, ragged clothing and smelled incredibly foul. The stink was unlike anything that Abe had smelled before. In the past, Abe had gone 2 or 3 days without showering and thought that he smelled pretty rank. That was mild compared to the tang of the hobo next to him. Abe wondered why the hobo was there, because the man didn't appear to be hurt in any obvious way. Abe was glad that he himself wasn't homeless and began feeling sorry for the poor hobo. The snoozing hobo began quietly moaning and then farted the loudest fart ever. The smell of the hobo's body odor was nothing compared to the person's fart stench. What had that hobo been eating? Then the hobo farted again and it sounded like a wet one. Hmm. Abe wondered. Did that sleeping hobo just poop in his pants?

169. Ellsworth's Spark 2



169. Ellsworth's Spark 2

Ellsworth had to muster the courage that he hoped was within himself to make the first move to get into the giraffe paddock. All he had to do was leap from his slippery perch in the tree. It seemed simple enough on paper. What could go wrong? He might miss the top of the fence, slide down the front of the fence and crash to the ground. He might land on top of the fence and be stabbed by the small security spikes. Those spikes didn't look very dangerous, but they would certainly hurt a bit. He might slip while trying to jump from the tree and crash to the ground. As he thought about how dangerous it would actually be to jump, the leader of the giraffes walked over to the fence to investigate the racket. Ellsworth had made so much noise while shimmying his hooves up the tree that the giraffe leader couldn't help but hear the clamor. The giraffe leader and the number 2 giraffe alternated making patrols each night for the safety of the herd. It had been the giraffe leader's turn that night.

When the giraffe leader reached Ellsworth, he asked the camel what was going on. Ellsworth explained that he had wanted to get a new sleeping structure for the giraffes in the same manner as he had with the other animals at the zoo. The giraffe leader had heard about Ellsworth's exploits and had been waiting in earnest for a new giraffe sleeping structure to come along. The giraffe leader was miffed that Ellsworth had waited so long to finally get to the giraffes. Ellsworth assured the giraffe leader that the giraffe sleeping structure had been on his list; he just had to have time to get to it. Ellsworth begged the giraffe leader for help. The giraffe leader asked Ellsworth how long he had been stuck up in the tree and Ellsworth told him. The giraffe leader laughed and told Ellsworth that he would help the camel when he got around to it. As the giraffe leader turned to walk away, Ellsworth whispered with a shrieking voice for help now, not later. The camel cried that he was losing his grip and was about to fall.

The giraffe leader agreed to help Ellsworth and walked back to the sleeping structure to wake up the other giraffes. Ellsworth breathed a sigh of relief and wondered how the giraffes planned to help him out of the tree. When the giraffes returned to the fence, the giraffe leader made a deal with Ellsworth that the giraffes would help the camel get out of the tree and onto their side of the fence only if Ellsworth promised to burn down their sleeping structure. They would then help Ellsworth escape from the giraffe paddock to get back to his camel paddock. Ellsworth agreed with the giraffe leader and the giraffes got into position. It was as if the giraffes had done it before. They assembled into 2 groups - 1 group of 4 giraffes stood 2 by 2 at the fence and the other group of 2 giraffes climbed onto the backs of the group 1 giraffes. The plan was that Ellsworth would give his best effort to jump from the tree and try to clear the fence. The 2 giraffes from group 2 would assist Ellsworth as he sailed through the air toward the fence.

If Ellsworth came up short, the group 2 giraffes would grab him and pull him over the top of the fence. It was simple. The giraffe leader reassured Ellsworth that the giraffes in the 2 groups had

performed similar stunts while they were still in Barnum & Bailey's circus. Ellsworth was impressed by the organizational abilities of the giraffes and he became more confident in success. The plan was that the giraffe leader would be waiting behind the 2 stacked groups and Ellsworth would land on the leader's back after clearing the top of the fence. The 2 giraffes from group 2 egged Ellsworth on and attempted to give him more confidence. Even though the giraffes seemed to know what they were doing, Ellsworth was still hesitant to make the leap of faith. The taller group 2 giraffe yelled at Ellsworth to jump already; they didn't have all night, after all. Ellsworth took a big breath and leaped.

As he left the tree, his back hooves slipped slightly, which was to be expected. He sailed through the air and the group 2 giraffes sensed that Ellsworth wasn't going to make it. They quickly reached their long necks toward Ellsworth. Each group 2 giraffe bit into one of Ellsworth's ears and yanked. Ellsworth howled from the pain of the giraffes biting his ears, but knew that it was necessary. The group 2 giraffes flexed their powerful necks and flung Ellsworth clear of the fence back toward the giraffe leader waiting behind them. Ellsworth was elated that he had cleared the fence, but the group 2 giraffes hadn't been aware of their own strength. The powerful giraffes had exerted so much force when hauling Ellsworth over the top of the fence that Ellsworth's body had gone into an end-over-end spin. Ellsworth came down and landed on the giraffe leader with his balls in contact with the giraffe leader's face. The giraffe leader snorted from the vile stench of Ellsworth's balls in his face and Ellsworth slid down the giraffe leader's sloped back.

Ellsworth panicked and didn't want to slide down the giraffe leader's back onto the ground. The camel reached out with his mouth and grabbed onto the giraffe leader's tail with his teeth. Ellsworth also clung the best that he could to the giraffe leader's body with his hooves. The giraffe leader instantly felt the agony of Ellsworth's teeth biting into his tail and he instinctively took off running. The giraffe leader began galloping and bucking around the giraffe paddock in an attempt to rid himself of the torturous camel on his back. The group 1 and 2 giraffes dismounted and stood by to observe the spectacle. They talked among themselves and noted that they had never seen their leader running so fast. Dust clouds began forming in waves. The giraffe leader was violently bucking like a bull trying to throw off a bull rider at a rodeo. Ellsworth maintained his bite grip on the giraffe leader's tail and kept tenaciously clinging with his hooves. The giraffe leader yelled at Ellsworth to let go and jump off, but Ellsworth was afraid of becoming injured.

The giraffe leader instinctively kept running and bucking, because he was in so much pain. The number 2 giraffe had emerged from the sleeping structure by that point and began shouting at the giraffe leader to stop running. The only way for Ellsworth to even consider sliding down from the giraffe leader was if the giraffe leader were motionless. The giraffe leader forced himself to suppress his natural instincts and with a lurch, he stopped running. The giraffe leader bent his

head down and Ellsworth went sliding off over the giraffe's head. Once again, Ellsworth's balls made contact with the giraffe leader's face, but that was minor compared to another problem. When the giraffe leader had screeched to a halt, Ellsworth had still been gripping tightly to the giraffe's tail with his teeth. The suddenness of stopping had caused Ellsworth to bite off part of the giraffe leader's tail as the stopping momentum carried Ellsworth toward the front of the giraffe. The giraffe leader began screaming like a baby giraffe. Ellsworth landed on the ground in front of the giraffe leader with a piece of the giraffe leader's tail in his mouth. The giraffe leader ran forward with his head down and rammed Ellsworth with its horns. The number 2 giraffe ran between the giraffe leader and Ellsworth to prevent the giraffe leader from doing great harm to Ellsworth.

The giraffe leader calmed himself and managed to come back to reality. The giraffe leader stood there looking at Ellsworth with the piece of giraffe tail in his mouth. Ellsworth suddenly realized the inappropriateness of him standing there with the piece of giraffe tail in his mouth and he turned around to spit it on the ground. The giraffe leader snorted in rage and started to run at Ellsworth again. The number 2 giraffe once again intervened to stop a potential disaster. Rather than allowing the giraffe leader to see a piece of his tail on the dusty ground, Ellsworth picked up the piece of tail, ran to the fence and flung it over the top of the fence. As Ellsworth made his way back to the number 1 and 2 giraffes, the giraffe leader gradually calmed himself down again. Ellsworth repeatedly proclaimed his sorrow for the loss of the giraffe leader's piece of tail. Eventually, the giraffe leader forgave Ellsworth, because it was the right thing to do. The giraffe leader felt that Ellsworth as a camel was an animal that was beneath the giraffes in the hierarchy of the animal kingdom, so that the stupid camel shouldn't be held responsible for his actions.

The giraffe leader did acknowledge however, that Ellsworth had figured out a way to remove the old sleeping structures, of which none of the other zoo animals had been capable. At least Ellsworth had that going for him. His cowardice and selfishness for self-preservation were other matters entirely. The giraffe leader escorted Ellsworth to the sleeping structure and ordered the giraffes that were still in the structure to move to the far corner of the paddock. As the giraffe leader stood at the sleeping structure with Ellsworth, the giraffe wished that he didn't have to rely on the stupid camel for a better lifestyle. The giraffe leader was 36 years old and had seen many things. He hated having to be at the mercy of humans for his survival and he missed his homeland of Africa. The giraffe leader concluded that if the stupid camel could help the giraffe herd to live happier, then the loss of his tail piece would have been justified.

Ellsworth explained that a large pile of straw needed to be assembled at the corners of the wooden sleeping structure and Ellsworth would then use his device to get the fire started. The giraffe leader assisted Ellsworth with the straw collection task and after 17 minutes, the preparations were ready. Ellsworth flinched his neck to release the spark-producing object from the usual hiding place in the neck skin folds. He flinched and flinched, but the device refused to

show itself. Ellsworth concluded that the object had somehow fallen out from his neck folds during the evening's events. When the giraffe leader asked Ellsworth why there was a delay, the camel pleaded his case. The giraffe leader was enraged at Ellsworth and began ramming the camel with his horns again. The number 2 giraffe trotted over from the far corner, just in time to prevent real injury to Ellsworth.

Ellsworth stated that they had to find the object or the deal would be off. The object was absolutely essential to the project at hand. The giraffe leader ordered the number 2 giraffe to go fetch the rest of the giraffe herd. Ellsworth and the giraffes began the search for Ellsworth's magical object. As the night wore on, all the animals were getting more and more tired, since they were normally sleeping at that time of day. Unrest within the giraffe herd was beginning to brew. Ellsworth was beginning to get nervous about his fate. If Ellsworth didn't take care of the giraffe's sleeping structure per the plan, the giraffe leader might cause him some serious bodily harm. After a couple hours of searching, one of the recently born giraffes began squeaking that it had found something. The mother of the baby giraffe trotted over to scrutinize the situation. The baby giraffe had indeed located a strange object in the loose dirt. The mother giraffe whistled for the number 2 giraffe to come over. When the number 2 giraffe had concluded that it might actually be the object in question, he whistled for the giraffe leader to come over with Ellsworth.

Ellsworth rooted around in the dirt and to his extreme joy, he had discovered his precious object. The camel immediately galloped to the sleeping structure, while the giraffe leader ordered the remaining giraffes to go back to the far corner of the paddock. Ellsworth was elated. Now he could carry out his well-intended mission. He would be able to grant the giraffes a new sleeping structure, as he had desired. He would further increase the legend of his benevolence at the zoo. Most importantly, he would be able to escape the giraffe paddock alive on that night. As Ellsworth reached the first straw pile, the giraffe leader arrived. The giraffe leader was murmuring something under his breath. Ellsworth felt his former excitement at finding his object beginning to turn into fear again. Why did that giraffe leader have to be so imposing? Maybe it was his new shorter tail that was still bleeding from the bite incident. Maybe the giraffe leader was just curious about the whole process.

