

A Miscellany of Mischief: Collected Comic Stories of Paul Hawkins

Author's note: *This collection presents most of the short stories I have written over the past 3 years. All have some comedy in them; some are dark comedy, some are happy comedy, and some veer toward the stupid funny but then redeem themselves. I like to think there is a little something for everybody, like in a good box of chocolates (not the waxy no-name brands that appears miraculously on store shelves around Christmas).*

Enjoy - if your next plane flight or other tedious event is made a little more enjoyable because of them. It will have made my day.

All the best,

Paul Hawkins

February, 2013

Facebook Author's Page: <https://www.facebook.com/paulhawkinsauthoradventureexplorer>

Riveting Self-Interview: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s7OARXESs3E>

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Section 1: Ten Short and Stupid Stories for a Rainy Day

Author's note: Is man by nature evil, or stupid, or both? These ten short stories let you decide.

Aladdin's Genie

He came to my yard sale and offered to pay for an old-timey toaster with \$5 worth of nickels. He carried then around in a sock. I was asking \$7 for it, but once I saw he was going to pay all in nickels, I agreed on \$5.

He said he was Aladdin's genie and what he was really looking for was his lamp. He had been freed from it many many years ago but life on the outside wasn't so great, and anyway, through his internet searches and general sense of intuition, he had decided that it must be in the greater Hoboken area.

I felt sorry for the guy - he looked rough - not sick or anything, just kind of beaten down. He said sure, the lamp had confined him to a life of servitude when he was living inside it, but he was confined to a life of servitude anyway now that he was outside it, but now he couldn't do magic or anything and his last seven marriages hadn't worked out and he was tired of flipping burgers.

I told him I hoped he'd find it. He offered to wait if I wanted to go inside and get a gun and shoot him so he could prove he was invulnerable and immortal. I declined on the off chance that he might not be a

genie at all but just some guy who was crazy.

After he had been counting out the nickels meticulously for a while, I got tired of keeping up with it and let him have the toaster for three bucks. He seemed pleased. It was kind of a fancy, shiny old-timey toaster from back when folks made toast with style. Maybe he liked stuff like that. Maybe he could find a way to live in that.

The Haunted Countertops

“My - I just love your new grey granite countertops – they make your kitchen look so lovely. And say, did you hear that somebody’s been stealing headstones from the old cemetery? I can’t think of a more despicable thing to do.”

“I - I can’t either – more coffee?”

“Just a drop thank you... and I’m so sorry you scalded your hand.”

“It’s nothing –my arm just slipped while cooking, I guess. Getting used to these countertops. They’re so smooth.”

“Yes – they’re certainly worth it!”

“I suppose so.”

“Well of course they are! Anyway, a person who steals headstones should be cursed for life – cursed I tell you! I hope they get haunted to their graves.”

“No doubt that’s exactly what will happen.”

“It’s time I left for my appointment, my dear. Now do try to be more careful around the house – you’ve been too accident prone lately. You don’t want someone stealing your headstone before your time! Ha ha – well I’m off.”

“Yes – ha ha – goodbye.”

Not much later they made her headstone from a chunk of the countertops, and the spirits were satisfied.

Golf Tips Digest Presents: Double-Bogey of Death!

The tall man and the short man walked toward the green.

"I'm on the green in three and you're on the green in one. What's your secret, Jack?"

"This new DVD from Golf Tips Digest. It gives me great tips for improving my game. And it's free with my paid subscription. By the way, are any of my hairs out of place?"

"I think they're all perfect - like always. Tell me, Jack, when are you going to up and rise straight into heaven?"

"Not as soon as I'd first thought, Bill. I've learned to like it in this little suburb of yours. The cost of living is scandalously low, I seem to be able to charm the socks off of everyone I meet, and I've got more women than I know what to do with. Just think of it!"

The stumpy little member of the twosome blasted his way out of the bunker on his third attempt and landed in the rough on the other side of the green. "At least I got a wife and kids that love me," he said.

The other man, tall and broad and tanned and good-looking, stood over his ball with a three-foot putt for eagle. "Wife and kids - culturally sanctioned excuses to protect you from your own masculine inadequacies. Not a bad move to preserve your ego, Bill. I think I'd have done the same if I were you - that is, if you are firmly resolved not to take those vitamins I offered you."

"Vitamins?" Bill scoffed. "Right - no thanks."

Jack bent over to sink his putt. "Then it's a smart move." And as he lined up a few practice swings he added casually, "By the way Bill, your wife doesn't love you." He concentrated and sent the ball gently into the hole.

"Just what do you know?" Bill spouted.

"It's just that no woman can really be happy with a man like you. What she gives you is nothing more than what you give her - the duty of sheltering her ego. What you don't give her, and what a silly-looking, troll-like man like you can never give her, is what you so innocuously call 'love' - her longing, Bill, her unbounded, unfathomable, unquenchable burning desire."

"You're a lunatic, you know!"

"Relax. Sink your putt, Bill."

"No, you listen. I'm tired of you. A lot of guys in the clubhouse are tired of you."

"Ah, all the horrible little men are ganging up against me. How long has this been going on? No, don't tell me. I know how long it's been going on. Ever since I came here, isn't that it? Ever since I showed you how ridiculous your petty pecking order is, ever since I showed your women what their desire is really made for - not for those white-gloved tea parties you offer them while you nurse your minuscule egos and shuffle pens and papers in your stuffy office and feign sexual advances at your secretaries. Well, what are you going to do, Bill, bell the cat?"

Bill reached into his golf bag and got a crooked little smile on his face. "Me and the boys chipped in to get you a little something." He lifted a sawed-off shotgun in front of him.

Before he could do anything, however, there was a flash, a groan, and Bill slumped to the ground. Jack had been quicker. Bill's collapsing body, oddly enough, launched his golf ball directly for the hole. Jack relaxed his grip on a small, almost unnoticeable silver pistol.

"You made it so easy," he said, bending down to the slumped body of his rival and placing the pistol in Bill's hand. "I suppose you think this means I'll have to leave town, but you're wrong." He paused, and seeing Bill's ball about to fall into the hole, stopped it short with his toe. He then removed his own ball from the cup. "But I'm not going to leave," he said. "I've grown to like this place. It's a pity it had all been weighing so hard on you lately, dear dear Bill. It's a pity all the pressures of home and work - and, dare we mention it, an adulterous wife - had started to unravel you. But suicide - over a double bogey? I was here for you Bill. I could have helped."

The man rolled and groaned and life ebbed out of him.

"But don't worry about your wife, Bill. I'll take care of her. Until I'm sick of her, that is."

With that he turned to the clubhouse and phoned the police as he strolled. As he walked he watched one of his Golf Tips Digest videos on his smartphone (free with every paid subscription). It would help him when he returned to conquer the remaining holes. Oh, he had many, many conquests planned ahead. Thank you, Golf Tips Digest - thank you so very much. He felt proud and manly and confident. A smile crossed his face as he imagined what the men at the clubhouse would think when they saw him returning alive from the back nine.

Fred Hoover: Crime Buster

"Get me \$40 in marked ones. I have some very minor criminal activity to investigate."

Such is a typical excerpt from the long-lost transcripts of the FBI's Very Very Petty Crimes Division, opened in 1958 to keep J. Edgar Hoover's talentless nephew, Fred Hoover, employed and out of the way. Closed recently in the wake of a Congressional budget hearing in which some grandstanding fiscal hawk exposed it to utmost ridicule, all that remains of the division now is a warehouse full of brittle tape recordings and boxes upon boxes of very petty documents.

It is sad to think that that once vibrant law enforcement division is now gone, for back in its heyday, when a marked dollar bill crossed a state border in a barely illegal transaction, such as the purchase of a comic book, French postcard, or firework, Fred Hoover was on it.

All references to this organization have been scrubbed from the internet, but you can sometimes still find a lonely old timer who is willing to talk about his days at the Bureau. It is harder to find anyone who has anything nice to say about Fred Hoover, though. It's always tough working for a relative of the boss. He was too young, dressed too fancy, favored lilac dress shirts and carnations, and in general was a bossy talentless asshole and a bit of a dandy.

He died one day in a sting operation somewhere in one of the smallest towns in Arkansas. He accidentally shot himself while trying to remove his gun from his shoulder holster in the midst of investigating an interstate comic book sale.

Forensics determined that if he had had the full stack of \$40 dollars in marked ones in his vest pocket, it might have stopped the bullet. But he was a few dollars shy because he had stopped on his way to the crime scene to purchase some suspicious horehound, bottle rockets, and sarsaparilla.

As for the questionable comic book itself, it featured Mary Marvel on the cover in a skirt that might be a tad too short. The boys at the lab would be able to tell. Sure was showing a lot of thigh, though.

All in all it was a tragic loss – that comic book would be worth real money today were it not for the bloodstains and bullet hole. Oh, and though no one would admit it, more than a few people actually missed Fred. He had made the mundane adventuresome; he lived large; he was fun to make fun of but he pursued ridiculously petty crime with style. After his death the department still chugged on, but its heart and soul had left it, and when it shifted its focus to petty potentially illegal interstate sales of office supplies, no one complained. It was a logical shift in an increasingly mundane world. Fred had been a holdover from a different era, when men lived out even petty details colorfully, and with gusto. RIP Fred Hoover. There's plenty of lilac buttonhole carnations and four-color comics in heaven.

Requiem For a Classic Rocker

As a life-long fan of the rock supergroup Journey, Larry had intended his last dying words to be an inspirational recitation of 'Don't stop...believin - hold on to that... feelin.'" Instead they were "Dear God - no! Get it away! Agggghh!" [gurgle].

No one knows what he was seeing in his fever dream, for he was in a rather tidy and nice-smelling hospital room with a pretty nurse at his side. One friend suggested it had been his recurring nightmare of finally getting backstage to meet Steve Perry only for the man to turn around and instead be the gaunt and recently face-lifted Steven Tyler. In any case his friends accidentally buried him with a Styx Greatest Hits CD instead of a Journey one, which is sad, because he had been a nice if forgettable guy.

They decided not to dig him up to rectify the indignity, but they did call the local classic rock radio station and ask them to play a song in his memory. Because they could not remember which song he had liked, they simply told the DJ "Just play anything classy by Foreigner. It's what Phil would have wanted."

The Slightly Evil Mirror

It was a dusty old round mirror in a baroque frame and was meant for a wall. It had been stored on a top shelf for years because when the last person looked into it, something bad happened to them. It was

like an evil or darker reflection of themselves took the moment to leap from a parallel dimension and inhabit them and fog their minds until they went crazy.

All of us in the insurance office were leery of it after that. We put it up high but did not want to break it for fear of letting whatever evil thing that lived in it escape. Rumor had it that it was the spirit of the guy who first figured how to skew the actuarial tables, or else his mom. But Larry really needed something to brighten up his office because his desk faced a wall, so we gave it to him. Even if he turned evil, the worst thing he could do was mess up our expense reports, and there was always the chance he would make errors in our favor. Turns out he did – we all made some extra cash for a while until he got fired.

I wish there were more to tell about the mirror, but I don't know what happened because I went to work for another company that did not make me fill out timesheets and gave me three more sick days a year. You may think that sounds trivial but life is about the little things.

If I had to do it all over again I would not have given Larry the mirror because he had a wife and three kids and did not deserve to get fired over mistakes we could have prevented if we had not unleashed the slightly less efficient version of himself. The extra cash was not worth it – well, I tell myself that, but I was able to get my kids braces and go to Disneyland that year. I guess it is a more difficult call than I thought. Lord knows this world takes a bigger genius than me to figure it out. Besides, I've spent all that money anyway so the point is moot.

The Bad Astronauts

Once the spaceship's inhabitants realized they could never return to earth because of the risk of the virus they had been exposed to, they took a vote on how to live out the remainder of their days given their limited supplies. The "party hearty/go in style" group won out and so that night they had one heck of a crazy bacchanalia, leaving the prudent astronauts to nurse their drinks and sulk in the corner. One by one, as the members of the "party hearty" constituency passed out, the prudent ones ejected them into deep space. This enabled them to actually extend their predicted lifespan by six miserable months. The real trick was to kill and eat the alien telepath before it could find out.

Bonus Question - Ethical Puzzler (For Continuing Education Credit):

Which group was really the bad astronauts? Debate amongst yourselves. There is no right answer, but I like to think that one group sucked significantly more than the other, though they both pretty much sucked.

At least the virus did not get to Earth. We can all assume that would have been really bad, right? Let's just agree to that and take it off the table. It was a really nasty virus, twice as bad as the worst cold you've ever had, and since it was from space, who knows? – you just can't take chances.

Okay – now you can debate.

The Stupid Super Man

He had galactic powers but the corn-fed good-hearted nature of a big blue boy scout, but when the Super-Powered Man turned evil he destroyed the pyramids - and that was just for starters. He also filled in the Grand Canyon and turned the Great Wall of China into a drainage ditch. I mean he went amok. It took a round-the-clock effort by world's best scientists to finally develop the procedure to turn the compass in his conscience toward "Good" again.

They shot the ray at his brain and the process was successful in that it made him good, but it left him much, much stupider than before. He rebuilt the pyramids as cubes, but no one had the courage to object. They fell apart five minutes after he left.

In the weeks and months that followed he went around doing more and more good in his very stupid way, and people began to realize that the well-intended but stupid Super-Powered Man was every bit as dangerous as the smart but evil one. But no one dared tell him, and anyways he was still all Mom and Apple Pie and so when he ran for Senate he won. It was in Washington D.C. that his newfound skill to do good in a stupid fashion found its true home.

It was soon thereafter that he realized how inefficient democracy was. This made the Good Super-Powered Man kind of mad, and he established a new good kind of order.