Ellsworth tried to operate his object as he had in the past. The device had gotten really grimy and dusty from landing in the dirt. Ellsworth further noted that the plastic of the device had a scratch on it. One of the animals might have accidentally stepped on the object during the initial moments of Ellsworth arriving in the paddock or during the search for the device. The thing wouldn't work. Ellsworth became nerve wracked. The giraffe leader's face was next to Ellsworth's face. The giraffe leader looked into Ellsworth's eyes with bad intent. The giraffe leader asked Ellsworth why nothing was happening. Ellsworth claimed that he didn't know what was going on. The device had always worked in the past as anyone could see from the recent sleeping structure fires. Ellsworth begged the giraffe leader to back off a little, because he was

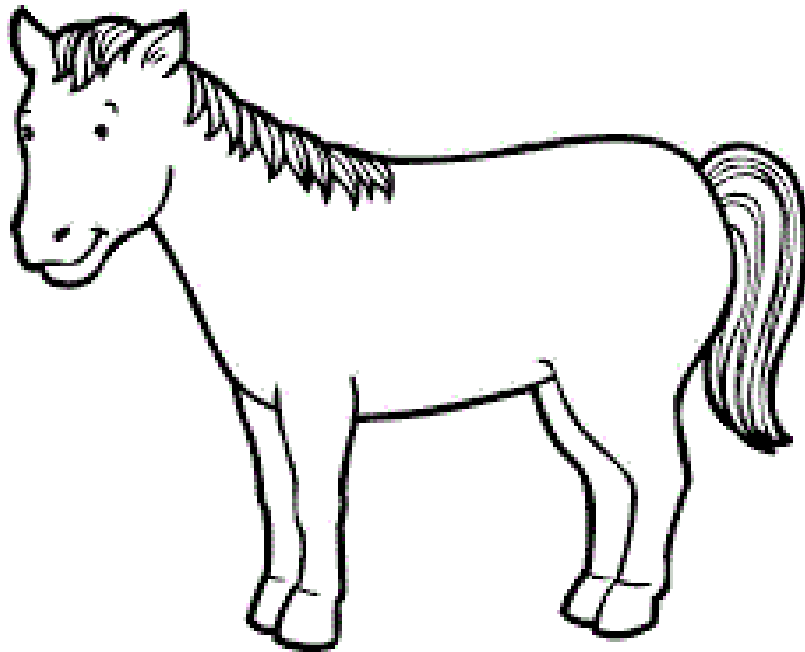
making him nervous. The giraffe leader complied. The giraffe leader began impatiently tapping one of his hooves in the dirt. Ellsworth silently looked at the tapping hoof and the giraffe leader stopped.

What was wrong with the object? Could it be that Ellsworth's precious spark object had been rendered unusable? It couldn't be! It had to work! The camel's life might depend on it. Ellsworth dropped the object onto a piece of wood and blew the dust out of it. He flipped it over and blew on it again. He then picked it up and shook it. He didn't know why he shook it, but he was desperate to find the solution. He was willing to try anything. He picked up the object in his mouth and swirled it around to clean it. He placed the spit-covered device onto the piece of wood and blew on the device to dry it. He tried to operate the object again, with no success. The giraffe leader asked Ellsworth if he thought the device was working or not. Ellsworth shrugged his shoulders, indicating that he didn't know.

The giraffe leader whistled for the number 2 and 3 giraffes to come over to see if they had any ideas. The number 2 giraffe shrugged his shoulders. The number 3 giraffe suggested that maybe some fart gas would somehow fix the device. The giraffe leader, the number 2 giraffe and the number 3 giraffe all farted on the object. Ellsworth tried the object and it still didn't work. Ellsworth farted on his device, but he couldn't make it work. The number 3 giraffe whispered something to the giraffe leader. The giraffe leader whistled for the mother of the baby that had found the object to come over with her baby. The giraffe leader instructed the baby mother to tell her baby to fart on the object. Since the baby had only been born recently, it didn't yet have the full control of its gastrointestinal system. The baby giraffe stressed that it might not be able to emit a controlled fart and that it might actually poop while trying to fart. The giraffe leader whispered something into the baby's ear. The bay giraffe smiled and squatted over Ellsworth's device. At first, a squeaky fart came out of the baby's poophole, but then the inevitable happened.

Some runny poop spilled out onto Ellsworth's object. Ellsworth and the adult giraffes gasped in horror. The baby giraffe started crying and galloped away. The mother giraffe galloped after her baby. The number 2 and 3 giraffes galloped after the mother and her baby. The giraffe leader stared menacingly at Ellsworth. Ellsworth's mouth hung open like big bass about to eat a wild shiner. Ellsworth feverishly picked up the device and swirled it around in his mouth. The taste was awful. Why was the poop of all baby creatures so horrendous? Only the creator truly knew. All Ellsworth knew was that he had to try again. After reluctantly swishing his poop-laden object around in his mouth, he placed it on the wood to blow it dry. He blew on one side, flipped it over and blew on the other side. He waited a few moments for the air to provide the final ambient drying. The giraffe leader began tapping one of his hooves again. Ellsworth shared the giraffe leader's stress. Ellsworth nervously picked up the object in his lips and carefully operated it. Once, twice, thrice. Suddenly it flashed. It worked!

170. Harry's Heroes 2



170. Harry's Heroes 2

Initially, patient QB had startled Harry, because the horse had never encountered such a physical presence. Normally, the patients that Harry helped kind of just stood there or sat there as Harry worked his magic on them. Harry's previous patients had never grabbed onto his ears and squeezed them. QB was certainly different. Apparently, QB was some kind of super-genius, whatever that meant. To Harry, the patient was just another patient. To the guardians of QB, it was something else. The patient's guardians had adopted QB when the boy was 7 years old. QB had been certified as a genius, but QB's autism had limited his ability to utilize his intelligence. The boy had been home-schooled his whole life and he passed all the standard tests with flying colors. When the boy turned 18, he was hit in the head by lightning and went into a coma for 2 months. When the boy awoke, his intelligence had soared even higher.

QB's adoptive parents were a husband and wife scientist team who had been working on various projects over the years, but they had finally decided to devote their life's work to finding a cure for autism. They felt that by adopting an autistic child, they would have firsthand experience with the struggles involved for the parents and the autistic person. The experience gained would hopefully enable them to discover a cure. When QB awoke from his coma, his parents were overjoyed that they hadn't lost their only child. QB wasn't able to share the joy of his parents, due to his illness, but he began showing positivity in other ways. QB began performing mathematical calculations for no reason whatsoever. He became a machine for solving problems. He used up dozens of pencils and ream after ream of paper. QB's parents provided him with books of all the greatest theories from the fields of Physics, Mathematics and Chemistry. QB managed to re-create the various complex solutions to all the theories without any assistance from his parents. QB's parents were overwhelmed. They soon realized that their son possibly had the equivalent mental capabilities of the greatest thinkers that the world had ever known.

QB's parents were unable to assist QB in harnessing his immense powers, however. His parents had heard about Harry's healing and releasing abilities and made plans to visit with the special horse. QB's parents hoped that Harry would be able to reach QB and help him to express his thoughts. If QB's tremendous thought powers could be employed, perhaps something amazing could come of it. It might be possible for QB to assist in finding a cure for his own autism. Naturally, QB had no idea of his affliction; all he knew was that he was somehow different from other people. He had been home schooled from the 1st grade on, after having problems in kindergarten. His ability to socialize and communicate with those around him was essentially null. Occasionally, he smiled when he seemed to come to realizations about things. Usually those realizations took place while he was working his equations. QB's parents wanted more than anything else to be able to help their son. If they could find a cure for autism, then they would be able to help many individuals worldwide.

The main problem with autism is that there is no known reason for its occurrence. There is no proven cure and many of the people who appeared to have been "cured" have only managed to naturally grow out of their "minor autistic condition." QB's parents looked at autism from a scientific viewpoint in that autism was something that could be cured or treated. However, since autism is a psychological affliction, it makes it difficult for scientists to apply the usual scientific methods to solve the problem. Medications and therapies had little value in curing autism. QB's parents had decided that by trying to get QB to open up more and reveal his powerful inner thoughts, maybe QB could help to develop the cure.

Of course, Harry knew nothing more about QB other than the person seemed to have an incredibly powerful psyche, more powerful than any encountered by Harry in the past. QB had a grip on Harry's ears and Harry needed to do something about it. Harry bit the tip of QB's nose. QB's eyes opened wide like someone who had just been told that they were fired. QB maintained his grip on Harry's ears, but stopped squeezing them so annoyingly. Harry bit QB's nose again and QB started laughing, but he still held onto Harry's ears. Harry spat again in QB's face. Since QB's mouth had been open while laughing, Harry's spit went into QB's mouth. QB accidentally swallowed Harry's spit and began gagging on the nasty stuff. QB let go of Harry's ears and started puking. Harry laughed. As QB puked, he noticed Harry laughing and began laughing himself. QB's laughing made Harry laugh harder. QB laughed harder. The horse and man laughed so hard that they made themselves fart. Since Harry had already pooped out all his poop when QB grabbed onto and squeezed his ears, all Harry could do was fart.

QB on the other hand hadn't pooped yet on that day and his last fart had caused a little morsel of poop to fall out into his underwear. QB became hysterical with laughter. He had never laughed in his lifetime and somehow Harry had helped him to laugh. Harry enabled QB's inner resistance to let go of some inhibition that the autism had trapped. QB and Harry continued laughing for about 15 minutes and stopped out of exhaustion. Harry was exhausted because he ran out of breath and QB was exhausted by the emotional release of years of anxiety. For the first time in his life, QB spoke; he said to Harry, "I like you!" Harry whinnied his jovial horsey response. During that meeting between Harry and QB, no one else was present. The next day, QB's parents accompanied him to be with Harry.

At first, Harry was reluctant to approach QB standing at the stall opening with his parents. Normally, Harry worked one-on-one with his patients. After a few moments, Harry sneaked over to his stall opening and greeted the trio. QB put his hand on Harry's face and Harry murmured as horses do. QB's parents decided to remain silent at first, until QB relaxed. QB relaxed immediately and actually began whispering in Harry's ear. QB's parents wondered what QB was saying to Harry, but they didn't want to interrupt. The progress with their son seemed incredible to them. Of course, QB still didn't talk to his parents, only to Harry. QB's parents expected QB to eventually talk to them, so they didn't worry about it at that moment. As the days and weeks

of therapy passed, QB was still only communicating with Harry and not with his parents or any other people. QB's parents remained patient. They had researched autism for many years and knew that it might take a while for QB to completely break free and communicate more normally.

After 6 months, QB reached a major milestone and actually said something to his father. QB whispered in his father's ear that he wanted to help. QB's father asked QB, "Help how?" QB whispered in his mother's ear that he wanted to help with the cure. QB's mother asked, "What cure?" QB spoke aloud, "The cure for my autism!" QB's parents began weeping. How did their son know? How long had he known? So many questions ran through the minds of QB's parents that they fell to the ground from the emotional blast given to them by their beloved son. QB's parents hugged and kissed him until QB could take no more. He suddenly ran away from them and ran to the car. It had been too much for him to handle when his parents became all touchy-feely. It should have been enough for them that he finally said something to them. They didn't have to start grabbing him and embarrassing him like that in front of Harry.

The next day, QB's parents kept him at home in the hopes that QB would communicate with them again. QB had been silent on the ride home the previous day. QB refused to say anything as he ate his Captain Crunch cereal that morning. He said nothing at lunch and he said nothing at dinner. QB seemed to have reverted to his old self again. The next day, they took QB to visit with Harry again. QB greeted Harry with a hearty, "Hello Harry!" Harry whinnied back. QB mentioned to his parents that Harry looked great. QB parents looked at each other. For some reason, QB only felt comfortable communicating with them when in the presence of Harry. They opined that it might only be temporary and that QB should eventually come around in the absence of Harry. QB didn't. QB's parents experimented by alternating QB's visits with Harry with varied intervals. QB only spoke when in the presence of Harry. QB's parents discussed the matter with different therapists, psychiatrists and psychologists. The experts all agreed that QB should eventually be able to break free of the bond with Harry.

After a year of visits with Harry, QB still only spoke in the presence of Harry. What was missing? Just when QB had made the breakthrough and actually offered to help find the cure, they seemed stalemated. QB's parents consulted with Harry's handlers about the possibility of buying Harry and taking the horse home with them. Harry's handlers outright refused. Harry's healing powers were far too valuable to waste on just one person. The horse had helped countless individuals with living better and becoming happy again. As much as Harry's handlers sympathized with QB's parents, they simply couldn't let Harry leave the premises. QB's parents understood where Harry's handlers were coming from and they had to deal with it. They had to find a way to gain QB's help with the use of Harry. Since QB's parents had more money than Davy Crockett, they made an offer to the owners of Harry's facility.

QB's parents offered a large sum of money if they were allowed to build a research lab on the grounds. That way, they could work with QB and Harry together. If QB only communicated in the presence of Harry, QB's parents needed that communication. They had to tap QB's brain to help find the cure. QB's immense desire and capability of working solutions was the only way to perform the necessary research. The facility agreed to allow the lab to be built as long as QB's parents contracted to make annual donations to the facility over the next 20 years. QB's parents agreed. They would be willing to pay any amount of money to help their son and others with autism. As the lab was being built, QB continued his daily therapy with Harry. During the therapy sessions, QB's parents gradually discussed more and more ideas with QB. QB's parents were amazed at their son's intelligence and thirst for knowledge. The boy seemed to have no limits on thinking. He was like a modern day Albert Einstein.

When the lab was completed, Harry's facility allowed Harry to be moved from his current stall into a special lab stall for inside and outside access. QB was able to communicate with Harry and thus his parents, via the new stall configuration. Harry was still able to see his other patients in between visiting with QB. As long as QB was communicative, his parents could focus his energies. The trick was to figure out a way of creating a drug to cure, or at least treat autism. Since there were myriad theories afoot, it was difficult to find a place to begin. QB's parents provided QB with all the latest literature and publications related to autism. QB was able to read and digest the huge amount of info in record time. He was anxious to find a cure for himself and others, but he also truly enjoyed the whole process. He felt as if he had been born again into a better world.

QB and his parents worked in the lab for 3 months, following many avenues of research, until QB came upon something in one of his readings. Scientists in Poland recently determined that autistic symptoms could possibly be treated to an extent if a certain compound could be formulated. Since some autistic symptoms involved excessive brain inputs from too many synapses in the brain, a precisely calibrated drug could reduce the number of synapses. Since the Polish scientists had published their findings, the world had been racing to figure out the necessary compound. QB researched further and further. Since much scientific research was based on trial and error, QB decided to try a new way. His prowess for solving equations would have to be beneficial in determining the answer. QB discussed the idea with his parents and they allowed him to go for it. It made sense to them that a compound might be determined mathematically, instead of by the time-consuming trial and error method. In the meantime, they would continue their approaches.

QB began his work. QB had a special bed placed next to Harry's stall so that he could see his beloved horse whenever he wanted. Harry's stall had a glass window on the lab side, to allow the horse some quiet during the night. QB never intended to bother Harry during the night; he simply liked to be near the horse. QB worked feverishly on his equations. He obtained

additional research from his parents, as he needed it. Months went by and QB actually began coming up with potentially viable solutions. He reviewed his daily work with his parents and at first, they couldn't understand his angle. After a while, they began to understand. A year after QB began his work, he began presenting his parents with the detailed compositions of the compounds for them to experiment on. The trial and error work by his parents would ferret out the potential solutions from the bad ones. QB was no scientist by any means; it was up to his parents to make his theories reality. QB's theories weren't working. Even though QB's concepts were logical to his parents, the synapse-reducing compound remained evasive.

QB didn't lose heart and neither did his parents; the answer was out there somewhere. QB needed to have some kind of a brainstorm to crack the code. QB began taking walks around Harry's facility with Harry and 1 of Harry's handlers. On one such hot summer afternoon, QB, Harry and the handler were out strolling and thunder started. Lightning bolts began appearing in the distance. They decided to make their way back to the buildings to take shelter from the storm before it got there. The thunder and lightning increased. Since the facility was so large, the 3 had been quite a ways out from the buildings. It started pouring rain, with the thunder and lightning closing in on them. Harry broke free from his handler and ran like the wind back to his building. The sopping wet handler ran after Harry and shouted for the soaked QB to get a move on. QB waved the handler to go on ahead. QB was fascinated by the power of the weather. He had been cooped up in his home for so long, that he didn't realize what he was missing outdoors.

He slowly strolled through the pouring rain with his arms outstretched like a scarecrow. He loved the storm. He felt glorious. He was soaked all the way through to his skin, but he was warm and happy. The thunder and lightning seemed to be upon him, but he was fearless. Even though he had been hit by lightning in the past, it had to be a one in a billion chance to be hit again. He had read that lightning was usually attracted to the tallest object in the area. There were trees within 100 feet of him that should take the lightning hit; the lightning wouldn't hit him. It couldn't. It did. A "minor" bolt of lightning hit QB in the head and knocked him to the ground. He was out cold. Some amount of time later, QB's parents came to rescue him and bring him to the hospital. He was in a coma for 6 days.

When QB awoke from the coma, he shouted, "Aha!" He suddenly rolled over, fell out of his high hospital bed and scooted over to his parents to acquire a pad and pencil. Without speaking a word, he hurriedly scratched numbers and formulas for the next 45 minutes. When he was done, he had filled 2 pads full of ramblings. QB handed the sweaty notes to his parents, who were unable to make out a thing. QB's blurry writing was most likely only discernible to him. Since he was unable to talk unless in the presence of Harry, QB couldn't explain his notes. QB became incredibly excited and began running around the hospital room. The nurse came in to reattach his saline bag and administer a sleep aid. QB's parents couldn't wait to take QB back to the lab to discuss his eureka moment.

171. Pat's Gang 2



171. Pat's Gang 2

Fisheyes and Fingers ordered Pat into the van. With Fisheyes at the wheel, the 3 cons drove as quickly as the van could take them toward the front gate. Pat asked the others what the heck they were doing. Pat was in a fervor. He wanted no part of the jailbreak, but he had been dragged into it against his will. Fisheyes explained his 2-part plan. Unbeknownst to Fingers and Pat, Fisheyes had been planning a jailbreak for many months. He hadn't revealed any details of the plan to anyone in the prison for fear that information might be leaked out. If any elements of the plan had become public knowledge, it would have been impossible to execute the plan. Prisons were full of stool pigeons, squealers and other weak-spirited individuals who spewed information to the authorities in order to make their lives easier. Fisheyes' knowledge of the prison system and transportation networks, in and out of the prisons had fueled his thought processes. He knew many people on the outside who would be more than glad to help him for a fee or at least for a partnership in some future money-grabbing scenario.

Once a person had made that first fatal mistake by obtaining a criminal record, they basically became enemies of society. Fisheyes knew many lowlifes similar to himself whom he had in place waiting outside for the current prison break plan to occur. Plan A began with smashing through the front gate of the prison with the van going at full speed. As Fisheyes, Fingers and Pat sat in the racing van, Fisheyes revealed some details. If they could manage to get through the front gate and make their way to the nearby city, they could pull the van into a certain building owned by one of Fisheyes' cohorts. With the van hidden inside that building, they could go their separate ways. That plan was the ideal plan, because Fisheyes had people in the building who would be able to supply clothing and money for the escaped convict trio. Fingers and Pat had many contacts on the outside as well. Fisheyes revealed the names of 2 people in the building, with whom Fingers and Pat had been acquainted. The trio hoped that plan A would work.

As the van reached the front gate, the cons encountered 2 parked vehicles that were positioned to block the way. Fisheyes already had the pedal to the metal in the van so that at 83 mph, the van was at full speed when it impacted with the 2 parked vehicles. The van easily smashed through the parked vehicles and then smashed through the gate. Bullets were flying in every direction at that point. The main problem with law enforcement in general was that they were all trained to avoid firing their weapons. In theory, it would be a wonderful protocol to follow. However, it was the lack of using their weapons in real situations that caused some law enforcement individuals to panic when a rare crisis erupted. Those individuals would then sometimes fire at will and exhaust the magazines of their overkill 31-round magazined handguns. Those individuals rarely hit anything during their moments of panic and usually only injured or killed an innocent bystander of some unarmed individual.

In the case of Fisheyes, Fingers and Pat, fortunately for them, only the left rear Run-Flat tire had

been hit by the spastic shooters. Since the van had been equipped with such special tires, it enabled the trio to continue driving at full speed for a while, until the leaking tire had reached too low of a pressure. When that designated pressure had been reached, the temperature of the leaking tire would be such that the tire would become unstable and make the vehicle on which the tire was installed, a tricky thing to maneuver. Since Fisheyes had driven go-carts in his younger days, he was fully confident in being capable of handling the van if it became unstable. The van began swerving to the left and right as the damaged tire altered the vehicles handling package. Fisheyes remained undaunted. He had driven many sloppy handling errant vehicles in his past and he wasn't too worried about the van. Fingers and Pat were beginning to get nervous and jerky and began to have dire thoughts about their outcome. The van continued to swerve, but Fisheyes stayed calm. They had to get as far away from the prison as possible.

Because of the damaged tire, plan A didn't seem as if it would become fruitful. There was no way that they could drive that limping van into the city. Fisheyes was dauntless, however. Plan B entailed the trio ditching the van at a predetermined location and getting into a boat that had been put in place weeks before. As they drove, Fisheyes kept looking for the right spot. It was just a matter of time that a helicopter would be in the air that would easily find the van and end their escape charade. Fingers and Pat kept their Fingers crossed and hoped that Fisheyes would be able to pull it off. Fisheyes suddenly veered to the left near a huge old oak tree and guided the van to the right of the tree. As Fingers and Pat screamed to high heaven from fright, Fisheyes drove the van into the river behind the oak tree. Plan B had been put into motion.

Even though Fisheyes had been bestowed with a lower than average IQ, his life of crime had instilled within him special abilities to handle anything that came along. When an impulse had triggered his left brain that he wanted or needed something, his right brain had no choice but to carry out the impulse. Fisheyes had been flying a kite when he was 5 during a thunderstorm. The youth remained in the field stalwartly maneuvering his kite, long after his buddies had scurried back home to their mommies. As the wind whipped crazily and the thunder exploded loudly, Fisheyes kept flying his kite. He absolutely loved the scene. There he was, alone with the infinite power of nature, playing with his stupid kite. The situation had represented much more to Fisheyes than the simple act of flying a kite. He had been risking his very life in order to maximize the potential of his kite. The wind was so immense that the kite strings had cut into hid young Fingers.

He looked at the blood on his Fingers and laughed. He yelled at the thunderous sky that he wasn't about to leave that field under any circumstances. He had obviously possessed the invincible mentality of a typical youth, except at a much higher level. He was afraid of nothing. When the rain started pouring in buckets, Fisheyes' kite became soaked with moisture. He screamed at his kite to hang in there, even as the weight of the rain gradually made the kite sink down through the heavy air. Fisheyes maintained his insane composure as the storm raged, even

though his kite flying adventure appeared to be at an end. As his rain-soaked kite slowly drifted down to the ground, he began crying. As uncharacteristic as it was for a tough youth like Fisheyes to cry under any circumstances, it was even odder that he had burst into tears when his kite touched the ground and lay there like a dead butterfly.