*

Today, thanks to Super First Leader, the world is a much cleaner and safer place with far fewer people. His arch-nemesis has expatriated to the Moon and made himself a kind of Bonnie Prince Charlie. He now attracts the kind of supporters who used to flock to Ron Paul. He was the first one to discover that the Moon had a big ol' chunk of Element X at its center, the one substance in all the universe that rendered the Super-Powered Man helpless. Lucky bastard. We keep waiting for him to do something, but you know super-villains - it's gonna cost us.

The Dog Tree

When the kids were little their pet dog up and died. This was an unexpected event and it forced the parents to have to explain death a little earlier than they were ready, so when they buried Rex in the backyard the dad said, "Don't worry kids - it's a part of life. Planting Rex means we'll have a dog tree someday. You got to plant a dog if you want a dog tree."

Now he had assumed that the kids were so young they would forget this bit of blarney but they never did, and year after year they kept asking him when the dog tree would sprout, so one night when they were all asleep he went out and bought a tree and planted it where Rex was buried, and the next day he told the kids, "Look - the dog tree has come up! Now quit asking me about it."

This only partly satisfied their curiosity, however, because they were now intent to see what happened when the tree bore fruit. When it finally did they were disappointed but the dad simply said, "Sorry kids - that damn dog must've eaten a lot of apples."

They distrusted their dad, religion, and apples in general for years and years after that.

Pied Piper 3000

Maybe people would have stood more of a chance against Pied Piper 3000 if they had remembered what "pied" meant. Well, "meant" – by the year 3000 it was "meant," not "meant." But no one did – remember, that is. A government board had decided that the word "pied" was offensive, or could be in certain circumstances they were only allowed to imagine sort of from the periphery but not to ponder directly much less discuss out loud, and therefore they had scrubbed the word from the dictionaries and replaced it with "special." Like so many government workers they were lazy asses and you would be astonished (or not) to learn how many rather quaint but unfamiliar words got replaced by them with the word "special."

Anyways, it meant ("meant") 'consisting of two or more colors in blotches,' or 'two-colored.' In any case if they had known to look out for a blotchy two-colored guy with a ray gun, they would have had more of a chance. But since they were on the lookout for a "special" guy with a ray gun they overlooked him until it was too late. Pity, too, since he really stood out amongst all the regular folks in their silver lamé jumpsuits. He had on an old blotchy pied horse-hide shawl that looked at least 3000 years old. But instead of being alarmed folks just thought, "Hey, that crazy jittery-eyed nut job sure is special – but hell, we're all special."

He vaporized them in seconds. Come to think of it, he didn't even have a pipe. Or if he did, he hid it. Maybe that ray gun was his pipe. In any case "pipe" had become a forbidden word due to its potentially unsavory connotations and been replaced with the much less offensive "substantially proportioned penis." That threw them off too – no one bothered to check if he had one. They just assumed he did, what with the designer genetics and drive-thru plastic surgery of the future and all. Most everyone had one. Well, before he vaporized them, that is.

Let's face it, he was a nut-job in the Middle Ages when he led the villagers' kids away into the mountains and he's a nut job now. He's still pied, though, and I think it would have been good just to call him out for what he was. But next time we'll know. Next time we'll be ready to take his pied ass out.

Section 2: Hare-Brained Heroics: Four Tales of the Little Guy versus the System

Middleburg: A Zeppelin-Friendly Community

Author's note: I know I have used the terms blimp, dirigible, and zeppelin interchangeably - mea culpa. They all float. -- Paul Hawkins

*

Enzo Fabrioli was a third generation American, descended from Staten Island immigrants. Enzo Fabrioli loved his country, and he had always loved airships. No one had to tell him about them - as a boy he had seen them in a book and been instantly filled with wonder. He had asked his papa about them and his papa told him about the great airships of yesteryear. His papa also told him to get his head out of the clouds, but Enzo never did. His grand papa, who spoke hardly any English, told him to keep dreaming, since he was only a boy.

And as he grew up, Enzo saw that intra-city travel by dirigible was an idea whose time had come, but it was only by the time he reached middle age that he saw a chance to do something about it. Cash-strapped European governments were having yard sales left and right, and Enzo was able to take the money he had scraped together from a series of successive but unsatisfying careers and buy a military blimp from a nigh-insolvent nation for a song. He took it home the only way he could - on a leisurely flight somewhat governed by the courses of the wind and subsequently violating the airspaces and raising the alarm of several sovereign nations. Jet planes circled him like angry hornets but no one ever actually shot him down. After a while he just flipped off the radio because he could not understand the air marshals' panicked commands in foreign languages anyway, except for some of the Italian - he father had remembered enough from his father to cuss in it. And so eventually he lofted across the Atlantic towards home. At the Eastern seaboard he came perilously close to gracing Washington DC with his blimp's lazy shadow before a breeze gently steered him toward Baltimore, and so he was able to make it ploddingly home with a front-page-making crisis avoided. On the way he decided he should name the airship Bessie.

Once he was back to his semi-major Midwestern metropolis of Middleburg (actual name changed for legal reasons) Enzo's investment readily achieved fruition, for the quiet pace that was the bane of dirigibles for long-distance trips proved to be its strength for intra-urban transit, where one had only to be faster than the speed of traffic. It excelled at bypassing bottlenecks, because it of course floated gently over them. One of Bessie's appeals was that she allowed passengers to nurse a cocktail and look down through glass windows and outright laughed at the hapless commuters snarled on their nightly white-knuckled journey back to the suburbs. If they chose, passengers could descend to points in between downtown and the blimp's suburban terminus via tethers. The younger professionals and those who liked to think they were still young (you could tell because they had goatees), actually liked that. In hindsight Enzo saw that he could have charged extra for the service.

In any case Enzo made a mint until some city planners with deep pockets got their collective panties in a wad because he was making their massively more expensive and mismanaged light rail transit plan (funded by federal dollars) look like the boondoggle it was. Five years, a billion dollars in funding, endless eminent domain disputes and a quarter mile of crooked track later, they had nothing but widespread bad will to show for it. The blimp made them look like chumps. Their pain was compounded by the fact that they could not outright forbid Enzo's safe and easy form of air travel for legal reasons succinctly summarized by a rusting sign teetering at the edge of town that read "Middleburg: A Zeppelin-Friendly Community." Way back in the early 1930's, in an effort to attract the booming airship industry, Middleburg had written several generous perks for airship manufacturers and operators in iron-clad language into their town charter. To violate them within 1000 years of their enactment would incur penalties that, in today's dollars, would bankrupt them. Everyone else had forgotten this, but not Enzo. He still drove the back road into town where the rusting sign resided. It had helped fuel his childhood passion. It had a picture of a 1930's airship on it and happy passengers (with men in hats) and everything.

And so, unable to forbid his operations legally, the town elders took to a public relations assault to kill them. They compared his blimp to the Hindenburg. They showed pictures of explosions scorching homes, children, and puppies. They worked the airwaves relentlessly to instill fear in the residents of every neighborhood it lofted over (Enzo was not the best pilot - he always got from A to B though not without a wandering course). And in time they succeeded in painting his happily floating grey war surplus dirigible as a menace, and the once-celebrated vehicle, whose broad span had been a favorite place for local businesses to place their advertisements, became anathema - except among those who enjoyed its initial purpose - getting from the suburbs to work and back without an embolism. But they did not have enough pull. Once a person got the "townies" riled up there was no hope - they could throw themselves into holy crusades on the most frivolous issues with preternatural gusto and an unquenchable sense of self-righteousness. Last year it had been banning goats as pets, this year it was airships. They proved too much for Enzo, who hung up his hat and put old Bessie in mothballs because he did not need that kind of grief.

Months later, however, the city had a rare earthquake that shattered several overpasses leading out of downtown, and the city council pleaded for Enzo to get old his airship out of retirement to rescue stranded, panicked commuters. Though still a little bitter he volunteered without a moment's hesitation, and he worked tirelessly running a nearly 24-hour shift hauling people back and forth, back and forth, until everyone who needed it was safely home.

But was no sooner had he finished his last run than the city council's "Brighter Future" committee used the crisis to promote its light rail system again and that meant the Hindenburg ads were trotted back out. Now Enzo Fabrioli was a patient man, and nice, and kind, but after seeing the ungrateful ads run during the ten o'clock news he turned to his mechanic, Gus (Gustav) and said "Fill'er up with hydrogen. Bessie and I are going to give them something to remember."

It was a mad expedition, pure folly. But Enzo was mad. The hypocrisy had aggrieved the innate sense of decency in him, the trust of human nature, and the vision of America as a free and glorious place his

grandpapa and papa had always taught him. The smug, cocktail-party inner-circle central planners represented a future he did not want - that no one should have to endure - an endless fate of the populace having to be grateful for mediocrity and pay through the nose for it while fat cats lined their pockets at their expense, forever. If his ancestors had wanted that they would have stayed in Europe.

And so the airship launched in pure quiet into the dead night and lofted toward town hall. But word of its mission got out, and somewhere near the business loop that separated old neighborhoods from white-flight ones, spotlights stabbed through the darkness and intercepted the lumbering vessel, flashing here and there off its wide gray sides as though tracking a quiet, inevitable, great angry gray whale of the skies.

But as the spotlights illuminated it they revealed a huge and brazen message slapped in paint on its sides: "Freedom Isn't Free: Fight the Power Before They Lock the Chains!" It was stark in the raw unskilled anger of its execution. Paint still dripped from it. It made the people gaze on it in fear and wonder.

Its course toward town hall was inevitable. The cops tried to shoot it down but it repelled their efforts or, in any case, seemed unharmed. They then rushed to unbox some bazooka-like devices they had been sent (unrequested) by the Department of Homeland Security, allocated to communities of a certain size thanks to the usual chicanery that is 'budget bingo'. But none of them had read the manual on how to use the things so the mayor put his foot down. This made a lot of people in SWAT suits sad, but they could only watch as the blimp drew closer.

At last, when it was over the town hall, two doors opened in its bottom and gallons upon gallons of red paint fell out, covering the onlookers, the neo-classical town hall, its adjacent 1970's style ugly offices, and the statue of the town founder himself, Sam Middleburg - which was ironic since the inscription at the statue's base read "Never give up - reach for the skies."

Relieved of its ballast, the blimp shot upward and was pushed quickly away by a prevailing northerly wind. People could only watch and wonder and dab at their paint-spattered selves as the enigma disappeared. When it was well away and over empty countryside, it erupted into a fireball. People gasped and watched it glow then fade then rain debris.

No one ever heard from Enzo (or Bessie) again. The last chapter in Middleburg's era of the airships was over.

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But Enzo was not dead. Oh no - his mechanic Gus had rigged a thing to guide Bessie by remote control on its last journey, and Enzo had been nowhere near it as it made its flight.

These days Enzo Fabrioli lives a life of quiet luxury in Panama. But he now and then reads the news from Middleburg. After that dramatic night things changed. The townies outlawed red paint. The suburban folks raised so much rancor to their congressman that, because he was up for re-election, he launched a probe into the light rail fiasco and shut it down for good. The commuters still have to drive white-

knuckled to and from downtown, but at least they have the satisfaction of knowing they got to stick it to some people who deserved it.

And as for Enzo? He now and then dreams of Bessie Two. And what better place than Panama? Why queue up barge upon barge to go through the canal when you could loft leisurely above it? His mind soars when the idea strikes him, and he is transported to a glorious place. The piña coladas go down easy. Yes, yes indeed. His idea is a noble thing, and Enzo Fabrioli imagines that, in time, he will make it come to be.

Zoomobile 3000

Larry had an old RV and started his own Zoomobile. He got the idea when he won a chimp in a hand of poker. It was in a seedy smoke-filled room behind the bait shop. Even the chimp was smoking. As he took custody of his winnings he asked the guy (whose face he could hardly see), "What the hell are you doing with a chimp?"

"That there's a good chimp!" the man protested before realizing that Larry was not questioning the value of his winnings. Then he continued. "Two years ago a circus was coming through town when its finances went belly up. Dude tried to win enough money to get to the next city on a hand of poker. He lost - I got me the animals."

"And you still have them?"

"Shore."

Larry's mind raced. He had just won a chimp, and last week he had towed a gigantic motor home to his car parts graveyard on the edge of town.

"Say, what if instead of people having to drive to the zoo, the zoo came to them?"

"I don't follow ya."

"Never mind!" Larry said. "You got snakes?"

"Shore."

"And maybe a lemur or two, and a fancy bird?"

"Yep - and I got me an armadillo, a bobcat, and some possums."

I can git those myself!" Larry said dismissively. He lived in the sticks and he barely missed hitting all of those and more on the road at night on many occasions.

"What you thinkin'?" the man asked.

"None of your business," Larry answered. "Now how about another hand - you in or you out?"

The man was in, then he was out, and Larry had added the man's entire menagerie to his portfolio. The next day he took custody of them and then began working day and night on his Zoomobile.

The vehicle became an obsession. It had been a big, long, boxy, dirt-colored 1970's RV to begin with, but Larry never saw it that way. He saw a mobile zoo all shiny clean and painted zebra-striped. And he worked on it constantly, letting all other things in his life slide. His girl left him. The girl he was keeping secret from the other girl left him. His dog left him (or got eaten by the puma). But after two weeks, the vehicle matched what he had seen in his mind's eye: it was triumphant; it was pristine. Even the shabby animals seemed impressed. The bobcat looked at it with a glow in his eyes as to say "Sweet!" but not quite let on the degree to which he was impressed. Still, Larry thought he heard a low whistle.

And so Larry stocked it lovingly, used mooched wifi to figure out how to care for and accommodate every animal, and then began his mobile tour of mostly rural municipalities that had no laws against mobile zoos or were just plain unincorporated and had no laws, period.

People were impressed. They came to anticipate its arrival days in advance and lined up to see the insides. Larry marched them steadily through from front to back. Money, enter, walk-through, exit. Pay to walk through again. It was a goldmine. At nights he would pitch camp just beyond town limits and he and the animals would sit around a campfire and relax. If folks came around to see him then he did not charge as much, and sometimes he would even get a cold one out of the ice chest for them. He tried to get the chimp to give up smoking, but the chimp would just wave him off and point at Larry's beer gut as if to say "Get your own house in order first, fatso."