After Fisheyes, Fingers and Pat barely escaped from the sinking van per Fisheyes' barked instructions, they floated for 100 yards to the location of the moored vessel, as detailed in the plan. Fortunately for Fingers and Pat, they were both able to swim. As they floated for those nervous 100 yards, they couldn't remember if Fisheyes had ever asked them in the past if they could swim or not. At that point, it didn't matter, because the 3 of them were on a mission that proclaimed, "Every man for himself!" The designated boat was a perfect vehicle for their escape, because it had been designed for tight maneuvering. Plan B directed the men to employ the boat to quickly navigate down the raging river for a spell, until another marker had been encountered. Since Fisheyes had been the only member of the escaped trio who was in possession of the location of the next marker, Fingers and Pat were at the mercy of Fisheyes' memory.

As the men floated to the shore, Fisheyes roared at them to jump into the boat as quickly as they could. The men complied. Fingers and Pat realized at that moment that their lives were in the hands of Fisheyes, whatever that meant. As the 3 men untethered, entered and pushed the boat from the shore, Fisheyes sifted through one of the olive drab colored backpacks that had been sitting in the bottom of the boat. From the backpack, Fisheyes produced a .44 magnum revolver, similar to the model used by Dirty Harry. Fingers and Pat said nothing as Fisheyes inserted the gun into his belt. Fisheyes ordered Fingers and Pat to change into the clothes in one of the other backpacks as Fisheyes drove the boat down the river. Fisheyes then commanded Pat to take control of the motor, as Fisheyes changed into the 3rd set of civilian clothes from the backpack. The men were told by Fisheyes to eat and drink at will from the food and drink in the backpacks.

As the various food and beverage laden backpacks were emptied, they were set on fire and then the ashes were chucked into the river. The plan that had been set in place by Fisheyes seemed to have many contingencies covered. Of course, no plan was perfect. After Fisheyes had changed into his civilian garb, he regained control of the boat. He informed Fingers and Pat about the next things to expect as they proceeded down the river. At no point, had Fisheyes ever intended to give out all the details of the escape plan to Fingers and Pat. The 2 had existed on a need to know basis. Fisheyes had felt that method to be the best way to achieve success. If the other 2 men had known too much, they might be hesitant or they might be inclined to offer suggestions. Fisheyes wasn't open to any opinions or suggestions about ways of improving the plan's specifications. Fisheyes had been working on the escape concept for long enough to exhaust most, if not all, the possibilities of failure.

Fisheyes had been fully aware of the problems related to a helicopter flying overhead and that's

why the escape had been planned to occur during the time of year when the surrounding trees were at their leafiest. A helicopter couldn't see through trees, unless the officials used some type of infrared equipment. Fisheyes had a detail to thwart the infrared. As long as the trio could get downstream to the next designated location before a helicopter was overhead, they would be fine. Fisheyes racked his brain for that all-important next location. Where was it? Was it at a tree or at a boulder or at a cove or at a bend? Where the heck was it? The trio heard the helicopter in the distance. They had to get off that river. The next checkpoint had to be just up ahead. Where was it? There it was! Of course! It was at a cove on the left, away from the road side of the river. The road at that point on the river was approximately 2 miles away, due to the bends of the river. Fisheyes had remembered correctly. For the first time that day, Fisheyes managed to form a devious grin with his sinister mouth.

He cut the motor and drifted the boat into the cove. He ordered the others to grab the remaining backpacks and to help him sink the boat. Fisheyes produced 3 pairs of special booties from one of the backpacks and instructed the men to put them on over their shoes. The booties were infused with a special chemical that would confuse sniffing dogs, in case there were any sniffing dogs. There were plugs strategically located in the boat bottom, which when popped out, immediately sunk the boat to the bottom of the deep river. Fisheyes was particularly proud of that detail. A boating friend of his on the outside had come up with that one. The crucial concept that Fisheyes emphasized to Fingers and Pat was that they could leave no traces of their presence. Dogs would soon be on the scene that would be able to track them via any presence of the convicts. Exiting from the river on the side opposite to the road was an advantage in that respect. Since the searchers would most likely be releasing the dogs from vehicles parked on the road and then heading in the direction of the river, the river would provide a stopgap for the escapees.

The trio had the element of time to their advantage. Time combined with Fisheyes' plan seemed to be just what the escaped trio's doctor had ordered. Fisheyes led the men from the scuttled boat site into the dense woods next to the river. The men chopped their way through the sickeningly thick growth with machetes from one of the packs. The growth was full of briars and scratchy vines. Fortunately, the men were wearing thick canvas jackets to protect them from the abusive scratches. The going was arduous and slow, but they were free and on their way somewhere. As difficult as it was to make their way through the stuff, the men felt elated. It seemed to Fingers and Pat that Fisheyes' plan was working. Fisheyes told himself that the most important aspect of plan B was to find the cave. The cave would permit the men to live for a while completely hidden, until the next parts of the plan could be effected. As the men inched their way through the jungle, Fisheyes struggled to visualize the map in his brain. A visitor with the map sketched on their hand had shown the map to Fisheyes during a visit.

The escaped trio was cutting new ground as they went, since the area hadn't been trespassed by a

human for years. A friend of Fisheyes, who explored caves as a hobby, had discovered the cave. Those cavers who were really into the sport were an adventurous bunch indeed. All they ever wanted to do was find new caves, explore them and move onto the next one. The particular cave that Fisheyes was looking for was an unusually large one, but ridiculously hidden at the same time. It was one of those caves with a ground level entrance that was covered by vegetation of some sort. It might be difficult to find. Fisheyes tapped his memory for the landmarks around the cave. There was some kind of dead tree on one side of the cave entrance and some boulders on the other side. Where was that stuff? The growth that the men were chopping through was thick and tall like bamboo, limiting the visibility of anything around them. After an hour of painstaking trudging, the men stopped to rest. Fisheyes attempted to get a feel from the men of how they felt about how things were going. Fingers and Pat voiced that they were content for the moment, but they were beginning to become tired.

The men ate and drank from the backpacks and then continued on their journey. Fisheyes was beginning to have doubts about his memory of the map. Did he miss something? Where was that dead tree? They hadn't encountered any boulders yet. He thought that the cave entrance was supposed to be approximately 300 yards from the river's edge, but he couldn't be sure how far they had gone so far. Fisheyes asked Fingers and Pat about how far they thought that they had traversed so far from the river's edge. Pat guessed 200 yards and Fingers guessed 250 yards. Fisheyes thought to himself that they had gone 300 yards already and was glad that the others had guessed a shorter distance. Out of desperation, Fisheyes finally reluctantly revealed to the others that they were looking for a cave that was 300 yards from the river. There should be a dead tree on one side and some boulders somewhere on the other side of the cave entrance. They all needed to keep a sharp watch out for those signs.

With the others informed about the clues for the cave location, Fisheyes felt a little better about success. After 30 minutes, Pat shouted that he saw a dead tree ahead. As they approached the tree, they looked around for the telltale boulders. The trio stopped at the dead tree and began a loose sweep around the tree, in the hopes of detecting the boulders. As they chopped and forced their way through the thick growth, Fingers yelled that he had spotted the boulders. Before Fisheyes and Pat could consult with Fingers, Fingers had suddenly disappeared. As Fisheyes and Pat called out to Fingers, they kept chopping and walking. Suddenly, Pat disappeared. Fisheyes called to Pat and heard nothing. He called again to Fingers and heard nothing. Where were they? For the next hour, Fisheyes chopped and traipsed around the area, while keeping the dead tree in sight. He suddenly heard the mute cries of someone screaming. What the heck was that? It sounded like someone was crying for help, except that they sounded as if they were miles away. Fisheyes continued searching. The cries began becoming more audible. Someone was shrieking, "Fisheyes, Help!" Fisheyes heard it again and again. What was that? Who was that? Where were they? Fisheyes then heard 2 people quietly screaming. Was that Fingers and Pat screaming for help? Where were they?

172. Landon's Whisper 2



172. Landon's Whisper 2

Landon's success with Constantine became the talk of the zoo and of the world. Landon's connection with the gorilla had been unprecedented. Constantine became a model gorilla and was able to interact with others of his kind in the large facility. Constantine had even developed a sense of humor. He created an act of his own where he would eat various fruits, spit the chewed fruit bits into the air and catch them in his mouth. The children loved it. The zoo even went as far as selling fruit in vending machines at the large window of the gorilla facility. Children were able to buy bananas, for example and then heave them over the top of the glass. Constantine would catch the tossed bananas and perform his act. Naturally, the zoo closely monitored the goings on, to prevent Constantine from eating too many of one fruit. The zoo also wanted to make sure that nothing could be thrown over the glass that might harm any of the gorillas in the facility. In no time, the other gorillas of the facility learned Constantine's act and were getting fruits tossed to them as well. The other gorillas didn't have Constantine's flare for performance, however.

Landon received a call from a zoo in China that had 2 pandas that weren't acting as normally as they should have been. Landon flew to the Chinese zoo to investigate the matter. The pandas were named Bingbing, the female and Bangbang, the male. When Landon first set eyes on the pandas, the animals didn't appear to have any injuries and seemed to be well cared for. The pandas appeared to be of the correct weight for pandas of their age. The panda handler had mentioned to Landon that there had been a storm 2 months back during which lightning and thunder cracked and roared. Shortly after the storm, the pandas began behaving strangely. The pandas ate and drank just fine. It was their new intense shyness that had confounded the owner of zoo. Since pandas were all the rage in China, every zoo had some; the pandas were always the most popular zoo attractions. The pandas at that zoo were normally happy and frolicky, but now just sat and stared all day. Landon promised to try his best.

The pandas were in their small private room away from the public and Landon was allowed in with the assistance of the handler. Bingbing and Bangbang sat in a corner together and stared blankly at Landon. As Landon approached the pandas, the lights went out. Landon, the handler and the pandas were in complete darkness together. Suddenly, a roar was heard and then another roar. Landon heard the handler scream and thought that the pandas must have attacked in the darkness. When the lights came back on, the pandas were sitting in the corner staring blankly and the handler was unconscious on the floor of the room. The handler had red stains on his uniform, indicating that something had happened to him, most likely because of a panda attack. It all happened so quickly that Landon almost wasn't even sure what had happened. Landon dragged the injured handler out of the panda room and locked the door behind him. He immediately radioed to the first aid station that an ambulance was required for the handler.

The next day, Landon conversed with another panda handler and explained the attack of the previous day. What would have possessed the seemingly sedate pandas to suddenly attack during the brief darkness? What if the lights had been out for a longer period? Would Landon have been attacked as well? Would the injured handler have been injured more severely by the pandas? The handler asked Landon if he was afraid to go back into the room with the pandas and Landon said that he wasn't. Landon opined that the pandas might have become overexcited by the presence of a stranger along with their usual handler. When the lights went out, the pandas might have panicked and slipped into a self-defense mode. Maybe, they were actually attempting to injure Landon and not their usual handler, but they couldn't tell who was who in the darkness. Both Landon and the other handler agreed that the pandas have an excellent sense of smell and they would have been able to smell the difference between Landon and their usual handler in the darkness.

Landon had avoided injury for a yet unknown reason. Perhaps, the pandas sensed Landon's mystical abilities with animals and had avoided hurting him. Who knows? Landon hadn't been able to make contact with the pandas in the short time in the room with them. He needed to make contact with an animal in order to communicate with it in his usual way. After a week of allowing the pandas to settle down, Landon went back in without the assistance of another handler. If Landon's theory was correct, he needed to be alone with the creatures, without interference from other humans in the room. Since pandas ate bamboo as the majority of their diet, Landon offered the pandas in the corner some choice tender bamboo sprouts to break the ice. As Landon held out the sprouts, Bingbing reached out first and took some. Bangbang then reached out for some sprouts. The pandas seemed to appreciate Landon's peace offering and they quietly crunched away as they stared at him. Landon kept giving sprouts to the pandas, until the sprouts were gone. Landon couldn't tell if the pandas were ready to communicate or not, but he tried anyway.

Landon reached his left hand out to Bingbing in a similar manner as when he offered the sprouts to the panda. Bingbing reached her right paw out to Landon's hand and made contact with Landon's index finger with 1 of her toes. Landon twitched and immediately went into one of his trances. Bingbing twitched and started dreaming about being free. Since Bangbang had been in direct contact with Bingbing as they sat in the corner, he twitched and also began dreaming of freedom. Bingbing and Bangbang found themselves together in each other's dreams. They were freely roaming the mountainous bamboo rainforests of their Native China. They were exceedingly happy. The bamboo grew in abundance there in myriad varieties. It was a true paradise for a panda. They were a mating pair of pandas that were part of a large panda community.

The panda community prospered and many panda cubs were born annually. Bingbing and Bangbang were having dreams together that were the equivalent of humans living in the heralded

Garden of Eden. As the 2 pandas sat there peacefully dreaming in their quiet room with Landon, Bangbang subconsciously reached his left paw out to Landon. Even though Landon had been in a deep trance, for some reason, he subconsciously reached out his right hand to Bangbang. One of Bangbang's toes made contact with the index finger on Landon's right hand. The resulting connection between the 2 pandas and Landon was explosive. The pandas and Landon began twitching like crazy and then after a few seconds, they calmed down again. For the first time in Landon's experience of working with animals, he had entered the dream world of the pandas. It was beyond his control at that point to do anything about it. It was just happening and it was real.

Landon was in the rainforest with Bingbing and Bangbang eating bamboo shoots with them. He was as exceedingly happy as they were. Just like Jane Goodall with her chimps, Landon had been accepted into the panda community. In Landon's dream though, it was as if he were actually a panda like the other pandas. He was eating bamboo and interacting with the other pandas as if he were one of them. A female panda that was in heat had been presenting herself to him in a certain way. That female was attempting to attract him as a mate. It was weird, to say the least. Because of Landon's special abilities, he was able to being in a trance in the real world and at the same time be capable of thinking while in his dream world. The experience with the pandas, however, was unique. In the past, he had never been able to enter into a fantasy with a patient. He typically maintained his real world grip while in his trance.

There was something about the combination of the 2 pandas that had thrust Landon into their dream world along with them. Landon was so happy, essentially being a panda in their panda realm that he didn't want to depart from his flight of the imagination. Throughout his lifetime, he had always been limited in his abilities to experience the definition of "happy," because of his power, which was actually a crutch. As much as he had always yearned to be happy, he had never found it and never felt it. For some miraculous reason, he had found his bona fide happiness while living with the pandas in his trance. Landon actually enjoyed eating the bamboo alongside Bingbing and Bangbang. He found the flavor to be similar to bean sprouts. The female panda that had been following him around the community had actually sparked a strange desire. Landon couldn't believe it, but in his dream state, he actually wanted to procreate with that female panda. Talk about odd!

The longer that Landon and the 2 pandas remained in contact with each other, dreaming together, the more Landon wanted to stay there. Obviously, Landon had some serious unresolved issues going on his head. He was unable to think straight. He had fallen in love with the concept of being a panda. What was wrong with that? Hours passed in the special room of the zoo with Landon and the pandas in spiritual contact with each other. The panda handler occasionally checked in on the trio to make sure that everything was ok. The pandas had been fed and watered just before Landon's visit, so that the pandas were nutritionally fine on their end.

Landon rarely ate or drank anything on the days of his animal encounters, so that he was nutritionally fine as well. Landon found himself in the dream welcoming the in-heat female panda's advances. He was losing grip on reality. What was he thinking in his dream? He couldn't mate with a panda. Or could he? Yes, he could! Landon's real world persona attempted to control his dream world fantasy, but the real world's grip was minutely eroding.

As Landon, Bingbing and Bangbang tranquilly ate bamboo shoots in the rainforest, one of the security pandas uttered an alert call. Something was wrong in the rainforest. The alert call could have meant many things. It could have meant that a predator had entered the panda community. It could have meant that some panda had encountered something dangerous that needed to be pointed out to the other pandas. Or, it could have meant that the worst case had taken place. Humans had entered the rain forest and were endangering the panda community. Unfortunately, it had been the worst case. Two zoo poachers had entered the boundaries of the panda community. Zoo poachers were those unscrupulous individuals who removed happy animals from the wild in order to put a small percentage of those collected animals into zoos for ignorant people to view and marvel at. It was a fact that 10% or fewer of the animals poached in the wild ever made it to the zoos alive. Even though zooed animals allegedly lived longer in captivity (based on biased zoo numbers), the animals couldn't possibly have been happy. New Hampshire's motto, "Live free or die," was a poignant one.

Landon, Bingbing, Bangbang and Landon's potential suitor panicked. The rest of the panda community had been thrown into a panic as well. After a few moments, the 2 poachers came into view. The pandas were powerless against the poachers. The poachers employed tranquilizer darts that were fired by special rifles. The pandas were only stunned by the darts, but it meant that they would be leaving their homeland. The poachers shot at will at the running and shrieking pandas. Landon was in the dream with the pandas and seemed to be an actual panda to the other pandas, but he still had some human in him. The chaos created by the poachers had caused something to click in Landon's brain while he was in the dream state. He managed to break away from the bliss of being a panda just long enough to utilize some human cunning. He advised Bingbing and Bangbang to find the stoutest bamboo shoots in the area. Landon didn't possess the physical power of the pandas and had limited strength in his teeth.

The teeth of the pandas were scary. Bingbing and Bangbang found some thick bamboo shoots that were suitable as spears. The pandas didn't know what Landon had intended to do with the thick bamboo shoots, but they stood by him. Landon found himself grasping an armload of the spears and going into hiding. The poachers had the advantage of surprise against the docile pandas, as well as the fact that the pandas were too timid to instinctively defend themselves. The poachers shot the pandas at will with the tranquilizer darts. Pandas were flopping over to the left and to the right. It was pitiful. Landon took advantage of the cockiness and nonchalant attitude of the poachers and he sneaked around to the edge of the panda community. Landon slowly

slithered behind 1 of the poachers. Landon threw 1 of the spears and hit the poacher in the back of his left shoulder. The shocked poacher fell to the ground like a 10-pin. The injured poacher screeched like a little baby that needed a diaper change or feeding or holding or something. Landon quietly guffawed.

The other poacher yelled out to the injured one to determine what had happened. The injured poacher squeaked that he had been stabbed by a spear. Perplexed by the response from the injured poacher, the other poacher yelled, "What are you talking about?" The injured poacher repeated his plea. As the other poacher turned around to help his evil partner, Landon threw another spear, hitting the other poacher in the left eye. Ouch! The other poacher fell to the ground, bawling like a little baby. Landon quietly snickered. Landon thought how funny it was that those hero poachers were actually nothing but cowards. Landon whistled for some reason and the panda community instantly moved in on the injured poachers. After 9 minutes of historic carnage, the former poachers had been reduced to messy skeletons. Even though it had been unnatural for pandas to behave so violently, when pushing came to shoving, they did what they had to do.

Landon was surprised to witness such horror. Had he instilled such violence in his community members or did they have it in them already? Was Landon to blame for the demise of the poachers? Bingbing and Bangbang attempted to console Landon and assure him that he had done the right thing. From the point of view of the pandas, they were acting instinctively, as savage as it seemed. They were bears, after all. Bingbing and Bangbang couldn't understand why Landon had become so flustered by the affair. In Landon's dream state, he was actually part panda and part human. The human part couldn't accept the fact that he had initiated the slaughter of the poachers. It scared Landon that Bingbing, Bangbang and the other members of the panda community could act so barbarically. The unrivaled happiness that Landon had felt had disappeared.

The panda persona that Landon had occupied while in his trance had ever so slightly been replaced more and more by his human side. In his dream, Landon slowly realized that he no longer desired to be a panda. The pandas were wild animals, bears actually, that were capable of dealing serious harm to humans. The dream had to end for Landon. It was fine for Bingbing and Bangbang to remain in the dream if they wanted to, but he had to get out. Bingbing and Bangbang had realized Landon's value of creating the spears and of protecting them and the panda community. Without Landon's mysterious ingenuity and cunning, the poachers would have won out. The pandas were eternally grateful to Landon, but they would never allow him to leave. They couldn't. Landon begged Bingbing and Bangbang to let him go back to being a human. They refused. Landon fought to release himself from his trance as usual, but something went wrong. When the panda handler checked in on Bingbing, Bangbang and Landon, Landon was found on the floor in a coma.

173. Tarantino's Taxi



173. Tarantino's Taxi

Tarantino couldn't believe the foulness of the passenger in the back seat of his cab. He had endured the smells of countless fares over the past 3 years, but had never smelled anything so bad. The smelly man had more than B.O.; he had B.B.O. (beyond B.O.) How could the man walk around the city stinking like that? Tarantino was beginning to wonder of the stenching man was a homeless person who had been intending to skip out on the fare. Riders skipped out all the time, typically about 4 per week, but the majority of the fares were honest people who paid the fare with a suitable tip added. Tarantino closely observed the fetid man in the rear view mirror. The man seemed to be a little fidgety, as if he were waiting for just the right moment to open one of the back doors and scurry away like the gutter rat that he was. Tarantino waited for it. The upcoming traffic light changed from yellow to red and sure enough, the stink bomb jumped out of the cab. Good riddance! Tarantino opened all the windows to air out the pollution. He didn't want to allow the stink to get into his clothing and more importantly, he didn't want the next fare to get sick.

Driving a cab was definitely an interesting job with many ups and jobs, like any job really. On some nights, the tips were great, usually on Fridays or Saturdays when the riders were tipsy and feeling generous. Some nights were filled with adventure and others were boring beyond tears. Tarantino was a simple man with simple needs. He had been minimally educated and actually enjoyed the simplicity of driving a taximeter cabriolet, as they used to be called in the olden days. A company owned the cab; the company paid for the gas; it was an easy job. He had heard so many horror stories about cab drivers having nasty things done to them, but nothing had ever happened to him. He had a full beard and gravelly voice, both of which might be enough to keep the passengers at bay. He had a canister of bear mace on the front seat next to him, along with a Police-strength taser for potential threats. He wore a minimal bulletproof vest and had a baton, handgun and nunchucks under his seat, for easy access. If something actually went down, he would be prepared. His time in the U.S. Marines had instilled within him a fearlessness of any man.

Tarantino couldn't believe he had allowed himself to be fooled by the stinking man. The main issue with the stink bomb was that the time had been wasted on a non-fare. Any time that the cab was on duty, it needed to be earning money for the company. When people skipped out on fares, they were cheating Tarantino out of a fare and cheating the cab companies out of profits. The cab companies had no alternative but to pass on the losses to the riders in the form of increased fare rates. In essence, the fare cheaters were cheating themselves down the road, if they ever decided to pay the fare for a taxi ride. There wasn't much that Tarantino could do to a fare cheater anyway. It wasn't like those Uber taxi drivers who drove their own cars around for fares. If someone skipped out on an Uber driver, the driver lost all the money, not some cab company. Tarantino was content driving someone else's vehicle; all he had to do was put up with the

passengers.

Sometimes, the passengers had some interesting stories to tell. One time, a nervous woman had jumped into the cab and ordered Tarantino to take her to the airport as fast as he could drive. With the city traffic as it was, Tarantino could only drive so fast; it wasn't like in the movies. The woman had been holding a duffel bag and she had been clinging to it like a mother clings to her newborn baby. Tarantino watched the sweating woman closely. She looked a little too nervous. She looked as if she had just committed a crime of sorts. She kept yelling at him to go faster as she looked out the rear windshield. Her looking out the back was a red flag. She was definitely an outlaw who was trying to get away. Tarantino became excited at the prospect of helping someone get away with something. The funny thing about cab drivers is that they could never be implicated as accessories to crimes. Cab drivers innocently allowed fares into their taxis and took the fares to their destinations. Tarantino actually liked the concept.