Larry would laugh - it was a good life. But like all good things, some busy-body-citizens cannot abide them, and seek to cease them for the greater good. And so it was with Larry - he had made an enemy and did not even know it yet. But he had cut off some blue-haired old biddy in traffic one day on a tour through some faceless, nameless hicksville, and she had remembered, and she was certain there was a law against him - or his kind, anyway - and she was even now burning the midnight oil to get him shut down forever.

The woman (Pearl, by name) told herself she was doing it for the animals. She told herself this so many times she came to believe it - but really, she was just doing it because she was kind of sour inside - the kind of sour that had driven her husband to his grave years before his time and kept the gossip circle at her church running day and night tallying the sins of other folks, but never to their faces.

In time, she found just the right the law and just the right kind of crusading do-gooder lawyer to take Larry down. She would do it for the animals. She would do it for the greater good. She would do it for HOAs everywhere. That Zoomobile was so huge it had taken nearly thirty seconds to go through the intersection and made it so the light was stale yellow before she could complete her turn. That had burned her. She never broke a law and did not like being made to appear to do so.

She insisted on being there personally when her attorney delivered the summons.

Larry's jaw fell when he got it and she stood behind the dark-suited lawyer and smiled.

"What's this?" Larry asked.

"Your day in court," Pearl said. "Your day in court."

Well Larry sweated out that day in court for weeks - he did not have the money to pay for proper counsel. That Zoomobile was his bread-and-butter and almost all the profits went back into caring for the animals. He spent many a sleepless night trying to cobbling together his own defense and making a mess of it.

The day in court came and the old prude was standing there in a hot small-town courtroom beside her big-fish-in-a-small-pond lawyer, and Larry was standing on the other side of the aisle with a disorganized stack of sheets of yellow paper, when suddenly the doors at the end of the hall flung open as dramatically as in any movie, and in stepped some foxy lady in a Manhattan-style business suit and smart-girl glasses. She walked past the lot of them and straight to the judge and handed him a single, well-typed sheet of paper.

"What is the meaning of this?" he said, followed by, "Gimme my glasses," and, "Well I'll be damned! Give him my best regards - case dismissed!" Down went the gavel.

The old lady's jaw dropped but Larry had no time to gloat, because as the classy lady lawyer walked back down the aisle and past him she said simply, "Larry Jenkins, follow me. My employer wishes to speak with you." And so Larry followed.

What happened next was all a kind of blur. It turns out it was some crazy anonymous billionaire who paid for his defense, and that he had taken an interest in Larry for some time. Larry and the lady lawyer (Cappadocia Seville by name) flew out on his private jet to meet him. Larry had never been treated half so fancy. When the plane door opened Larry found himself on a jungle island, and there in the middle of it all stood a gleaming red-finned rocketship.

"What the hell...?"

But she led him past that to a small cool suite of underground offices where a frail old man in an immaculate suit spun around to face him in his wheelchair.

"The world is dying, Larry Jenkins," he said, "and I want you for my Space Ark."

"Look boss, all I did is run a Zoomobile. I aint your man."

He the old man waved him off. "I have followed your career on Craigslist, and on MySpace. There are men and there are scientists. The latter have the brains but not the heart. But you, you have a gift. The world is dying and I'll be damned if I see all her glory lost in my lifetime. I have charted a habitable planet. It will take you a thousand years in suspended animation to get there. But I want you to oversee it, Larry. Scientists I can buy - and as you can see, I have bought them, by the hundreds. But what I need, what only good fortune can provide, is a man of heart. Such a man cannot be bought - he can only volunteer."

“Are you nuts?”

“Does that rocketship look nuts to you? It is stocked with every kind of animal.”

Larry pondered. He felt like he was in a crazy dream, but the man just put his fingertips together and looked at him and waited.

“What is there for you, really, on this earth?” the man asked.

Larry paused. “Not much.” he said. “My animals.”

“You can bring the menagerie from your Zoomobile with you. And did I mention that Miss Cappadocia here will be coming too? She has taken a fancy to you. I can’t claim to understand it.”

Larry gulped. He was in.

It was a fool's quest, but Larry was a fool - a fool ready for a new planet. They were launched into space and scant hours later that mysterious island exploded and took all its secrets with it. It made the news but they only blamed it on a volcano.

Cappadocia was on the ship with him as his confidant and advisor, but soon she fell for his animal magnetism. Well, they fell for each other. Turns out she had been educated in the finest board schools in England but before that she had started out as a foundling in the rainforests of India, an infant being raised by a jungle cats. He finally got up the nerve to kiss her just before every living thing on that ship was put into a deep, deep sleep for the duration of their thousand-year journey. His last thought was a dream of her. He thought he was holding her hand.

What else is there to say? All went well - they arrived at their destination, a brave new world whose sky had three suns. It was like a vast rolling pristine paradise, waiting for new life. They set about populating it, and the work was long but they grew never tired - or old. A last gift from the eccentric billionaire, it seems. He had given them a serum that he had had made for himself.

Somewhere out there is a planet populated with Larry and Cappadocia’s descendents. Most people live in a bubble city but Larry and Cappadocia live outside in a trailer at the edge of a cliff, overlooking a vast green sea of unspoiled wilderness. They sit at a campfire at night and watch the world they helped create unfold. Larry’s chimp, who had mutated dramatically in the planet’s atmosphere, has offered to lend them his newfound telepathic powers over animals, but they declined - they want to see the creatures wild and free. The chimp shrugged his shoulders and walked off. He still smokes, and he keeps the books for them. They think he skims a little off the top for himself but they don't mind. So far everything on the planet is free, anyway, except for the illicit stuff the chimp is into. One of these days Larry will engage him in a hand of poker, loosen him up a little, and see if he is planning to overthrow him and Cappadocia any time soon. Larry is still good at poker. If that chimp is up to something, he’ll bluff it out of him.

High Crimes and Mr. Wieners

His real name was not Mr. Wieners, of course, and before his Public Television show got axed, his stage name had not been not Mr. Wieners. That title came later – when he began fighting crime. The press gave it to him. But beforehand his given name had been plain old Alan Wainwright, and his stage name had been “Doctor Doggshund” (get it? Dachshund?). He did a show with a live kiddie audience bused in from local gradeschools that focused on proper pet care and featured the odd exotic animal or nature clip or rescue shelter adoption spot. But his show got axed when the local PBS affiliate got a grant to feature some nationally produced show that used cartoon Bananimals (part banana, part animal - get it?) to teach diversity and math.

“Not diverse? One of the dogs is a Jew, one’s Hispanic, one’s crippled, and two are transgendered. I admit the rest of them are White.”

None of the local station’s execs were amused, so he continued. “Hey, dogs are the universal language. All folks love them. Their loyalty has brought folks out of comas, for pete’s sake. They bring down people’s blood pressure just by being there to pet. That, my friends, is a scientific fact! Isn’t PBS about science?”

“I’m sorry. Effective immediately, we’re replacing you with the Bananimals.”

“For Christ’s sake. How long have we known each other, Bill? We came into the business together.”

“Sorry Alan – it’s about money. The Bananimals are a trifecta: they got animals, math, nutrition, and multi-culturalism.”

“Trifecta? That’s four.”

“I don’t have time for this Alan. I’m sorry.” He held out an envelope. “We get all our funding with strings attached these days. Here’s your severance check. The time for your show has passed.”

“But what about the dogs?”

Both men looked down. Seven adorable dachshunds surrounded Wainwright’s feet.

“No one’s taking them from you.”

“But how will I support them? Seven mouths, seven sets of vet’s bills – that show was their livelihood.”

“I’m sure you’ll figure something out. Kids’ birthday parties – something.”

Wainwright noticed that his former friend had been walking him to the door. The secretary, whom he had known for fifteen years, set her face and would not look at him. She needed her job. No bad will - it was just a different era.

“So long, Wainwright – and good luck. By the way, effective immediately, we got a policy of no pets in the building.”

And then just like that the door clicked shut behind him, and he was out in the hot sun, staring at his crappy car across the parking lot while seven sets of dark brown eyes stared at him, all to remind him it was past their lunch time.

“Come on guys,” he said. And with that he held open the backseat door and seven sausage-long bodies launched themselves onto the pleather benchseat and began jostling for the best spots near the windows.

Wainwright turned the key and the old car started with a cough. He let his head sink to the steering wheel. “What am I going to do?” he said aloud. “What am I going to do?”

*

The birthday party route proved no good. The economy had been tight for some time now and anyway kids did not seem to take to dogs like they used to, them not having lasers and such, much less a middle-aged man with middle-aged laser-less dogs, and anyway he gave off an aura of glum desperation that made young moms wary. Soon his business dwindled to nothing. He removed his ad from the back of the newspaper and stopped answering the phone. In fact, he sank into a funk. He took to staying in his cruddy apartment and mooching wifi off his neighbors. He stopped shaving. And one day, when he went to cash a check to buy the week’s supply of pet food, he was told his bank account was empty. After the lady at the teller window had scolded him, he turned and slinked away. The dogs looked up at him but he could not meet their eyes. He had no hope, and no reply.

He got an idea, at last – a desperate one. He would lead them to the dumpster behind the hot dog joint that night. Maybe he could find enough scraps to feed them.

The place was near his apartment. Once the sun had set he cracked his door open, snuck past the door of his nosy next-door neighbor Nora (or was it Dora?) and led his seven charges down the stairs, across the street, then through the alley behind the fast food joints. Here and there the dogs sniffed one dumpster after another but always turned back discouraged. And then they came to the bright blue dumpster behind the Coney King, and there his heart failed him, for in the window was a big hand-painted sign: “OUT OF BUSINESS.” But even as he was ready to despair the dogs had the opposite reaction, for they were striking to attention at the big blue bin. Wainwright stared at them, stared at the dumpster, then creaked its lid open. And sure enough, inside were packages and packages of hot dogs, and they still seemed good. He tore these open and tossed them over his shoulder to the dogs, and the dogs attacked them hungrily.

And as the dogs were enjoying their feast, he noticed a patch of bright red and yellow peeking out from behind some flats of cardboard. He pushed these aside, grabbed at the swatch of color (it was cloth), and pulled it up. As he pulled it kept coming, and coming, and coming. When he had at last pulled it completely out he held it at arm’s length and identified it: it was a “Hot Dog Guy” costume. He remembered now. His mind raced back to all the times he had seen “Hot Dog Guy” dancing desperately at the curb, holding a sign, trying to lure traffic to the business. Apparently it hadn’t work. But Wainwright admired it. In fact, as he looked from the costume to his seven hungry wiener dogs, a flash

of hopefulness occurred to him as though this were a moment of destiny, a kind of sign. But of what? He did not know. Just something wonderful like a blessing.

And while he stood pondering a scream came from across the alley, dashing his reverie with a single piercing cry of "Help!" All his charges' tiny canine heads pivoted simultaneously in the direction of the scream. Down the alley, behind the pawn shop, a lady was struggling with a hoodlum for her purse.

Wainwright's natural instinct was to run away, but the dogs' stares wouldn't let him. He knew he was the alpha dog to them, the one they looked up to, but that the position was always precarious at best. If he turned tail and fled he would never have the authority to shoo them off the couch again. So he did the only thing he could do: he donned the Hot Dog Guy suit to conceal his identity and raced toward the altercation. The dogs followed in a cloud of excitement.

"My purse – you awful man!"

"Shouldn't be cashing your social security check at night, grandma!"

Wainwright sucked in his breath and puffed his chest out to its full unimpressive span and leapt out of the shadows in his costume, and his seven angry dachshunds latched onto the purse-snatchers limbs at once.

"What the heck?" the thug screamed as the tiny teeth sank into him. He leapt around in agony.

Wainwright spotted an old metal soda syrup canister next to a dumpster and brought it down on the thug's head. The villain sank to the ground like a rock. Wainwright took the purse from him and handed it back to the old lady.

"You better beat it before he wakes up," he said.

She flushed and cooed. "Oh my! What a nice man! However can I repay you?"

At first he was about to say "No reward required, good citizen!" but then he realized he had seven mouths to feed and so he said, "Maybe twenty bucks so I can feed these fellas here?"

"Twenty? Fifty I say!" She handed him the bills. He felt like a crud but he took them anyway.

He walked her to the safety of the streetlights but did not enter them himself. Instead he hung back in the shadows, and once he saw her walking safely down the sidewalk he and the hounds high-tailed it out of sight.

He made his way back at his apartment, snuck past his nosy neighbor, and once inside he counted and recounted the money she had given him late into the night and looked over at the Hot Dog Guy costume, and then at his seven sleeping charges, and he wondered if it had all been some crazy dream. He decided he'd sleep on it and find out tomorrow. But as he slept his mind played out a novel idea, a brilliant idea, and it soon became apparent that his subconscious, in any case, had figured out a way to feed his pets and save the world (or his corner of it) if he were bold enough. Well, desperate and bold enough. Some time in the night he decided that he was.

*

After that day his brief dramatic life as a crime fighter began. He broke up muggings. He thwarted burglars. He foiled toll-booth runners with mustard. He caught a guy trying to pour a pan full of old motor oil down a storm drain. And he got on the news now and then, and people loved his little dogs, so soon his fame began to grow and he was giving more speeches than fighting crime, and his old TV show spiel returned to his heart and voice but with a new vigor, and before long he was talking to schools and various society guilds about taking care of animals and not doing drugs and eating right and saving the planet, and he was making good money at it.

But every costumed hero eventually evokes the appearance of a costumed criminal counterpart, and it would have been wise of him to remember the time when his PBS show had been in its heyday, and he had told an idealistic school boy that if he worked hard and lived a good life and got good grades all his dreams would come true. Well they never had – his life had turned cruddy: his folks lost their jobs, his dad took to drinking, his mom ran off, they had to move to a crummy neighborhood in a really bad school district, he got terrible acne from the years 14 to 18, he turned terribly near-sighted and had to wear thick glasses, and the one college he had really hoped to get into turned him down because he just wasn't diverse enough (he had listed his primary extra-curricular interest as taxidermy, which did not help).