Tarantino had always been a rebellious sort, but luckily had no criminal record. The worst thing he ever did was to steal some condoms from the local drugstore. He hadn't been caught in the act, but he never stole again. As Tarantino drove the nervous woman to the airport, she kept looking around and looking down at her duffel bag. Tarantino wondered what was in the duffel bag. Money? Jewels? A head? It looked like it was full of something, possibly money. Tarantino wondered if the woman had just robbed a bank or jewelry store or something similar. Wow! He might have a criminal in his cab. How cool was that? The woman began asking Tarantino when they were going to be at the airport and he told her about 15 minutes. She asked if he could go faster. He said that he couldn't. She pulled a handgun from the duffel bag and pointed it at his head. As Tarantino repeated his response of "15 minutes," he slowly reached for the mace on the front seat next to him.

Tarantino pointed the mace at the woman's face and told her what it was. He warned her that if he sprayed her in the face with it, she would become blind for several minutes and would suffer from a surprising amount of pain. She thought about it for a second and put her handgun back in the duffel bag. Tarantino put the mace back down on the seat. Tarantino informed the woman of the numerous other weapons that he had at his disposal if she tried anything like that again. She said she was sorry for pointing a gun at him, but she absolutely had to get to the airport in a hurry. Tarantino was becoming intrigued by the woman and her duffel bag. What was in that container that was so valuable that it had to be transported to the airport in such an unrealistic amount of time? Was she late for a flight? Was there something perishable in the bag? Hmm. Tarantino navigated the taxi as quickly as possible through the traffic, but then the traffic came to a halt. The woman shrieked. He try to calm her by telling her that traffic jams were common and things should clear up soon.

She shouted that she knew all about traffic jams, because she had been born in the city. She

asked him if she looked like some kind of a country bumpkin. Tarantino made no comment. He concluded over the years of driving a cab that sometimes it was best to keep quiet when the passengers became nervous and jerky for whatever reason. The woman was obviously rattled and needed some moments of silence to regain her limited composure. When the car/truck accident was spotted ahead by the woman, she shrieked again. It was obviously going to take longer than expected to get to the airport. Tarantino wasn't any kind of a regular air traveler, but he assumed that it would be possible for the woman to get a later flight, if need be. He tossed around the idea in his head of asking her if she were flying out or did she have to get to the airport to meet someone, etc. He saw her crazed face in his rear view mirror and decided to remain silent. She appeared to cling even tighter to the heavy, overstuffed duffel.

Tarantino tried to think back to when she entered the cab if she was struggling with the weight of the duffel bag. That might indicate the presence of something heavier than money in the bag. He tried to see the shape of the duffel to determine if it looked smooth or bumpy. He shouldn't have been as nosy as he was, but he just couldn't help it. It was her nervousness with the bag that had sparked Tarantino's interest more than anything. He usually didn't care what his passengers were carrying with them, except when they were carrying heavy luggage. The heavy luggage was a chore to load into and out of the trunk, but he received bigger tips in the process. The woman asked if he knew how much longer it would be to the airport because of the accident-caused traffic jam. Tarantino guessed about 30 minutes. The city was pretty efficient about clearing up accident scenes; they had to be, to keep the slow moving traffic in motion. A tow truck and ambulance were already at the crash scene, so it shouldn't be much longer.

The woman began crying when Tarantino told her the 30-minute time and he was tempted to console her, but he backed away. The woman was more mysterious than his typical fare and he needed to tread lightly with her. The fact that she had put her handgun back in the duffel didn't negate the danger of the gun. She could at any moment whip out the gun and shoot him before he could blink his eyes. His bulletproof vest provided no protection for his head and face. He decided to remain cool with her and monitor her, as a psychiatrist would monitor a patient. Tarantino began whistling a cheery tune from a Disney movie that he had just watched on TV that morning. He was an excellent whistler and sounded like a bird on his better days. He practiced constantly while in the cab and only stopped when the passengers grew tired of it. The woman's eyes became less tense when she heard the whistled tune. Tarantino was onto something. She actually appeared to slightly loosen her viselike grip on the duffel bag. Her face became less wrinkly from stress. She commented that she loved that tune and movie.

Tarantino jumped in with his statement that he loved all the Disney movies, the old ones and the new ones. He preferred the old ones, because of the originality of Walt's early vision. The woman said that she also preferred the earlier ones as well. Tarantino suddenly felt a strange bond with the woman. Did she actually have similar likes as himself? He had rarely encountered

a fare who mentioned their fondness for early Disney movies after hearing him whistle tunes from the movies. She actually was kind of a cute woman with a face like Katharine Hepburn. The woman went on to talk about the early Disney movies and how all the modern movies used too much computerization. Tarantino agreed with the woman and began to feel more comfortable with her. She seemed to be relaxing and more accepting of the delay of her arrival at the airport. She actually asked him if he knew any other tunes; he chuckled and began whistling another tune from an early Disney movie. A game began where he would start whistling a tune and she would guess the associated movie. The game went on for 12 minutes and then the traffic began moving again. The woman became silent and Tarantino stopped whistling.

The fleeting fantasy world of Disney had ended and the task of a taxi driver transporting an individual had resumed. The atmosphere in the cab became damp and chilling like a dungeon in an old English castle. Tarantino looked into the rear view mirror and noted that the woman had increased her grip on the duffel. They were back to the real world again. The traffic moved along at its pre-accident pace and the woman resumed her grimace. Tarantino resumed his silent partner status. He chose to remain without speech for a bit as they drove through the city. On the edge of the city, a magnificent complex of highways had been constructed that went in many different directions. If travelers had only wanted to drive past the city, they could use the complex to avoid the city traffic. The complex provided a way for city drivers to quickly exit the city and get to the airport, other highways or to another county route.

When Tarantino reached the complex, the sign to the airport came into view. The woman heaved huge sigh of relief. Tarantino reacted to the woman's sigh by sighing himself, though not as noticeably as the woman's sighing. She relaxed her grip on the duffel and glowed with relief. The entrance to the highway had infused the woman with a new cheeriness. She began whistling a tune from an early Disney movie that Tarantino hadn't recognized at first. When he did recognize it, he began whistling along with her. They created an interesting harmony with their differently toned whistles. Tarantino whistled in a higher tone than the woman and the combination produced something truly beautiful. In seconds, they were both snapping their fingers to the melody of their harmonized whistling. She maintained her grip on the duffel bag as she snapped her fingers and Tarantino could only snap the fingers on 1 hand, with his other hand on the steering wheel.

The woman began stomping her feet on the floor of the cab to create a bass beat that complemented the whistling and finger snapping. Tarantino then began stomping his free left foot on the floor to supplement her feet in the back of the cab. If some type of recording device had been in the taxi at that moment, an amazing sound would have been recorded. Tarantino and the woman were so caught up in the musical moment that Tarantino had accidentally missed the exit for the airport and the woman didn't seem to care. When she realized that they had passed the exit, it took her some seconds to collect her senses. When that moment occurred, she

screamed at Tarantino that they had missed the all-important exit to the airport. Tarantino assured her that the next exit would eventually lead them to the airport, although it would take a little longer. She went back to her silent, panicked look. He did the same, although his look wasn't as panicked as hers was. Really though, he wasn't panicked at all; he was more miffed that their musical creation had been aborted, than anything else. She was the one who was panicked, for her own furtive reasons.

Tarantino decided to mess with the woman and drive by the next exit that eventually led to the airport. He knew that the exit after that purposely missed one would eventually lead to the airport as well. He was enjoying the woman as a passenger. He hadn't had so much fun in his cab in a long time, if ever. As he drove past the exit, he tried to think back to when he had so much fun with a passenger. As they drove past he exit, the woman began yelling to high heaven. Tarantino said nothing as they drove along; he was in control, not her. She pulled the handgun from the duffel bag and pointed it at his head. She threatened to shoot him if he didn't get her to the airport within the next 10 minutes. Tarantino fully believed that the woman might pull the trigger, but he sensed a weakness in her voice. Her voice had betrayed her. After their 45 minutes in the cab together, Tarantino thought that he knew her limitations. She was a desperate person who only wanted to get to the airport. He didn't think that she would actually shoot him.

Tarantino began whistling again and she told him to stop it. He continued whistling, in spite of her command. She ordered him to stop whistling and he began whistling louder. She hollered at him to stop whistling or else. Tarantino turned around to look at the woman and asked her, "Or else what?" The woman bawled that she just wanted to get to the airport; it was a matter of life and death. Tarantino didn't believe that it was a matter of life and death. That was something that actors and actresses uttered in movies. She obviously wasn't in any kind of dire straits herself. The life and death threat was related to the contents of the duffel bag. What could possibly be in that duffel that was life threatening? Tarantino felt that he had the upper hand in the situation. They were speeding along a highway at 74 mph.

If the woman shot him, the vehicle would crash and she would most likely be injured and possibly worse. He said, "Look lady, I'm trying to get you to the airport as fast as I can; give me a break will you!" She relaxed a little and put the gun back into the bag. Tarantino boldly decided to intentionally miss the next exit, which was the last possible exit for a few miles that eventually led to the airport. As the cab sped past the exit, the woman began screaming hysterically. "Turn around! Turn around!" she cried. "What are you doing? Take me to the airport now!" Tarantino began laughing and started whistling. "Stop that stupid whistling, you idiot! Take me to the airport!" Tarantino turned his head to her while still whistling, comically widened his eyes like an owl and turned back to the front again. She continued blubbing. Suddenly, the duffel bag seemed to unzip by itself and a half-naked little person with a knife in his hand jumped out screaming bloody murder.

174. Greg's Guess



174. Greg's Guess

Greg wasn't the most religious person around, although he did subscribe to the concept of a creator. He didn't go to any place of worship on a regular basis, because he found the whole idea of organized religion to be preposterous. Wasn't it enough to believe in some all-powerful being without ruining it by saying that 1 religion was better than another, etc.? It was a fact that more suffering and death had resulted from the different religions fighting with one another than from all the wars and natural disasters combined. Greg had been born with the ability to see into the future, with certain limitations. He wasn't able to pick lottery tickets or other such simplistic designs. He was able to predict or foresee major catastrophes well ahead of their occurrences. When he was a kid, he had predicted the potato blight in his little hometown, although there was nothing he could have done to prevent the blight. He was just a stupid kid who knew nothing about anything. When he had informed his father about his prediction, his father chuckled and told him to go milk the cows and feed the chickens.

The ensuing potato blight had caused a lot of problems for Greg's father and many of the other farmers in the farming region. Greg's family had been jettisoned into poverty and they were forced to live in a van down by the river for a while, until things got better. Greg did a lot of thinking during that time, as numerous other vistas began flooding his confused cranium. He couldn't stop the visions from materializing in his brain. All he could do was try to find a way to deal with them. He wanted to tell his parents about the visions, but feared that they would think he was a tad askew. Even though Greg had internally felt justified in telling his father about the potato blight, which had actually occurred, it seemed too bombastic to relate his latest visions. The things that Greg was seeing in his head seemed too outlandish and impossible to possibly occur. A potato blight or other agricultural calamity could have been luckily foretold by anyone on a whim. The fact that Greg had seen it in his mind before it happened bothered him.