And so the boy grew up and turned into a grease-spattered burger-flipping man, and he nursed a grudge against a society that made bright promises but only sold chains, and seeing Hot Dog Guy on the news every night just made him sicker. And so Burger Guy was born - it was not a difficult criminal vocation for him to step into. He had worked at nearly every burger joint in town; he had stolen several of their costumes; he knew the secrets of all his past employers - that this one's tills never really locked, that that one left the back door open for the grease truck guy, that the security camera at Happy Burger was really just a shoebox and a toilet paper tube spray-painted black - each one had its Achilles' Heel and he knew them all.

And so he began a crime spree, and he openly taunted his costumed counterpart to try to stop him. The trouble is, Wainwright's life had gotten cushy, which had been helped along by the fact that it had been impossible for him to stay anonymous. Whereas Burger Guy could be anyone, everyone had figured out who Wainwright was after maybe 30 seconds, because they remembered the guy who'd been on PBS with all the wiener dogs. And when he had told his sob story of getting fired to the local media, he became a cause celeb. "How could they have done such a cruel thing? Work for us at Channel 48." His public speaking career grew exponentially; in addition, he became spokesman for a local brand of dog chow (his dogs hated it); he addressed the college media class with a speech called "Voice and Choices: Preserving Local Media Identity in an Era of Commoditized Corporate Creativity." He came to have mostly given up wearing the Hot Dog Guy suit, opting for stylish suits and a hot dog-themed tie instead, but every once in a while he donned the full suit (it was the kind with big fake kooky eyes while your real eyes looked out the mouth hole), and he fought crime for the sake of keeping up appearances. The local police agreed to tip him off about the occasional mugger if he in turn promised not to squirt mustard on the windshields of cars speeding in school zones.

But soon Burger Guy's crime spree grew so big and so brazen that the local media could no longer ignore it, and when that happened he sent a video to all the local TV stations daring Hot Dog Guy ("Mr. Wieners") to try to stop him. It was a cruel, disturbing video, filmed in shakey cam from within some small cruddy apartment. The man did not seem right in the head. He taunted Wainwright from within the Burger Guy costume, which consisted basically of typical fast food servant attire - cheap blue slacks + white short-sleeved shirt - but with a giant burger for a head, onto which he had smeared a large uneven smile with ketchup. He bobbed this giant head at the camera as he ranted, which made the video all the more freakish.

"You call yourself a hero! Hah! Hot Dog Guy - you are worse than a lie - you are an old, bad joke. You say the world's a bright place where dreams can come true - I say the world sucks. You suck. You stand for nothing but giving the system a friendly face to excuse its many many sins. You tell people to adopt puppies - the system kicks people out of their homes to build Big Box Stores. You talk about saving the planet - the system pushes all its slavery and pollution to the third world so people can buy cheap merchandise and think they still have morality. You once told a boy bused in to watch your stupid TV show that if he worked hard and got good grades all his dreams could come true. But the system told him "you aren't rich enough and your folks aren't connected enough and you don't look like the kind of kid we want on our glossy brochures - good luck flipping burgers."

"Don't you get it? The world is a lie, and you've become a lie! If you hadn't you would have noticed by now that one of your dogs is missing and has been replaced with a cunning counterfeit!" At that he held up a squirming wiener dog which twisted and turned in attempts to bite him. "That's right, Hot Dog Guy - you want him? You want to prove you haven't become as shallow as all the 'causes' you shill for? Meet me at the abandoned sausage factory at midnight tonight and try to stop me - or your little dog is toast."

Wainwright looked down at the cloud of hounds around his feet. One, two, three, four, five, six ... and a hairless cat with a fake snout held on by a rubber band. Dixie was gone! Or was it Trixie? It wasn't Milo - he had liver spots. In any case his heart shattered. He picked up the cat and tore off the fake snout in a furious rage. He stomped up and down the hall and the dogs followed him in an increasingly excited flurry. They had been trying to tell him - if he had not been so self-absorbed he would have noticed. He was so angry he could kick himself - he tried and fell. The dogs surrounded him, their little eager brown-eyed faces saying "We tried to tell you! Why didn't you notice? Haven't you been wondering why the couch smells like pee?"

He dropped the cat off at the apartment of his nosy neighbor Nora (or was it Dora? Anyway she was a cat-lady), and then he looked at the clock - 10:15! He had less than two hours to save his pooch! He shuddered to think what the burger maniac might do to it.

Just then the chief of police called. "Don't do it, Wainwright. Don't take the bait - this one's a nut job - we'll handle it. Damned fool tipped us off to exactly where he'll be. My boys on the SWAT team can handle this punk - we bought ourselves a butt-load of gear with Department of Homeland Security cash. I think we can see through walls now - I haven't tried those goggles on myself yet but they sure look cool..."

“Well Chief...”

“Listen Wainwright, you’ve become a big man. You’re important to this community. You’ve got bigger things to live for now than that mutt. We’ll save her.”

Wainwright dropped the phone.

“Wainwright? Wainwright?” the Chief’s voice came from the receiver. Wainwright hung it up.

He heard the villain’s voice in his head, and then Chief’s - had he become a phony to himself? “You’ve got bigger things to live for than that mutt?” The words hit deep in his heart. He had become a lie. He had six faces looking up at him that were too kind to ever, ever say as much, but in their very loyalty they told him. He knew what he must do. He must do what he had always done - look out for his loyal charges through thick and thin. He must do the one thing he had always done right, his whole life, long before the fame had come to him - he must return the loyalty of his pets with love and trust and protection.

He threw open the closet door. There, in the back, behind all the fancy suits he was now able to afford, hung the Hot Dog Guy costume. He took it off the hook. He sniffed it - it was kind of crusty. But he put it on. The dogs began to caper and leap with excitement.

“Come on my friends,” he said. “Let’s go save Dixie (or Trixie)!”

With that he dashed out the door. Nora (or was it Dora?) popped her head out the door of her apartment and tried to talk to him but he waved her off. He and his six remaining hounds piled into his car, and Wainwright roared out onto the highway while six pointy noses hung out the window and snuffed the night air, hoping to pick up the scent of their missing comrade.

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His cruddy car raced through the night and soon arrived at the old abandoned factory. It was surrounded by squad cars, but it was easy enough for Wainwright to turn off his headlights and make his way unnoticed around to the back. He pulled to a stop in the large empty lot where trucks and train cars used to berth and climbed up on one loading docks and tested the metal door beside it. It creaked open. One by one he hoisted his wiener dogs up on the platform beside him and then they all went into the cavernous dark building.

Once his eyes adjusted Wainwright could see old abandoned scaffolding and machinery throughout the place.

“Look,” Wainwright yelled into the emptiness, “I don’t want any trouble. I just want my dog back.”

First silence met him, then crazy laughter, far away at first but then coming closer. Wainwright braced himself in his best pugilistic stance, and a burger-headed figure slowly emerged into a small patch of moonlight coming through a broken-out window. Once the figure had appeared, however, the voice that came out of it was not defiant but scared.

"I didn't think you'd come," he laughed. "It's all a crazy joke in a crazy world. I can't believe what I've gotten myself into."

Wainwright paused; he felt his fists lower slightly. He saw Trixie at the fellow's side. He gestured for her and she came to him. The man just stood there.

"I took it too far," he said in a shakey, nervous voice – half-laugh, half-sob. "And now I've made a hell of a mess for myself. You should just get the hell out of here."

But Wainwright didn't. Instead he walked a little ways away and sat on an old metal bench, and his cloud of dachshunds circled his feet. He patted at the bench for his burger-headed counterpart to sit beside him.

"What's your name, son?"

"What's it matter?"

"It matters to me."

"Sure it does, old man!"

Wainwright pulled off the top of his costume so that he was no longer a leering kooky hotdog head but just a guy. He tried to straighten his hair a bit, and he propped up his glasses.

"Look, I know life can be cruddy. And I know I told a lot of pie-in-the-sky whoppers that could only lead a kid like you to disappointment. I'm sorry son."

Burger Guy looked at him, and there was something in the sincerity of Wainwright's voice and the calm look of his seven dogs' brown eyes that got past his armor. The man walked slowly toward him, and when he was a few feet away he paused and took off his giant burger head. He was little more than a pimply faced kid.

"My name's Bill."

"Hi Bill. I guess you know I'm Alan, but that name's never felt more worthless in my entire life. Have a seat, son."

The boy stared at him but then took a seat. Some of the dogs moved to sit at his feet, including Trixie, who nuzzled at his ankles.

"Go ahead – pick her up."

The boy did and the dog curled into his elbow.

"You must have treated her okay when you had her. I trust that dog's instincts more than any lie detector test."

The burger kid petted the dog. "I can see why you like them."

“Sure - Dogs help people. Science shows they even lower people’s blood pressure, but I don’t need some egghead to tell me that. Dogs heal people.”

“Yeah, but they can’t get me out of this mess.”

Wainwright thought for a while. “Maybe they can. But first let me tell you this: I know life can be cruddy. It was cruddy for me for a long time. I was doing my kids’ show for fifteen years but after the first six months I was just going through the motions. I lied to kids – I lied to you. I got apathetic and satisfied with good enough and hollow. My wife left me and all I had left was a pregnant wiener dog named Gladys. But I took care of Gladys and she took care of me, and I raised those seven puppies of hers, and they gave me a purpose, even if it wasn’t much of one. I took care of them and they took care of me.”

The boy nodded as he held Trixie in his lap. “I know what you mean. I had meant to do something mean to this dog, but the second she looked up at me with those big brown eyes I just couldn’t. And when I stopped trying to fight her she let me pet her, and she soothed me. There’s not a drop of hate in her whole long body.”

Trixie nodded. She pushed her muzzle into the crook of the kid’s elbow.

Wainwright agreed. “Look son, let me tell you how it is: life sucks, and the system is no damned good, but it only has as much power over you as you give it. You made me realize that. I let the scraps of fame they threw me go to my head – a little glory, a little recognition, a whole lot of waived parking tickets. I let it make me think I was somebody special. But I’m not special unless I care for those close to me. Now you can have somebody close to you.”

“What do you mean?”

“Trixie’s pregnant.”

The boy’s jaw fell open slightly.

“Not sure who the father is, but she and Rusty have been awfully chummy lately.”

They looked down at the wiener dogs and the rusty one suddenly became absorbed in a study of his paws.

“Five or six puppies on the way.” Wainwright continued. “Think you can handle that, son?”

“You mean..?”

“I mean I want you to take care of her. Look, you’re young and you’ve got your whole life ahead of you. You just have to learn to believe in yourself and be responsible for something that looks up to you. Trixie trusts you. You’ve got a good heart, kid, one that got set off the tracks by a rotten life. But I am giving her to you, and you to her. And one other thing – I am going to help you escape.”

“But this old factory’s surrounded.”

“You just leave that to me.”

“Okay.”

Wainwright leaned forward. “Look – I got a second chance from these mutts and now you’re going to get one. Listen to me: don’t let anybody tell you how life has to be. They tell you it’s a drudge, but I say you make it a ball. You understand me?”

“I think so.”

“Remember this moment – it’s the first day of your second chance at life. Break the chains – be who the person you were meant to be. Thumb your nose at all of them, forever. Make life a ball. I’m giving you that chance. Run boy, run. Get that ball.”

The young man nodded, but the seven dachshunds’ heads pivoted this way and that in search of a ball that was nowhere in sight.

“Now listen here,” Wainwright said. “I have a plan...”

*

Moments later, a hotdog-costumed figure emerged from the front door of the abandoned sausage factory, a cloud of waddling wiener dogs at his feet. The figure had his hands raised. “Don’t shoot! Don’t shoot!” he said. “It’s me!”

The chief of police shone a flashlight at him. “Wainwright! I thought I told you to stay out of this!”

“My dog was at stake,” he coughed. “I couldn’t.” He bent over and turned away.

“You all right?”

“Fellow roughed me up pretty bad – took a punch to the wind-pipe. But I’m okay – you should see the other guy. Fell off the scaffolding. He’s still in there and crazy as hell. Hope your boys are ready.”

“You just leave him to us – and stay the hell out of the way! I’ll deal with you tomorrow.”

“Sure Chief.” He nodded and began to walk off, shoulders hunched.

The Chief was not sufficiently impressed by his rectitude. “I mean it Wainwright – 9:00 a.m. at my office tomorrow. We’re gonna have us a little refresher course on the do’s and don’ts of masked vigilantism! You’ve got a reputation to think about.”

The man waved back over his shoulder. “Understood Chief – see you tomorrow.”

The Chief scowled at the retreating figure and his pack of pooches until he had departed, then he turned to his lieutenant.

“Damn, he’s nuts.”

The lieutenant nodded and set his jaw grimly. "This world's a freakshow."

They both stood there silently pondering the possibility of their small-to-medium-sized community turning into a four-color comic book world splashed with senseless costumed violence when a second figure emerged in the factory doorway, and a creepy scary laugh emerged from his grotesque ketchup-smear burger head.

"Ready for a long night, coppers? Hahahaha!"

"It's Burger Guy!" someone shouted. Twenty rifles immediately snapped to twenty shoulders, and twenty fingers quivered at their triggers.

"Wait! Wait!" the Burger Guy said, raising his hands over his head. "Don't shoot. I'm just kidding – it's me – it's Wainwright!"

The Chief and the lieutenant looked at each other as a dozen flashlights fell on the figure, who slowly removed his giant head.

"Dadgum – it is Wainwright!"

Wainwright propped up his glasses and the rifles lowered a little.

"Wainwright!" the Chief yelled, striding towards him. "What the hell is the meaning of this?"

Wainwright shrugged. "I talked it out with him. I figured the kid needed a second chance, so we switched costumes. I promise to make full restitution for all his burglaries."

The Chief stood there and fumed. He was speechless. He stammered, stomped, turned, and looked at Wainwright. Finally the words he needed came to him, and he whirled and pointed a quivering finger at the wiener dog man in a blind fury.

"You'll never work in this town again, Wainwright! You hear me! Your name is dead in this town – dead! I'll have you locked away for twenty years!"

"You do what you need to do."

Two men in blue put the cuffs on him and led him to a squad car. He offered no resistance, and the Chief just stood there as the black and white containing Wainwright slipped into the night. He could only shake his head.

"He made us look like fools, lieutenant – fools!"

The lieutenant nodded. "Whole damn world's gone nuts - hard to tell the perps from the freaks."

The Chief nodded. The lieutenant always talked like that. He understood this crazy mixed up world better than the Chief did; he imagined himself sitting behind the big desk some day.

*

Wainwright's trial was the event of the century – or of the decade, or at least of the week – an old lady drove her car through the front window of a Bed Bath and Beyond the day after it started and kind of stole his thunder. But in any case Wainwright's lawyer had an ace in the hole. He called to the stand the loveable dachshunds, which had been returned to Wainwright surreptitiously after Burger Guy had escaped. Once the jury saw their big brown eyes and wagging tails, it melted their hearts. With Wainwright's promise of full restitution, all was forgiven. And so his life went on, once more a free man, but never again to be the celebrity he had been briefly.

*

The Chief's prediction that he would never work in that town again, however, proved untrue. He did find work, but not of the high prestige he'd enjoyed before. Instead, he found himself flipping burgers. But Wainwright didn't mind. It paid the rent, and there were always plenty of leftovers for his dogs.

"Dora, I'm home!"

He had finally stopped to talk to Dora the cat lady one day, and it turned out he actually liked her. She liked his dogs and he liked her cats, and it turned out that they liked each other. And so within a year they were a couple.

As he came home he hung his burger hat and apron on the peg inside the doorway, and the cloud of dogs (and cats) greeted him as he sank into his chair. Dora brought him a glass of tea and asked him, "Seen the news?"

He looked at her. "You mean..?"

"Yes – he's at it again."

They flipped on the set to see the latest report on Hot Dog Guy, who had thwarted a jewelry heist with his seven vicious wiener dogs assisting him, latching onto the sleeves of the bandits until the police arrived. And then, of course, the Hot Dog vigilante had vanished into the shadows, ever mysterious and ever vigilant, ready to thwart crime should it rear its ugly head again.

"He makes you proud?" she asked as she sat on the arm of his chair.

He looked at her and smiled. "You bet he does."

She settled in beside him, and the two of them and their menagerie basked in each other's company late into that evening and many evenings thereafter. And in his heart Alan Wainwright felt great pride and great peace, as if the lesson he had been trying to teach in all the years of his kids' TV show had been communicated in one moment, and he had been as much the student as the master. And yes he had a burger-flipping life for the rest of his days. But it was a good life.

Punchafish

It was a big, brutish, ugly fish that might as well have been from another era. It swam in a big glass-walled cell that spanned from floor to ceiling in the local rundown municipal zoo's aquarium. No one knew how long it had been there. You could see its photo in old news articles dating back to at least the 1930's. Other fish had come and gone. The big fish might have helped with that. The zoo itself had never been in the money but limped along on an 1/8 of a penny sales tax and never got shut down for some nostalgic reason or another although most people didn't like to go to that part of town anymore.

But George Miller did. He lived there. Oh he used to live high, but his wife left him and the economy tanked, and he had lost hope and just stopped trying and before he knew it he was living in that shabby part of town and wasting his days and then his cable got shut off and so he spent more time than he'd care to in that rundown zoo cuz if nothing else it gave an excuse to get outside and smoke. He somehow still had smoking money.

And when he went to that zoo he always saw that big smug ancient fish. Not a gar precisely, not quite a sturgeon, but kind of like both, with a the long full body of a catfish but scaly and grey with an ugly wide head. And when George look at it it looked back at him, and swam a little ways off and then would come back and look at him, and almost sneer or laugh and show supreme, sublime disdain, as if George were less than nothing and it were an elemental force.

"God," George said. "I'd love to punch that fish!" He often cocked back a fist and barely stopped himself from hitting the glass. The fish just laughed.

A nearby janitor overheard him. Like George he looked run down and also like the kind of guy who never made enough money legitimately to meet his illegitimate needs, and so he leaned over while pretending to sweep and whispered in George's ear. "Hey buddy - you serious?"

"What?"

"Would you like to punch that fish?"

George looked at the man but the man pretended to be absorbed in sweeping, though he lingered. George was for a moment flummoxed, but then all the rage and frustration and hatred welled up inside him like a long suppressed volcano.

"Yeah," he said. "I'd like to punch the hell out of him."

The janitor nodded. "Then meet me back here tonight. Gate will be open. Bring twenty bucks."

"But..."

"No 'buts'. The stuff you need to get in there and punch him will be ready. You just show up."

George said yes and then the man was gone, sweeping in another corner. George felt like he had just been through a crazy dream but then he looked back up at the ancient grey fish. The fish seemed to

know that something was up. It swam by with increased disdain and extravagance. It seemed to say that it had done all this before, and that George would simply be its latest victim.

That made George mad. He went home and then went at an old heavy bag that hung in the empty bay of an abandoned filling station down the block. The more he thought about the fish the madder he got, and the madder he got the harder he punched. Dust flew from the bag as he punched and thought about the fish. It may have bested other men, but it had never met George.

*

He showed up at the zoo that night and the gate was unlocked like he'd been told and he made his way through the dark to the aquarium and was surprised to see that an audience was already there - a room full of toughs, down-and-outers, sneering laughing smoking men. They had known to come here. Apparently it was a not an uncommon event. A moment later he recognized the janitor, who called him over. "Go in that room over there and put on the wetsuit. There's oxygen in the tank. You get five minutes in the ring with the fish."

It was happening faster than he could think about it. George was a big man and could barely squeeze into the black slippery suit, but he zipped it to the top with one final supreme sucking in of his gut. Then he pulled the goggles down over his eyes and put the breathing tube thingee in his mouth and marched his flippered feet back into the aquarium room.

"Okay buddy," the janitor said. "All good? I got money on you - I'm that only one that does. I seen something in your eyes. You ready to get in there and punchafish?"

George nodded that he was, but just then the ancient giant fish leered at him through the glass, and he began to think that this was all a terrible mistake, and fear welled up inside of his as they lowered him on ropes into the tank.

*

The fish's assault was quick and brutal. From the moment George was in the water the leviathan was on him. It butted him savagely into the wall. George swung a lazy punch at him and missed. The fish came at him again - it knocked from behind the knees and onto the colored gravel. George tried to rise and it pummeled him. George back against the wall and inched his body upward. He felt a trickle of blood flow from his swollen lip. He looked through the smeary goggles and saw the fish waiting a few yards away from him. It had a savage countenance. It leered, it derided. It let George get up just to have the fun of knocking him down again. It regarded him as nothing.

George took many blows, blow after terrible blow, until his legs were jelly and his whole meager measly life swam in front of him. He felt like nothing, like less than nothing. He almost gave up, but then some small spark of hope welled up inside of him. Of hope maybe, or defiance. He was a man, damnit - he felt the tiny spark of human dignity that makes man a spectator to his own life, both a part of and a lord of nature - a king and a beggar and a mystery all at once, It was a dignity that no man should be denied, however tough things get. And in that moment he remembered how he and his old man had watched

the Ali-Foreman fight way back when he was a kid, back in the day, and how Ali had hung on the ropes for eight rounds, taking everything Foreman could dish out, taking more punishment than any normal man could take until Foreman was exhausted, and had then come back to knock the titan out. "Rope-a-dope" he'd called it. It was his only hope.

George dragged the back of his hand against his bleeding lip but then raised his arms to protect his chest and head while the fish went at him. Head butt here! Tail lash there! The fish moved in to finish George off. But George just hunkered up and took it. He took it for the wife who had left him because of his own damned fault, he took it for the two kids he never saw anymore, he took it for all the shitty hours he had worked and the shiftless foremen who had never done a thing for him but live large on his dues. He took it for the rusting factory where folks like him had used to have good jobs. He took it, blow after blow, he took it in for all the ways the world had gone to hell through everybody's greediness and his own many, many faults. He took it and he got stronger. As the fish sensed his defiance it began enraged and pounded and pounded the poor man with everything it had until George nearly gave up, but in the last few blows he could sense the fish was weakening. He took a few more hits then George rolled out.

He landed a solid right to the fish's snout. A left to its leering eyeball. He smacked it in the gills. The fish recoil and charged, but its exhausted form lumbered past and missed him. It was then that George decided to go for the finish. He grabbed the leviathan by the tail and began to swing. The crowd, which had been rooting against George, now rose from their chairs in awe. George held the tail tight and swung and swung, faster and faster. Cigars fell from open mouths. George swung and swung. "Damn you fish!" he said. "Damn you for all life's miseries and woes! Damn you fish for all you've done to me - to us! Damn you fish - here's some payback from the little guy!" It was a stirring speech, but all the crowd heard was a series of bloop. Still they gaped as George released the tail and the fish sailed across the tank and hit the wall and sank, dazed. After a few lazy moments it righted itself and looked at George. There was something like awe and wonder in its ancient eyes. Fish looked at man and man looked at fish, and something like a great respect passed between them. Then it swam away behind a fake castle and a rock. It had given up. It would have nothing more to do with George tonight.

Ropes pulled George back up from the water, out from a world of silence to a world of sudden roars and cheers and laughter. He took off the goggles. It was all too much. The whole crowd cheered for him. George raised his hands but then his body wilted and shook with emotion. Tears welled up and fell from his eyes. George had done it. He did not even know exactly what he had done. But his whole body shook as with a great awakening, a great rebirth.

*

George never talked about that moment - he let that great heroic triumph fade quietly into the background of his memory. But he was a changed man from then on. He straightened up and got an okay job while always on the lookout for a better one. He called up his ex-wife and they agreed to try to make things work again. He saw his kids again and realized just how much they needed a dad and just how much he had missed them. One day he took them to the library and as they ran off happily to the kiddie section George's eyes chanced to fall upon the cover of "Moby Dick." He didn't pick it up. Nobody

read anymore, and certainly not George Miller. But as he slowly followed in the wake of his children he had the satisfaction of knowing that he did not need to read the book to understand it. He knew all too well the eternal struggle of man with nature, and in particular with fish. Other men had read the book but George had lived it. George had won his fight with nature and himself. George Miller had punched a fish and won.

Nihilism Sucks: A Few More Short and Stupid

Author's note: Nihilism does indeed suck. It is only embraced by people who wish everyone else was as miserable as they are.

Nihilism Sucks: Of Human Hope and Larry's Hail Mary Pass in the Craigslist Personals

"Biodegradable, under-insured, single-for-a-reason male seeks sexy silicone-enhanced doweress for marriage and possible romance. No pre-nups. Please reply with your measurements and a copy of your latest bank account statement. There's the lottery and then there's Craigslist, and Craigslist is free - let's both get lucky! Must not be overly concerned about masculine 'size.' Serious replies only, please."

In the far future some frayed, under-fed graduate student would use Larry's personal ad from the early 21st century to destroy the canonical consensus that post-Modern society had been thoroughly gloomy and forlorn. He built a new canon out of a hodge-podge of personal ads, hackneyed movie plots, and the public's bottomless thirst for self-help books. He showed that people had been hopeful, even optimistic, though in non-traditional ways.

His thesis committee gave him shit about it but had to pass him. They were too tired and too stoned not to. He went on to become a big shot in the sort of academic circles where people write and read papers to each other to secure their tenure – which is to say, he had no influence on real society at all. But he was right, damnit. He was right. People always found a way to make life a ball, at least in brief moments, even when the world sucked.

Larry's descendants would have congratulated him if Larry had had any. His son-of-a-bitch roommate Dave had poached the ad's replies and gone on to live a life of luxury.

Dear American English Teacher

"Dear American English Teacher,

Thank much you for to teaching me English good. Tell many friends you name - for to high praise! Who teach you? I say your name. Good friend! My speaking snow English good - blame you - ha ha! So good. So friend! Being from China yours - will all no! God friend - love friend! Much many business come your way, many thank yous, your your student. Have a good loaf."

Phil Lamont - Attorney for the Damned

Phil Lamont spent his afterlife being the attorney for the damned. Each and every damned person got maybe ten minutes in court to plead his case before Saint Peter, except it was never Saint Peter but some saint from the Middle Ages that no one had ever heard of standing in. I think it was mostly Saint Canute. Well, it was some guy who had an old-timey Anglo-Saxon name that sounded like a bowl full of consonants.

It was Phil's role to plead the case of each and every one of them - and there was a damned long queue of the damned - And the thing is, they were already damned, so no matter how hard he pleaded, no matter how many rhetorical tricks he tried, no matter how many emotional pleas he made (albeit insincerely), the answer always came back the same.

"Damned."

"Damned."

"He is SO damned."

"Damned."

"Damned damned damned."

"Ten minute recess - nice tie, Phil. How's the wife and kids? Now where were we? Oh yes - damned!"

The trouble is, Phil had been told that if he could ever successfully plead the case of even one of these lost souls, he would achieve recompense for his own sins and get to enter into heaven, so he threw himself into every case with everything he had. Damned fool - didn't realize he was already damned. I don't know if Saint Canute was in on it - he seemed nice enough. But damn, Phil - get a clue. You were a LAWYER in your former life.

Damned. Damned. Ironically damned. Damned.