When Greg and his family were back on their feet again after their stint in the van, they were back to farming again, thanks to governmental loans and subsidies for the stricken farmers. Since potato farming was all that Greg's father knew and loved, they planted potatoes again. Greg's mother was a typical farmwife who did whatever needed to be done to support her husband and keep the family well fed, clothed and educated. Since Greg, his 2 brothers and 2 sisters had been home schooled by their parents, they were all incredibly well educated. It might have been Greg's wide ranging knowledge that had imparted the visions in his head, but who could say. He had been born with an unusual psyche that demanded large injections of historical data to process. The more that Greg read about the history of the world, the more realistic his visions seem to become. For a short time, Greg had pondered why he was having the visions. Who was he to have these things put upon him? He didn't want to have the visions; they were just there. The visions became a daily obsession after a while. It was getting to the point where Greg felt the urge to talk about it.

One particular foresight that had become a daily drudgery concerned the nearby river becoming polluted for some reason. The water would become unusable for farm irrigation and the river's fish would become sick and perish. Greg tried to regard his foresight from a real world perspective. He researched the river and found that an industrial plant existed miles upstream of the river. Since Greg lived in the 1940's, little had been known about industrial pollution. Heck, they even thought that smoking cigarettes was ok back then. There were no routine pollution-related inspections for factories. The word pollution hadn't even been coined yet. Greg had determined that the upstream factory had been owned by a businessman who had gone into politics. The businessman had inherited his wealth from his father, but had publicly taken credit for his current wealth. Since politics is so fraught with partisanship and other such banalities, the businessman had easily become elected mayor by the naive citizens. The businessman continued to operate his business ventures at will with the assistance of his 2 sons and daughter, while running the community as he saw fit.

Greg casually asked his father in the field one day about the plant upstream and if he knew anything about it. His father stated that the plant had been owned by the mayor who only wanted the best for his constituents. Greg inquired further if his father had been concerned about the runoff from the mayor's factory into the river. Greg's father shrugged his shoulders, yelled at Greg for bothering him while he was busy and resumed cultivated the huge field. Greg had wanted more than anything to tell his father about the polluted river vision, but he couldn't. Thirty days later, the mayor's industrial plant had accidentally released tons of toxins into the river. The mayor had claimed that everything was fine and that nature would take its course. The fish downstream of the plant immediately perished in the greenish colored water.

The farmers downstream were advised to avoid using the river for irrigation, if possible, which was ludicrous. The farmers all had immense fields that relied on the river for a high percentage of the irrigation. None of the farmers had turned off their river-supplied irrigation pumps. In another month, the potato fields were full of diseased plants, indicating a major crop loss. Greg had wished that he had mentioned his fears about the plant, but had to live with his decision. His father lost everything again and the family was back to living in the van down by the river. After a while, Greg's family had returned to their rented farm. Greg began to see frogs in his dreams. It seemed pretty odd to see vast colonies of frogs hopping around the countryside, but there it was. It was another chilling spectacle for Greg to behold. Why was he seeing frogs all of a sudden? How bizarre! How much damage could a bunch of frogs do anyway?

Greg's father had the new crop of potatoes in and the plants seemed to be healthy and happy. The embarrassing mayor had been impeached and the mayor's toxic factory had been shut down. It's amazing what the voice of the people could accomplish once the people knew what they were talking about. The fools that had voted that businessman mayor into office in the first place walked around in shame and rarely discussed politics in public. The new mayor was a woman,

who had years of political experience behind her and she had given the mostly agricultural townsfolk a new lease on life. Things were beginning to look wonderful in the farming community.

Greg's frog sightings began to plague him. He saw frogs all day long. When he slept, he saw frogs; when he sat on the toilet, he had to keep looking into the toilet to see if there were frogs swimming around. When he ate his daily potato soup, he worried that frogs were in the broth. When he took his weekly bath, he felt frogs in the tub with him. As he read his books, he thought he saw the pages moving. When he changed into his work clothes, he thought he saw the clothes moving. When he put on his work boots each day, he feared that slimy frogs were waiting for his feet. The frogs were beginning to become a real problem for Greg. He decided to talk to his mother about it while she was doing some canning. He told her about his constant frog visions and she told him to ask his father. Greg had hoped that she wouldn't say that. The last thing that Greg wanted to do was to bother his father about some trivial frog visions.

In 2 weeks, frogs began infesting the vast potato fields. For some reason, the frogs ate the young potato plants, which was something that was entirely uncharacteristic of their traits. Frogs normally ate flies, mosquitoes, moths, dragonflies, grasshoppers, worms and other smaller frogs. Why were the frogs eating the potato plants? An agent from the county cooperative extension visited the potato fields of the area and had reported his findings. He had never seen frogs act in such a manner. The frogs had no reason to eat the potato plants, since their typical food sources were in abundance. The agents were of no value to suggest any type of remedy for the situation. In a week, the frogs had eliminated the entire potato crop. Greg wished that he had said something, but what?

After some time in the van down by the river, Greg vowed to speak up if he ever had a vision again that might wreak havoc. The frogs had disappeared as mysteriously as they had appeared. Greg's father put in the new potato crop and the farmers kept their fingers crossed for a successful harvest. The potatoes grew beautifully and things looked promising in the town. Soon, Greg began seeing see animals running wild through his brainpan. He panicked. Did the animals have anything to do with real life? Could the animals cause any problems with the potato crop? It was odd that the animals in his dreams were wolves. The state that Greg lived in had a healthy number of wolves living in it, but nothing to write home about. Greg saw packs and packs of wolves in his visions. Obviously, wolves could be dangerous animals in certain circumstances, but they haven't been a problem to humans for decades. What was the significance of those wolf dreams?

As the potato crop neared harvest time, the farmers grew excited. It was the best harvest in years, with much-needed high profits heading to the coffers. The farmers began the harvest on a Monday. By Thursday morning, wolves had been sporadically spotted roaming around various

fields in the region. At first, no one was particularly worried about it. What harm could a few wolves do? They were probably looking for rabbits or other small game on which to snack. Greg's father noticed a few wolves on Saturday. More wolves were seen on Sunday. The wolves gradually roamed closer and closer to the farmers, which was unusual for the typically human-fearing creatures. Greg's father began carrying a rifle with him on the tractor as he brought in the potatoes. Reports were broadcasted about some farmers disappearing while harvesting their potato crops. Greg's father hadn't been too unsettled, until the wolves in his field got closer and closer as each harvest day progressed. Greg's father had finally heard about the disappearances of 2 of his friends as they brought in their crops.

By the time that the bountiful potato crop harvest had ended, 5 farmers had disappeared while in their fields. No one could be sure what had happened, but everyone suspected the mysterious wolves. After the harvest, the wolves completely disappeared. Greg's dreams turned to other things. The next crop put in by Greg's father brought promise to the town. With the exception of the missing farmers, last season's potato crop had brought good times. Things were getting back to normal and the farmers looked forward to another great harvest. Rain fell in the desired amounts and the sun shone magnificently. The latest potato crop looked to be disease-free and profitable, possibly more than the year before, which had been record-breaking, though heartbreaking. Greg kept seeing giant insects in his visions, the size of which made them scary. Greg didn't know what kind of insects they were, but they looked menacing. Greg was familiar with the appearance of grasshoppers, but his insects were bigger.

As the potato harvest approached, the farmers armed themselves in preparation for another possible wolf invasion. As the farmers commenced harvesting, dark clouds moved in from a distance. The sky had the appearance of a storm formation, but different somehow. Then the humming sound began. Where was that coming from? As the clouds moved closer, the humming grew louder. And louder. What was that? Greg's uncle began screaming about something. He was carrying on like a baby goat that couldn't find its way back to its mother. When Greg saw the clouds and heard the humming, he shuddered. The insects of his vision; it had to be. The farmers could only harvest as fast as their equipment could be operated, which wasn't very fast. Some of the old timers recognized the sight and sound of the dark sky. Locusts.

By the time that the locusts had arrived, only about 10% of the potatoes had been safeguarded by the farmers of the region. The remaining 90% quickly became locust sustenance. It was an apocalyptic sight indeed. The insects were surprisingly ravenous. They ate anything in sight that was vegetative in manner. The potato plants, the potatoes in the ground, the hay in the fields - everything. The farmers tried to spray the locusts with commercial insecticides, but it was an impossible undertaking. There were too many of the pests. Greg's uncle tried using a flame-throwing device that he had built years before on a lark. The gasoline that fueled the device ignited several small fires and singed off his uncle's eyebrows and facial hair. Greg thought that

it looked kind of cool to see masses of locusts go up in flames, especially when a cloud of locusts was incinerated. As cool as it looked, the potato crop had been decimated. No one was injured, except for some people who had become sick from the insecticides. Greg's uncle looked like a wrinkle-faced teenager. Greg's father had that all-too-familiar look of despair on his face. Greg's mother seemed to take it all in stride, because she had to. She was the cement that kept everyone together. If she had gone to pieces, it wouldn't have helped matters. They packed up the van and headed back to the river for a while.

While living at the river, Greg did a lot of thinking. He realized that revealing his prescience in the past wouldn't have prevented or changed any of the outcomes. The pestilences that had plagued the region as of late were probably unpreventable. Greg valued the privacy of keeping his visions to himself. As sick as it was to keep the thoughts to himself, it was the right thing to do. He couldn't risk becoming labeled as a witch or worse. His country people were superstitious already; the recent strange growing seasons had made them more so. Keeping his thoughts to himself was definitely the answer. As Greg's parents discussed the upcoming potato season, they had high hopes. Greg and his siblings remained silent at all such conversations. Children were to be seen and not heard in those days.

The government had been generous to the potato farmers and provided everything necessary to start the new potato crop. Potatoes were extremely valuable to the nation as an inexpensive source of nutrition and the politicians knew it. Happy constituents were voters who chose the politicians in the first place. The local congressmen wanted to be re-elected whenever possible. Greg's father didn't care about politics in general, but had been thankful to the federal government for stepping in to help the farmers again. Greg's father supposed that was the least they could do. The facial hair and eyebrows had grown back for Greg's uncle, so that he was happy again. Greg's mother cinched up her bootstraps and got to work. Greg's father set about planting him some potatoes.

As Greg's father and the other farmers nurtured their new crop of potatoes, they had the highest of hopes and optimism. After 3 weeks, the little plants were doing wonderfully. They were cheerful and healthy looking. Greg's father knelt down, delicately touched the leaves of one of the plants and thanked his lord in advance for the upcoming bounty of the new crop. He closed his eyes and said a prayer. Greg watched his father kneeling among the little potato plants and felt warm inside. Greg briefly shuddered, closed his eyes and had a vision of epic proportions. In his head, he saw hail pouring down and it wasn't pretty. Greg suddenly felt the pain of hard objects falling on his head and he snapped his eyes open. It was hailing on Greg and his father! The hail pellets were huge and unforgiving. As the hail pummeled them, Greg and his father ran like little girls to their rented farmhouse. They would be safe in there. As the hail fell from the heavens, it destroyed the potato plants everywhere. Greg and his family peered at the devastation through the dirty windows of the house and cried.

175. Todd's Tests



175. Todd's Tests

Todd didn't really like the term "guinea pig," but since he had technically become one, he was one. He graduated High School with flying colors and had hoped to get some kind of job as a Software Engineer after college, but things went awry. It seemed like a good idea at the time, but it wasn't meant to be, as were so many things. His adoptive parents had only wanted the best for him. If he wanted to go to college to acquire a specific degree, then they would fund and support his decision. If he wanted to become an astronaut, they would have been behind that idea as well. Whatever Todd wanted, he got. His superior intelligence and manipulative nature afforded him many luxuries in his life with his parents. All Todd ever really desired however, was to be loved by the mother that had given birth to him. Since his birth mother had come upon hard times after giving birth to Todd while she was still in High School, she gave him up for adoption. Todd never knew who his birth mother was.