Pied Piper 3000

Maybe people would have stood more of chance against Pied Piper 3000 if they had remembered what "pied" meant. Well, "meaned" – by the year 3000 it was "meaned," not "meant." But no one did – remember, that is. A government board had decided that the word "pied" was offensive, or could be in certain circumstances they were only allowed to imagine sort of from the periphery but not to ponder directly much less discuss out loud, and therefore they had scrubbed the word from the dictionaries and replaced it with "special." Like so many government workers they were lazy asses and you would be astonished (or not) to learn how many rather quaint but unfamiliar words got replaced by them with the word "special."

Anyways, it meant (“meant”) ‘consisting of two or more colors in blotches,’ or ‘two-colored.’ In any case if they had known to look out for a blotchy two-colored guy with a ray gun, they would have had more of a chance. But since they were on the lookout for a “special” guy with a ray gun they overlooked him until it was too late. Pity, too, since he really stood out amongst all the regular folks in their silver lamé jumpsuits. He had on an old blotchy pied horse-hide shawl that looked at least 3000 years old. But instead of being alarmed folks just thought, “Hey, that crazy jittery-eyed nut job sure is special – but hell, we’re all special.”

He vaporized them in seconds. Come to think of it, he didn’t even have a pipe. Or if he did, he hid it. Maybe that ray gun was his pipe. In any case “pipe” had become a forbidden word due to its potentially unsavory connotations and been replaced with the much less offensive “substantially proportioned penis.” That threw them off too – no one bothered to check if he had one. They just assumed he did, what with the designer genetics and drive-thru plastic surgery of the future and all. Most everyone had one. Well, before he vaporized them, that is.

Let’s face it, he was a nut-job in the Middle Ages when he led the villagers’ kids away into the mountains and he’s a nut job now. He’s still pied, though, and I think it would have been good just to call him out for what he was. But next time we’ll know. Next time we’ll be ready to take his pied ass out.

The Wishing Bird

So when the family got too big for the apartment and Janet and Doug were sick of city life anyway they bought a house out in the country - well, in the suburbs anyway. It meant a longer commute, but they did it for the kids. They needed elbow room and better schools.

It was kind of grand having made the move. Doug hadn’t realized how much he’d like the suburbs until he was there. When he was younger he’d like to think of himself as hip and urban, but dang it was nice to have some space. There was even nature out here. The house had a big back window and so they hung a bird feeder and sure enough every morning there was a delightful little show of birds fluttering, crowding, and feeding at the little redwood feeder. The kids, now just past toddler stage, loved admiring them with their parents, and all of this put Doug in an expansive mood. He felt kind of like a king, and there was one bright blue bird in particular that came to the feeder every day and so he told the kids, “See that bird? That’s a Wishing Bird. It’s magic and rare. They say that anyone who catches them can get a wish.”

“A wish?”

“Yep - a magic wish!” The kids’ eyes got big. He chuckled to himself - the world is full of so much wonder for the little ones.

The next day when he came home from work the kids had the blue bird trapped in a shoebox.

“What the hell?” Doug said. He could hear it pecking and clawing frantically inside.

“A bike! A pony!” the kids yelled at it. “A blue pony! A computer game!”

Doug snatched the box from their hands and flung open the back door and tossed the bird out into the air. It flew frantically and haphazardly away. It never returned.

“Good God, kids..!”

“But you told us..”

“Forget what I told you! Nature’s just a bunch of temporary molecular aggregations. Sense perceptions are lies. we’re all just random clouds of electro-magnetism that boil up for no good reason and spin apart soon enough. We live we eat we shit we die - now go to bed!”

The kids went off whimpering. Doug realized immediately he had gone too far. But damn - that poor bird trapped in a box! He didn’t even want to imagine how they’d managed it.

He felt awful for what he’d said, and he tried to tell himself that they were young and hadn’t understood the half of it. Still, all his rationalizing to himself was not enough, so later that night he invented the bike tree. If you’re good to birds you get a bike tree, see? Basically he hung a bike for each kid from the tree with rope. The kids bought into it and left the birds alone. Somehow the whole thing became an Easter tradition in their family. Spring - birds - bird feeder - Easter - bike tree. If you were good all Spring then on Easter morning there’d be bikes in the tree. At least when the kids were little. After that it was just candy and clean socks and underwear. Mom had brought the new socks and underwear tradition over from her side of the family. Doug knew nothing about it - his family certainly had not done that. But he went along with it. He knew when to pick his battles. Married life and parental life took more energy than he’d thought.

Love Poem on a Grain of Rice

Thirteen years ago when they were young and in love and could hardly afford anything, Jack and Janet had been walking in the mall and come upon this kiosk that said “Your message engraved on a grain of rice – a keepsake forever!” Right then and there Jack said,

I want to put a love poem on a grain of rice for you, Janet!”

“But Jack – it’s \$19.95 – are you sure we can afford it?”

“To heck with money!” Jack declared. “I want the whole world to know how much I love you!”

And so he went up to the indefinably ethnic man running the kiosk and dictated the poem to his eternal love right then and there:

“Janet you’re the one for me,

I’ve known it since we met,

And now it's on a grain of rice

So no one can forget!"

It brought her to tears. Jack was so moved by her emotion that he forked over the extra \$9.95 to have the grain of rice enshrined in a 10 carat gold(ite) necklace (not guaranteed not to break).

Well the years went by and lucrative professional success came to Jack and Janet both, in medical and legal careers, respectively, and sad to say they grew distant from each other as well. But over the course of one emotional marriage-mending retreat sponsored by their vaguely protestant stadium-sized suburban church, love sparked anew, and each sobbed and fell into the other's arms and apologized for letting their once strong flame grow cold.

"I – I love you Janet!"

"I love you too, Jack. I'll never take you for granted again!"

"Me too!"

Then Janet said, "Say Jack, remember all those years ago, when we were young and poor, and you spent everything you had to get a love poem written on a grain of rice for me? I wonder if we still have it?"

Jack demurred. "I'm pretty sure we lost it long ago in moving."

"No, I think I still have it. Oh, wouldn't it be fun to look at it again?"

"I'm pretty sure you lost it, hon. I remember you saying so years ago."

"Nonsense!"

When they got home Janet beat Jack to her jewelry chest and sure enough, there was the cheesy locket with the grain of rice inside.

"Oh, let's look at it under a magnifying glass!"

"I don't know... you know how rice erodes."

"No Jack, I don't know."

"Well, I'm pretty sure it does."

She turned a suddenly suspicious gaze at him. "What are you hiding, Jack?"

"Nothing!"

"Why, this isn't even the same grain of rice!" She looked at it closely. "This is Minute Rice!" A few minutes later she had removed it from the case and examined it with two magnifying glasses stacked on top of each other.

"Jack..."

"Okay, I got mad at you years ago and flushed the damned thing down the toilet. Then I instantly regretted what I'd done and put that in its place."

They stood stewing and staring at each other for a long while...

*

You want an ending? Long story short: She was a lawyer; he was a doctor. Guess who won? That ended up being one darned expensive grain of rice.

The New Atlantis

"Together," he had announced proudly, "we shall rule a new Atlantis!"

A few hours later, however, a dripping wet Ray found himself sneaking to the bait shop from the back way so he would not be seen and forced to admit that he had not figured out how to breath underwater after all. Under the influence of a twelve-pack it had seemed obvious that you could breathe underwater by sticking a fish's head in your mouth then sucking in water past its gills and down your throat. Then again, it had seemed obvious that spending his unemployment check on beer instead of rent each month was a good idea, too. Hence his current desire to find a way to live rent-free beneath the lake. You could not get rained on underwater, and you could live like a kind of king since there would only be fish there to bother you. You could maybe even rule the fish.

Of course it was the "together" part of his proclamation that ended up making headlines because his friend had been even stupider than he was and had not made it back to shore. The district attorney, though pressured to "take action" by the morbidly fascinated public, was at a loss for how to prosecute "death by trying to breathe through a fish." Finally he just said "There's no law against stupid." Later on, however, California did indeed pass a law against stupid but exempted government employees and trial lawyers. It was largely unnecessary, however, because even bored teens were wary of the appeal of "fish breathing." It did not even merit a PSA.

Still, Ray decided to think of that mudhole lake as "The New Atlantis" in honor of his friend, and to this day he claims to see the phantom of his lost companion late at night, glowing wispy green above the surface of the lake, holding a fish in one hand and a trident in the other – which is to say, Ray has given up fish breathing but not huffing paint.

Afterward he often wondered what had happened to the twenty bucks he had lost to his friend after betting who could hold their breath the longest. Perhaps it was still in the lake someplace. The thought made him kind of dreamy and sentimental, like he had attempted something more heroic than he'd realized and the lake had taken retribution on him. He sure could use that twenty.

Of Lamar, Luck and Grommets

"What size grommet do you prefer?"

It was a question he had not been expected to be asked. The world of custom-tailored clothing was new to Lamar. He was a victim of sudden wealth, and when the rather snooty tailor asked him the question, it caught him flat-footed. But he didn't want to let on how green he was.

"Thirteen gauge."

"Thirteen gauge?" the man asked incredulously.

"Thirteen gauge!" He would make no show of being indecisive - this kind of man would railroad him forever if he did.

"What is it with the tailors in this country - do you all have wax in your ears? There are plenty other shops on Savile Row!"

"No no sir - excellent choice. Thirteen gauge it is."

Well it turned out the damned grommets were as big as dinner plates, but that did not deter Lamar. He wore it he had meant it to be that way and just like that, it became a fashion trend. That only turned him into a man of even more wealth when he became a fashion designer as well (that is to say, somebody paid him to put his name on their stuff), and soon people were lining up to pay dearly for a "Lamar original."

Lamar's luck was like that - it was how he had come into sudden wealth in the first place. Not everyone has an idea for using spring shoes for intra-city courier delivery in heavy traffic and sees it through to completion. But Lamar was a man of vision and determination - he had believed all those stories about Alexander Graham Bell and Edison and the American way he had read in the outdated textbooks of his underfunded rural gradeschool, and no one had ever poisoned him with the cynicism to believe they weren't true. So there he was, a nobody from nowhere who had followed his dream and ended up with a comfortable amount of cash and a shirt that had big, big grommets. Well, lots of shirts. The original hung in the back of his closet for years, though even now you can find choice items from the "Lamar collection" at K-Mart, next to the stuff by Martha Stewart or someone like Martha Stewart.

On the heels of his shirt's success he went on to record a hit single that he never actually sang a note of and later became a "celebrity judge" on a variety of reality TV shows. He had his spring shoe wealth to fall back on and the fame was just for fun, but I say more power to him. Live large, Lamar. Live as large as those grommets and as high as those spring shoes will take you. If Edison were around he would give you a high-five. Or maybe not - he was sometimes kind of stoical. He would at least nod your way and say "Good job, American."

Ben Franklin's Bet

"Come on, Ben, it'll only take 15 minutes."

"Yes, but fifteen minutes is still a quarter of an hour, my good man, and an industrious man could make up to three good inventions in the time you'd have me waste on your shenanigans."

"You're riding your reputation, Franklin – put your money where your mouth is."

"You're on – because as I always say, 'a penny won is a penny ...' "

"Just start inventin', big mouth – the clock's ticking."

Ben found it harder than he thought to invent three things in fifteen minutes, but only because the pressure was on him and he had been called out in the town square. Still, in the end, he invented a kind of pen that didn't leak as much ink, a small but useful improvement to the printing press, and then he hung a key on a kite and got lightning to strike it.

They disputed whether that last one counted as an invention, so Ben let the man off the hook. But in Ben's mind it counted. It was an invention of, well, something. Anyways he aggrandized it in his diary and in his personal book of smug thoughts.

But no one called out Ben Franklin, and later he cunningly had the man framed for treason. You lose, Benedict Arnold. You lose big time. Game, set, and match. Invent this, m* f*. No one crossed "The Franklin."

Together for the First Time: The Compleat Taffney St. Cloud Saga

***Author's note:** Vampire fans always download these two stories and hate them (and me) because they expect them will be all moody and broody like a certain other teen vampire series. Or maybe they expect a little vampornography. Boo-hoo. These are intended to be funny and slightly stupid, and they are collected here for the first time because I stopped mid-way through writing a third one called "The Zombification of Taffney St. Cloud" but and do not expect to resume it anytime soon. So here ya go - something to sink your teeth into. Har.*

The Vampirening of Taffney St. Cloud

This being the initial installment of the "Vampirening of Taffney St. Cloud" saga, By Paul Hawkins, in which he distills, conveys, regurgitates, and in some instances has to correct a lot of mistakes made by his mysterious correspondent on all things supernatural, the elusive and made-up Mr. Piers Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon).

Note from the Piers d'Avignon:

Buckle yourself in for the exciting saga of the vampirenism and vampirization of Miss Taffney St. Cloud. Check your inhibitions at the door! Prepare to be shocked, amazed, thrilled, and chilled as you enter the realms of mystery that brush all too readily right up against our everyday lives in suburbia, USA.

This document will be updated frequently with additional chapters as the saga unfolds until the adventures of our heroine are complete, or, heaven forbid, until the darkness enfolds us, and her, entirely.

Note from Paul Hawkins:

This is but a fragment, published by myself at the request of my friend, the mysterious Mr. d'Avignon, who is a true believer in the supernatural and who went missing shortly after sending me this initial installment. He vouches for its authenticity, and his sudden absence convinces me that, this time, he ventured upon something larger than he could handle. But he is a resourceful man and kind of thin and wiry for his age, and in any case he thinks he is British and can use his accent to talk his way out of any jam. If he manages to contact me and send further installments, I will publish them.

Chapter the First

Taffney St Cloud was a somewhat fat, dark-haired college student new to the town and new to Sunvalleydale Local Regional College. None of the popular girls liked her and they told their boyfriends that they had better not like her either, so Taffney was very much alone. She had to eat lunch all by herself and everything.

But Taffney had a dark secret she did not share with them, and it was the reason she had moved to a new town and a new school in the first place. Sometime in the recent past, Taffney had undergone... the vampirening.

Her old town had been all mysterious like that - not all bright and shiny and suburban like Sunvalleydale. Folks back in her old town of Ravensberg didn't say much and didn't like to be asked anything, either. Oh sure, the town has prospered once long ago when horehound had been a popular candy and a marketable herbal cure-all when mixed with grain alcohol, but those times had long since passed, and the mill and the factory and the bottling plant had all long since closed down, so people got by as they could, and drove silently past all the old abandoned buildings and never talked much to each other. But Taffney got along there, and in any case there had been only 13 students in her entire graduating high school class, and all of them had been pale and thin and never stirred much and never did much and all went home to odd boring farm chores at the end of the day and so never had much time to get into trouble - well, any interesting trouble worth writing about. They did occasionally fall into wells, get bit by

rabid skunks or run off with the occasional vagrant or drifter - but nothing noteworthy in the grander scheme of how folks turn from ciphers into interesting people.

But Taffney had been blessedly exempted from manual labor when her mother won a tidy windfall in the state's scratch-off lotto and quit her job at the beauty parlor and married a man named Rocco who had first pretended to represent a firm that would carefully invest her newfound winnings and protect them from charlatans, but who later turned out to be nothing but a con man himself, but one who fell into the alluring trance of Taffney's mom's blue eyeshadow and hair extensions one moment before succumbing completely to the lure of her newly padded wallet. So he decided to safeguard rather than swindle her, and he helped them all move into a much nicer double-wide than any of them had ever enjoyed before, and they even put up a fancy above ground pool out back.

But this story is about Taffney and her vampirening and her new life in Sunvalleydale, and so we will move on to that with all due haste. Taffney and her mom moved to Sunvalleydale when her mom and Rocco broke up, which is the inevitable outcome of almost any relationship based purely on carnality, Indian casinos, and the mass consumption of the kind of daytime tv shows once can pluck out from the air with a homemade clothes-hanger antenna. And so one night Rocco was chased once and for all out into the great beyond one step ahead of a cast iron frying pan, and Taffney learned that her mother had decided to take her cousin up on her offer to take over an empty chair in a fancy hair salon out West, a part of the country to which the cousin had successfully relocated maybe five years earlier during the course of a fleeting romance that involved her following a travelling circus across the country before filling in for a trapeze artist one night and throwing out her back. And so with a shred of their lotto winnings left Taffney and her mother left gloomy Ravensberg forever and moved to a place where the days were always bright and sunny, and the people tanned and smiling - well, until you turned your back on them, and then their smiles gave way to cattiness and gossip about your tacky clothes or your beat up car or your parent's menial occupation.

But they could talk about Taffney all they wanted and critique her car and her mother and her appearance to the utmost detail but they would never discover this, her innermost secret: that one night, while still in Ravensberg, she had met the Elder of Lichens, filling his gas tank at the one and only convenience store in town, and in the course of an interchange neither could have foreseen and that the Lords of Darkness® themselves had yet to understand, she had elicited a spontaneous display of attention unworthy of his regalness and therefore undergone the vampirening, and now she was possessed of a horrible and wonderful curse that elated and tormented her, that drove her to compose ream upon ream of suicidal poetry that never actually led to death but did lead to overeating, and that during full moons or when an unseen and immeasurable tide of vampirenism was in the town's proximity, would transform her into a slim and alabaster buxom beauty, and she would hate how much she was drooled over by the same people who would not give her the time of day when she was gross and fat. And to make matters worse, it would be so easy to take their blood - the blood she needed - the blood which, when under the vampirening, she lusted for to sustain her very existence - it would be so easy to take it from them when they were under the spell of her porcelain cupidity - but it would belittle her, to seek - nay, to depend - on the lifesource of people who, in her ordinary life, despised her so.

And so her life at Sunvalleydale was tragic and complex - until the day she met the one man who seemed, somehow, to understand her. But like herself, there was more to him that was first to be detected, and he was not one to readily let others into his confidence, or share his secrets, for fear of cursing the ones who got close to him with the pain he bore and the tragedy that always resulted.

But one fateful day, when their hands accidentally brushed on the handle of the Slurpee machine, an electric charge went through them both, and they knew that later that evening they must meet, and discover that thing that had cast them together, before the town discovered their secret, tormented them, and drove them apart, even as a vampiring was about to descend upon Sunvalleydale and wrest the secret of why the Lord of Lichens had fallen for Taffney, and what the power was that she bore that had drawn him to her and almost immediately repulsed him, and figure out whether she was the chosen one or some descendant of his ancient mortal enemy or something, and in any case the mysterious man she thought would understand her was tall and dark-haired and broody and good looking, and his scowls and shyness hinted at a mysterious past that could only be unlocked in many frustrated chances to share a kiss or else by reams and reams of really bad poetry. But in any case, she would meet him behind the gym sometime after the girls' basketball practice ended, which is to say sometime between 6:00 and 6:30, which, in autumn, was perilously close to the time for the moon to rise.

Chapter the Second

Note from Paul Hawkins:

I am pleased to report that I have been able to reestablish contact with the elusive Mr. Señor Piers Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon, who now assures me that he is in fact of Polish extraction but that, in regard to his biography, I have been correct in all other particulars. He further confirms my fear that he has in fact been in hiding due to the perilous nature of his discoveries and of his delving too deep, as it were, into the clandestine workings of the supernatural. He cannot disclose his whereabouts but I can infer from the parchment upon which he delivered his latest report that he is in fact staying in a La Quinta near Sunvalleydale or at least took an opportunity to dash inside one and steal some stationary. And so without further ado I give you the continuation of his telling of the Vampiring of Taffney St. Cloud.

Note from Piers Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon:

All of my worst fears about the depth and breadth of the involvement of the darkest forces of the supernatural in the vampirification of Miss Taffney St. Cloud are confirmed, but first I must take this opportunity to redress a few mistakes I made in first recounting her particulars. She is not fat. Big-boned certainly, when not in her vampirified form, but not precisely fat in the popular sense of the term. Well, not corpulent. I accidentally followed a truly fat person around for three days under the false impression

that it was she, but noticed I the error in time to avoid any serious damage to the accuracy and credibility of my narrative and research. She does, however, know someone who is fat, and if this becomes significant in the unfolding of the dark mystery that surrounds Taffney's vampirizing I will certainly pursue the matter to whatever dark conclusion it must lead.

Also, her mother's husband's name was not Rocco but Rinaldo, and I correct this point not so much because it matters to the internal consistency of the narrative (he is, in fact, never mentioned again), but to show my scrupulous commitment to Lady Veritas.

And so, without further discursions, I continue:

* * *

Taffney resolved to meet her mysterious opposite behind the gym of Sunvalleydale Local Regional Community College sometime between 6:00 and 6:30, and as fate would have it their meeting managed to precisely split the difference so that they bowed their heads together in hushed conversation, thinking themselves safe from the prying eyes and ears of the Lords of Darkness and the Elders of the Damned, precisely at 6:15. It had simply turned out that meeting on the quarter hour was most convenient for both of them, due in no small part to the bus schedule.

"They are aware of your presence and your powers," he said.

She was shocked and aghast. "But I have no powers," she said. "He bit *me!* He had the powers – I only have a curse."

He stared back deep into her eyes as if he knew her, or at least as if he wanted to know her, and perhaps because he was trying to figure out what she looked like when she turned into a really hot chick when the moon was full or whenever the magnitude of vampirism was particular strong in the vicinity. All his staring made her uneasy and she hoisted one saggy bra strap back up on her shoulder.

"Stop looking at me that way."

"I'm sorry," he said. "I had an eye test this morning and the drops are just now starting to wear off."

"Oh." She was somewhat disappointed, and could not quite tell if he was lying but suspected he was, but his eyes were the kind that did not line up precisely straight so she did not want to make him self-conscious by pressing the issue. But in any case the evening had deepened and the clouds scudding the horizon suddenly parted to reveal a moon full of portent.

"How do I even know I can trust you?" she said.

"Because there are no such things as accidents," he said. "You can't deny you felt the same thing I did when our hands brushed on the Slurpee machine handle. At that moment, I learned a lot about you, Taffney St. Cloud. I had been trained to look for you, or rather one like you, and I know about your encounter with the Lord of the Lichens at the Ravenberg Quik-n-Git. I work with a group of mysterious

watchers, you see. Like it or not you're part of a larger battle now, Taffney. You have undergone the vampiring in a most peculiar way, and there are people out there now who are frightened by your mystery. You're not just a moody suburban college girl any more, Taffney. You're so much more."

"It's lies! All lies!" she said, and flung her head in her hands. "Sometimes I'm not even sure it really happened at all! I just want to be a normal! I just want to be a big-boned suburban girl, misunderstood but hoping to find love or at least casual affection in my undefined years after high school!"

"That path is closed to you, for now - until the vampiring has reached its course, until the final threshold is encountered."

"And that will be???"

"Too soon."

"It's lies!"

"Think about it - he sought out *you*, Taffney. You! To this day he doesn't know why. He torments himself with the question night after night, during each full moon in which he feels the waning of his power. Ask yourself Taffney: why did he just happen to bump into you in Ravensberg? Why did he take the time to bite you on the neck when he was already late for a hairdresser's appoint? And why, instead of you turning into a vampire right then and there, did you turn into the thing that you did, the alabaster buxom beauty that looks a whole lot more hot and less big-boned in the proximity of aggregations of vampiristic power or during particular types of phases of the full moon, and why, why, did he feel a sudden surge of power go out of him and into you, power that he now fears will be used against him and against the Legion of the Order of the Ancient of the Elders?"

"I don't know."

"And why was I, I, Bradley, the last of a long line of Watchers of the Weary, I, First of the Last of the Rest of the Others, who from the time of my people's own failed quest for orphic immortality at the building of Babel and since tasked for our repentance to protect the world against and some day rid its face of vampirification, why was I drawn to you, and why do I not sense with my unseen eye that you are the enemy - for you are not, for I would sense and see it. No, Taffney St. Cloud, in you I sense and see something different, something the Older of the Elder of the Order of the Spawn of the Damned has dreaded the arrival of for ages. Tell me this: what do you know about your father, Taffney?"

"Not much. To tell the truth, I kind of forgot what you were talking about. You went on for a long time. Did anyone ever tell you that your eyes don't quite line up right, and when a person looks at you they can't tell which one to look at and which one is just kind of out there wandering on its own?"

"Yes - that is the mark of my kind. It is a blessing and a curse."

"How is it a blessing?"

"I use it to see the auras of evil around men. And it keeps me from becoming completely absorbed in my own brooding good looks."

"So which one do I look at?"

"The right one."

She actually felt kind of relieved. Now that she knew which eye to look at she looked at it, and at him and for the first time she kind of trusted him, and finally he looked just a little bit normal. She reached a hand into her purse.

"Cigarette?" she said.

"No, those things will kill you."

"Like vampires won't?"

She laughed and suddenly he laughed too, and she lit up but he just leaned back on his arms in the grass and looked at the moon.

"It's not full," he said.

She blew smoke. "Oh, I get it. Disappointed? You'll just have to settle for ordinary big-boned Taffney tonight."

"No, it's not that," he said. "Look more closely at it. Notice it - the color?"

"It's kind of red."

"Yes - it's a sign that the harvest of the bloodening approaches."

"So? They'll suck the blood of a few cheerleaders and be on their way."

"No - when the harvesting of the hell moon comes, it means their power will be at its height, and with it possibly their one chance to destroy you. And you will be powerless to stop them unless you surrender yourself to the same mad blood feedening, and strengthen your vampiric side for the battle against those so alike yet so different than you."

"I just want to be normal."

"When the bloodening comes and the rage comes upon you, that choice to be normal will not lie before you. And if you succumb completely to the maddening, and feast on innocent blood the same as they do, that one thing that makes you different will be lost, and you will fall from being a threat to being just another mindless drone, the most minuscule of servants in their army of the damned. But it was for that reason that I was sent, for my people have preserved a bank of blood from the days of the ancient lichen wars, and it was blood shed by my own people in the ur-wars against the Vampiristic armies before time began, and collected for the day when the chosen one should come, that he or she might feast and not

be tainted, and with that remain pure and white and alabaster like your transformed self, and in doing so tap into the power to defeat them once and for all."

"And after that, I can be regular old Taffney St. Cloud again?"

"It's the right eye that you should be looking at, remember?"

"Oh right, sorry. Yes, that's much better. "So after that, I can be regular old Taffney St. Cloud again?"

"It is not my gift to see the future," he said. "Only to guide you to it."

"Do you always talk like that?"

"I'm sorry," he said. "Despite my youthful appearance, I am over 12,000 years old. I probably should have told you before."

"Probably."

He paused, looked down, but then looked back up at her, and there was something deep and soulful and even vulnerable in his one good eye. "I have lived a long time, Taffney St. Cloud, but..." he paused, "...but I have never met a woman quite like you."

"Oh Bradley!"

They fell into each other's gaze, and his hand fell on hers, and it was warm and strong and reassuring and did not feel a day over 9000 years old.

"Maybe, afterwards," he said, and looked at her, "maybe afterwards there can be a future - for us. The old books only say there will be a final battle. But after it - after it, if we survive, we will be free to write our own lives. That book is not yet written."

"Oh Bradley..!" she said.

"I understand you emotion," he said. "It is not ungood to hope. But we must not distract ourselves from the coming battle for now."

"Okay, so where is this bank of blood?"

"Buried under the stadium. There's a tunnel to it from the far side of the hill. It is secret and well-guarded by my kind. We can use it when the time comes. It's behind those old blocking dummies they discarded when the football team bought new ones."

She nodded.

"So what do we do now?"

"Taffney!" He said. "Your bosom - look!"

Indeed she stared down at herself, and she felt a sudden changening coming over her. Her topage heaved and swelled to button-popping size, her big bones melted and subsided into shapely lines, and her skin was quickly fading to a perfect shade of alabaster.

"But-but... the moon isn't full!"

"Don't you see what that means?" he said. "It means the tide of vampirism is grown strong here - it means they are here. Taffney - it means the bloodening has begun!"