Perhaps Todd had become jaded and ruined to an extent by being born into a world where he wasn't wanted; perhaps not. Kids were born everyday who were put up for adoption by their teenage mothers who either were uninformed about, or couldn't afford birth control. Todd had the brain of a genius and the motivation of a sloth. His entire life had been catered to and coddling. He was a waste of a human being to a certain extent. Todd might have been capable of creating insights in the fields of Science that could have cured diseases or made life better for humans in other ways. That was life. There were countless homeless individuals who were geniuses, whose brainpower would never be harnessed. It was a pity. As Todd grew older through high school, he became wilder and more disruptive in all social gatherings. The boy was a handful.

When he entered college at the age of 17, he was just following along with the plan of his parents. He was just going through the motions to see where college would take him. He never intended to stay in college for a sentence of 4 years at hard labor. He felt it a duty to his parents that he at least made an attempt. After the first semester of college, he could stand it no longer. He had to get out. His brain was still developing and his hormones were secreting. It was an interesting combination. Even though he aced all his classes, with minimal difficulty, he just couldn't do it. He couldn't see himself sitting in classrooms for 4 or more years like another of society's drones. He was much better than that. Or, so he thought. Like most geniuses, he didn't have the patience to tow society's line. It was too much against his grain. Fortunately for him, he had his adoptive parents as sponsors, which enabled him to do whatever he wanted, career-wise.

It was a loss to the world that Todd had been born into his situation, but it happened and the earth had to keep rotating around its own axis, while rotating around the sun, regardless of the plights of its inhabitants. After Todd completed his 1st semester with a 4.0 Grade Point Average, he quit college. While goofing around in the hallways on the day after he quit, he noticed something posted on 1 of the bulletin boards. The notice read, "College students needed as research

volunteers for new trials - excellent pay." When Todd first saw the notice, he laughed. After tossing the idea around in his size 7 3/4 brain, he decided to take a chance. "Why not?" he asked himself. What did he have to lose? His parents would be happy that he was at least making money doing something, although it wouldn't be as they had hoped. They should just be happy that he was doing anything at all. It wasn't as if he were standing on street corners as a member of a gang, looking for trouble. The research would obviously be college/science related, since only college-affiliated scientists were allowed to post notices on the glass-housed bulletin board.

After thinking about it for a few moments, Todd actually liked the idea. Imagine becoming a human guinea pig. How cool would that be? He had heard many things about the human guinea pigs of the world who had participated in scientific experiments. If it weren't for scientific volunteers, many of today's findings would have taken many more years to accomplish. Naturally, many of the volunteers were people afflicted with various ailments and diseases. Those people were typically at the end of the road of known medical solutions. Those people were willing to try anything to get better. Todd was an adventurous person who was ready for the next big thing, whatever that was. Many college students participated in experimental trials for the primary purpose of earning some extra money. Todd had more money than Davy Crockett, via his parents, so that it wasn't about money for him.

When he shared the idea with his friends, they all thought he was crazy. He scoffed at them and decided to participate in spite of them. He was just that kind of a person. He would show them. He would become a guinea pig and become a part of something important that would help people. Maybe that was his true calling in life, to help people in some way. Why not help people through scientific means? Yep, it was definitely the right thing to do at that point in his life. He wrote down the number and called the next day to set up an appointment with the scientist involved. When the scientist surprisingly answered on the other end of the line, he sounded as if he possessed a German or Austrian accent. The scientist's name was Dr. Schtone. Todd was astounded that the scientist had actually answered the phone, instead of some other flunky hired by the doctor to answer calls. Since the doctor always had his phone with him, it was easy.

Todd was scheduled to show up at the scientist's laboratory on a Saturday out in the country somewhere. When Todd asked why the lab wasn't on the college grounds, the scientist claimed that it was his own lab on his own property. Todd was impressed that a research scientist had enough money to have his own lab on his own property. The typical scenario was that scientists were required to beg and cajole for money to do any of their research, which was usually on campus grounds. The fact that the scientist owned his lab off campus intrigued Todd. Dr. Schtone must know what he is doing. Todd immediately felt better about the decision about volunteering as a guinea pig, because Schtone was probably more on the cutting edge of research than the slaves who worked in the campus labs. As Todd drove his Jaguar into Schtone's estate, he became even more impressed. That guy must be way up on the ladder of research scientists to

own such a place. The long curving driveway ended at a circular drive in front of what looked like a castle. A castle! Where did that doctor get so much dough that he lived in a castle? Wow!

Todd was greeted at the door by a butler who offered to take Todd's baseball cap. Todd declined the offer and chose to wear his cap. The butler escorted Todd through the immense ballroom-sized foyer to a locked door near the rear of the foyer. The butler pressed a button and spoke into the intercom, announcing Todd's arrival. Dr. Schtone responded that he would be right there. As Todd waited for the doctor to arrive, he looked around the castle in amazement. It was just like a scene out of a movie. It looked like one of those castles on TV. When Schtone clicked the lock on the other side of the door, Todd felt a chill. He thought that was funny. Why would he feel a chill like that? He was perfectly safe in the castle. The college had approved the doctor's notice before it was placed on the bulletin board. Todd thought to himself that he was just being silly.

The doctor opened the door and looked like any other average person, except that one of his eyebrows was a bit higher than the other. It gave the doctor a kind of quizzical look, as if he were thinking about something. When Todd shook the doctor's hand, he felt another chill. It might have been because the doctor's hand was so cold or it might have been because Todd actually was nervous. Naw! Todd was above all of it; he was there at Dr. Schtone's castle on a whim. If Todd didn't like what was going on, he would quit as usual. How bad could it be? The doctor dismissed the butler and escorted Todd to a room off the foyer. The room was another huge spectacle of grand design. Antiques and fine things were everywhere. Todd's chill disappeared and he was back to being impressed again. The doctor presented Todd with a package of papers that entailed the experiments and liabilities involved. Essentially, Todd was volunteering to participate at will, under no coercion. He would be paid the sum of \$50 per hour for his time.

Todd didn't necessarily care about the money, but he wanted to have the lawyer who was retained by his parents to look over the documents before proceeding. Dr. Schtone didn't bat an eye and had expected Todd to request a review before signing. The doctor gave Todd 2 weeks to have the contract reviewed. Todd felt better about the doctor's casual reaction to the legal review request. If the doctor had denied a legal review, Todd wouldn't have touched the contract. At first, he thought volunteering would be simple, but once a contract had been produced, he felt the need to cover himself. Two weeks later, after the legal review, Todd returned the signed and witnessed contract to Dr. Schtone, who then signed it in front of 2 legal witnesses. Todd was ready to begin the trial. The doctor provided a brochure that explained in boring detail the composition of the prescription drug that was being tested. Todd was to ingest the drug in pill form over a period of 2 months in varying doses.

After a week of reviewing the drug brochure with his parents and lawyer, Todd returned to the castle to begin the adventure. At first, the drug didn't seem to do anything and Todd wondered

about its value. When the doctor explained, Todd was initially merely the test bed for the compatibility of the drug with human physiology. After compatibility had been determined, the drug's potency could be dialed in. The whole thing seemed to be quite trivial to Todd. He had thought that there would be more going on during the trial. He took the pills per the doctor's recommendations and nothing happened. The doctor assured Todd that nothing happening was a good thing. It meant that the drug was compatible with human physiology. Todd wanted more. He thought that being a guinea pig would be more interesting than it turned out to be. Todd expressed his views to the doctor and the doctor had something to say.

Dr. Shtone explained that scientific research was a boring process, which involved trial and error on a minute scale. When drugs were tested, everything was documented and everything proceeded slowly, following established guidelines. There was no other safe way of doing it. The scientists had to allow time to show the results. Todd understood the doctor's explanation, but Todd wanted more, much more. He felt that he was at a crossroads in his life and craved to make his mark somehow. He childishly thought that by becoming a scientific guinea pig, he might be able to help the world somehow. He couldn't see how he was helping the world at the moment. The doctor understood Todd's feelings, which were common among the volunteers. The doctor stated that if Todd desired to escalate the experimentation to a different level, it would be possible. Todd wanted to escalate. The doctor presented Todd with a new contract to be reviewed, witnessed and signed as before.

Todd returned in 2 weeks with the new contract and the doctor had it witnessed and signed it as before. Todd was nervous about the decision. Was he doing the right thing? Of course he was! The doctor presented Todd with another brochure, which described a slightly different type of scientific research. After a week of review, Todd returned to the castle for the next level. The doctor had a psychiatrist at the castle who conducted an interview first with Todd and then with the doctor and Todd together. The psychiatric analysis was necessary for the doctor to be confident in Todd's full commitment to the trial. Todd found it comical that the doctor would attempt to analyze him; Todd was smarter than everyone and he knew it. No shrink would be able to get into his brain. No research scientist would be able to intimidate him either. Todd was ready for action. Bring it on!

Todd was required to have his head shaved bald as part of the experiment. Todd didn't mind being bald, because he always wore a baseball cap in public. Everyone in Todd's social circle had become accustomed to seeing him with a hat on. Todd's parents didn't mind either. As long as Todd was happy was all that mattered to them. Todd would have to be unconscious during the trial, which intrigued him. What was the doctor preparing to do? Of course, the entire procedure had been outlined in the brochure that Todd had reviewed, so there should be no mysteries. However, if Todd were in fact unconscious during the trial, how would Todd know what had actually taken place? Todd asked the doctor if he could have a witness present during the trial.

The doctor had no resistance to Todd's request. Dr. Shtone actually thought it was a good idea. Todd was allowed to bring a person of his choice to witness the trial. He chose to bring his mother.

On the day of the trial, Todd and his mother were in the lab with the doctor and the doctor's assistant. As the doctor administered the compound that would render Todd unconscious, the power suddenly went out. The lights went out in the lab and it was completely dark. Todd was knocked out cold. The doctor advised Todd's mother that the emergency lighting system would kick on in 15 seconds and light would return to the laboratory. After 15 seconds, the emergency lights came on. Todd's mother was relieved and thanked the doctor for being patient with her. Todd's mother had been afraid of the dark since childhood and was a little rattled by the temporary darkness. The emergency lights weren't as bright as the normal lab lights, but they were sufficient to proceed with the test. What Todd's mother hadn't realized was that during the period of darkness in the lab, Todd had been wheeled out of the lab by Dr. Shtone and a Todd look-alike had been wheeled in by a Dr. Shtone look-alike.

The Dr. Shtone look-alike performed a minor bit of prestidigitation on the Todd look-alike, while the real Dr. Shtone worked on the real Todd in the adjoining lab. This same process went on day after day for months in the castle, until Dr. Shtone had finally achieved his desired result. Todd's mother didn't know what she was looking at during the fake procedures. She sat in a corner of the lab, playing with her phone. Her role was to be in the room as her son was experimented on, while he was unconscious. By the end of the 3-month trial, Todd had been paid and sent home by the doctor. No one was the wiser. The doctor had achieved his lifelong dream. After years of experimenting with humans and primates, he had finally accomplished the impossible. Dr. Shtone had a theory that if a human male could somehow be mated with a female orangutan, some type of super-being might be created.

Scientists had theorized for years about the concept of combining a human with another primate in order to synthesize a being that would have the best characteristics of both. The moral objections against such an idea were obvious. The human side of the new being would have the appearance, intelligence, speech and reasoning abilities of a human. The orangutan side of the new being would have the incredible strength and immune system of an animal that had been allowed to evolve over time. Since humans never evolved beyond a certain point, they weren't capable of acquiring the natural improvements that occurred over time in a normal evolutionary process. Dr. Shtone had been crunching the numbers and mathematical equations involved with the process for 14 years. All the doctor required was a suitable volunteer and a way of covertly using the volunteer as he saw fit. As Todd lay unconscious during the testing in the adjoining lab, a female orangutan had been brought in to mate with Todd. Dr. Shtone had invented a special compound that provided an unconscious male human the ability to be mated with by another female subject.