They rose to their feet quickly. All of a sudden they saw red eyes appearing all around them in the darkness.

"Quick - to the secret entrance!"

He grabbed her hand and they dashed through the night filled with the sudden sounds of moans and hisses and the vague shadowy hints of swaying, lurching bodies. Arms clawed at them but Bradley led the way and brushed them aside, and they made their way down the hill to the old abandoned sled of blocking dummies, but the dummies had already been cast aside.

"By the elders!" he said, and all the while she felt it rising in her - the bloodening! The mad, insatiable thirst to feed, the eye-rolling overwhelming bottomless appetite beginning to roar through her like a lion, demanding that it be sated. And she heard a voice speak through her that was deeper and stranger than she had expected, and not quite her own.

"Bradley - the blood - I must feed quickly!"

He led her through the tunnel under the football field to where the blood bank of the ancients has been secreted, but as they made their way he saw the bodies of his kinsmen littering the floor before them, and when they made their way to the final chamber at the end of the hall his worst fears were realized: the jars of the blood from the ancient sacred lichen wars lay scattered and broken on the floor, and there in the middle of the room stood the Ancient of the Elders of the Legion of the Lords of the Lichen himself, wizen but robust, and he smiled and wiped a drop of trickling blood away from his lips.

"Hello Bradley, Last of the First of the Ancients of the Watchers of the Weary. And hello, Miss Taffney St. Cloud. I do not know what power you possess that caused me to succumb to you in Ravensberg that night, but I assure you it won't happen again. From now on, your vampirening will be a most humdrum, servile, and predictable one. The days of your threat and mystery are over, and the first day of the forevering of the vampiric reign starts now. This is end-game, Miss St. Cloud."

He approached them and Bradley turned to her quickly. "There's just one hope left, Taffney. You have to drink my blood, every last drop - you have to kill me!!! It is the only way!!!"

"No Bradley no!!!" She screamed and cried. "I just want to be normal - normal and write reams of poetry about being misunderstood."

But her bosom heaved with the thirst of the bloodening, and as the Lichen Lord descended upon them and Bradley's neck suddenly wavered so exposed and tender just inches before her, she found herself fighting to grasp the one last thread of rational thought that might tell her the right thing to do - to drink the blood of her friend and live as a monster, forever, or succumb to the Lichen Lord and at least share in the same fate as the one man who in all the world had ever really cared about her (and whom she had really only known for all of about twenty minutes). And in the last moment, as she was trying to decide before the fates decided for her, she felt the maddening overcome her completely, and a great shadow fell..."

Note from Paul Hawkins:

It is at this point in his narrative that Mr. Piers Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon apparently ran out of La Quinta stationary and began composing on Denny's paper napkins. Most are stained with ketchup and difficult to read, and in any case seem to have been scrawled upon with great haste. I am greatly worried for his safety, but it is nice to know he paused to sit down to a sensible meal. At least I assume it was sensible, for as I have said, he is nothing if not lithe and wiry, and a man of his age does not keep a physique like that without choosing a fruit cup over, say, biscuits and gravy when given the option. In any case I shall resume trying to decipher his narrative in the near future, but honestly have faint hope of progress, and mostly hope for a later and more neatly transcribed account from the British-Polish gentleman himself, should he have eluded or be continuing to elude the coming darkness.

Chapter the Third

Note from Paul Hawkins:

Once again I am forced to make corrections to, and apologies for, several inconsistencies in the narrative of the dubious Mr. Piers Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon, if that is his real name. His checks keep bouncing. In any case, he has managed to send me the third and final installment of his gripping and suspenseful tale of the Vampirening of Miss Taffney St. Cloud, ordinary post-high school girl transported from her dreary home town of Ravensberg to the sunny, shiny, but superficial surroundings of Sunvalleydale and, specifically, to the local junior college therein.

I am requested, by Mr. d'Avignon, to make the following corrections or additions to his narrative, which I do for the sake of expediency, and in light of the minuscule amount he pays me to communicate the changes, I deliver in the form of a bulleted list:

- Taffney's real father was a descendent of the Elder of the Order of the Wardens of the Primal Battle of the Bloodening, the man who he himself had designed the Tower of Babel, repented of his vanity when it was cast down, and in the wake of this reprobation had been divinely tasked with and led the fight

against the very Lichen Lord who threatens Taffney now, though he himself had fought the villain 14,000 years earlier and, while having been defeated, did so in order to pass one final seed for success against all hope to his one and only possible successor, his own foretold descendent Taffney. Mr. d'Avignon regrets omitting this detail.

- The blood bank that was to have empowered Taffney but was pillaged by the Lichen Lord was conveniently located beneath the football field because several members of the Order of the Watchers were also on the school board and had foreseen when and where this stockpile of power would be needed. Mr. d'Avignon realizes this was an important detail but just plain couldn't figure out where to fit it in.

- Mr. Señor Piers Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon informs me that he is, in fact, a Viscount, but that his birth name is Monroe Jenkins and that he is the great-great-grandson of the man who invented fruit cocktail and that, should I be generous enough to help him fund his legal pleadings, we could mount a beefy intellectual property infringement suit against the Del Monte brothers in federal court and, should we prevail, he would gladly divide the windfall with me.

And so, without further ado, I give you the remainder of his story, for I am sick of him.

Note From Viscount Monroe Jenkins, aka Dumont St. Laurent d'Avignon:

It is with great difficulty that I present to you the conclusion of my tale - in part because the subject matter is so emotionally draining and, in fact, terrifying, and in part because I feel that over the course of the narrative we have, in fact, become good friends, the kind who might lend money to each other, and I know that at the story's close we will part ways, but I console myself with knowing that each of us will have grown, and will be wiser, and will have developed the camaraderie that settles deep in the souls of people who have shared a great journey, and keep each other's contact information forever in their rolodex or modern electronic equivalent thereof, and who, when pressed, are not averse to lending cash should a friend find himself in a tight spot.

And so, and on that note, dear friend and companion, I conclude my narrative as follows:

In chapter one I really should have remembered to mention the amulet. Taffney was given it by her mother, as a gift from her father, with whom Taffney's mother had shared but one great night of passion in Del Rio, Texas, and whom Taffney had never actually met but had heard great things about. It was a small carved trinket of intertwined ebony and ivory serpents, kind of like the thing you see on doctors' signs or at least on medical websites, and it hung around her neck when that place of honor was not supplanted by tackier jewelry, usually of the faux gansta variety. Still, the amulet does not matter one whit in this tale, except to allow me to shoehorn in a bit of paternal back story.

And she was shocked when, instead of biting her, the Lord of the Lichen swooped down on Bradley, her protector, instead. He pushed Bradley against the wall and prepared to sink his fangs deep into Bradley's neck.

"Did you really think me such a fool, Taffney, to trouble with you while you yet had one wild card left to play? If the blood of this man's lineage is your last hope, I will remove him first, and then your own fate will be sealed as well."

"No!!!" Taffney screamed.

But even as the Lichen's fangs sank deep into his neck Bradley cried out: "Taffney - there's only one thing you must do. You must suck my blood even as he is doing so. He cannot be allowed to have it all! If you can have...even one drop...it may be enough.."

"But you only have one neck!"

"Aggggh - listen Taffney - argghh - there is another vein, down below.."

[Author's note: in keeping with the PG-13 nature of this work, Mr. Viscount Monroe Jenkins d'Avignon assures me his reference is either to the great saphenuous vein or else its friend and co-conspirator, the common liliac, both of the legish region]

"But.."

"Hurry! Suck, Taffney! Suck!"

And so two pairs of fangs plunged deep into the Last of the First of the Rest of the Watchers, one the fangs of darkest evil, and one the fangs of the transformed big-boned transplanted vampirenated girl, now a stunning pale curvaceous form of feminine light. And when the powers of the Lichen, the girl vampire and the centuries-old watcher combined in a single act and war of bloodening, a great burst of light and smoke exploded in the room, and all events within it were concealed, and at that time three things happened at once: the Lichen Lord was thrown backward as if from the blast of a cannon; Bradley, weakened from the Lichen's poisoning, collapsed to the floor, rolling and moaning like a nearly dead man; and Taffney, having fed on the blood of an ancient of the watchers and not of innocent ordinary mortal blood, felt the madness of the bloodening abating, and her senses beginning to return. She realized with abhorrence that she had bitten her best friend, and immediately retracted, but Bradley grabbed her head to him.

"No Taffney, your nature is strengthened now, but there is still the poison within me. The Lichen Lord is defeated but I need your help to try to cure me. Suck Taffney, suck!"

She cried and looked over to see the Lichen Lord indeed defeated, his form writhing and decaying before her eyes, shrinking and shriveling as if from a decaying fire within. Soon he was gaunt and aged; then, he was a skeleton, and finally, he was a pile of dust.

But Bradley looked near death as well. His face was ashen, his body limp, his eyelids barely open. "My blood - it was preserved across the ages - for you. Oh Taffney, to have defeated him now but then to be removed from you. I fear I am poisoned forever and may die - or worse."

"No Bradley, no! I won't have gone through all this just to lose you! I already told my diary we'd see a movie together Thursday night!"

He laughed, but even that made him cough like he was about to die. But then he stopped, and he paused, and he raised one faint, faint hand and stroked her hair. "Oh my Taffney. My sweet, sweet, non-big-boned girl. Don't you notice? You haven't changed back. Something has changed inside you, Taffney, and I would give all the world to live through this and see it. If the fates desire it, I shall live through this and we shall see that movie together. But you have to help me remove his poison. So suck Taffney, suck, but from the neck this time, but first..."

"Yes...?"

"But first, this..." He gently pulled her head toward his, and their lips met and held in a long, passionate kiss. But finally his head fell back and she sobbed and sobbed, but then she bent her fangs to his neck, and she sucked away for all she was worth. But the light got dimmer and dimmer, and she could not tell if she was doing any good.

Three months later:

Sunvalleydale is light and carefree now. For that matter, it always has been. The people there come and go as they always have, shopping at the mall and putting sweaters on their poodles and applying fake tan in winter and driving more expensive cars than they can afford and whitening their teeth several notches more than Nature could ever have intended. In short, no one knew or knows of the epic battle of light and darkening that went on in a tunnel underneath the junior college football field and nearly claimed them all, and certainly none appreciates the brave sacrifices made for all of them by one big-boned and moody young girl that none of them even liked. But she does not care. She knows. Taffney St. Cloud - she knows.

And she knows that though the battle is over the war goes on, for the victory is only ever partial so long as there are light and shadows in the world, for when her blood was mixed with that of the Watcher and the Lichens in that tumultuous battle just a few stray yards from the abandoned blocking dummies a new reality emerged, one that none of them quite understood, but one in which all parties must be vigilant, and waiting, for the Lichens though defeated gained just enough energy to persist, if for now in hiding, but nursing their strength and biding their time, for as long as there is evil in the world there will be energy to sustain and fuel and eventually reanimate their perverted nature of existence and their hidden modes of sin. And besides a lot of people seem kind of overly attracted to anything that has to do with them and would pretend to be them even if no actual vampires existed, and the whole trend has increased makeup sales to men by over 250%, and if you think the makeup companies (aka "Big Makeup") will let up on an opportunity like that, you can forget about it.

And Taffney was forever changed, and would no more return to her ordinary big-boned self, for the supernatural charge of the fight had launched her into buxom alabaster bombshell status forever. And

boy, did the fellas notice. But she has a higher destiny now, and mostly ignores them, though if they are dumb enough to buy her drinks she let them.

And she had Bradley now - or did she? It took weeks for him to recover from the battle, and the Lord of the Lichen's bite, though partially cured by Taffney's sucking, left his nature partially tainted forever. Forever must he battle now against a tide of anger inside him - of anger and something more - of a temptation to someday become the Lichen Lord himself. After 12,000 years of being trained to keep a watchful eye on the rest of the world, the thing he must watch most closely now is... his very soul.

And Taffney helps him - though the two must ever be apart. For you see, when she bit him some of her moodiness went into his nature, and he's a lot more standoffish now, and writes bad poetry, and he worries that he is tainted and that he might taint her, and so she fights battles her way and he fights them his, and he fusses over his hair and his shoes and even his diary a lot more than he used to, and he even bought himself a pair of Beatle boots that she absolutely cannot stand but he favors way too much, but some days, still, she see the light catch briefly in his eyes of what was, of what they had shared in that one long kiss, the first battle of the still young career of the vampire battling of the recent envampired Taffney St. Cloud, and she knows that there is love between them that she someday might rekindle, if he can only learn again to trust himself again, though it might take a massive battle against the forces of darkness that makes the one recounted in this story look like a pile of puke to do it.

But she is patient. She can wait. For she is no longer a troubled loner now. She is now Taffney St. Cloud, straddler of the realms of light and darkness, foretold, forlorn, but not forgotten, guarding the world that doesn't even know it's in danger. And she wears a lot hotter fashions now but if you pointed it out to her she'd deny it, and she'd say more's the pity for you for not having given her the time of day when she more ordinary and big-boned.

Postscript - Note from Paul Hawkins:

This is the end of the narrative as far as I can tell. In fact, the notes trail off into Mr. d'Avignon's shopping list, which includes chili, Vaseline, vodka, and pearl onions. I think I will encourage his fruit cocktail lawsuit against the Del Monte brothers just to see what happens. I buy store brand anyway and therefore don't give a damn. If he sends me any further narratives, I'll pass them along.

PS - Mr. d'Avignon informs me that I have transposed "Lichens" for "Liches" throughout this entire narrative, but I blame his crappy handwriting. If he had just said "vampires" this would all be fine, but he had to get fancy. I will fix this in a future edition.

Afterword and Post-Post-Conclusion of the Narrative, from Viscount Monroe Jenkins, Esquire:

A few afterwords and a hint at the future for our heroine and cast:

- Taffney also got hold of a really big, big sword someplace. I mean kick-ass big, and made from this weird white metal like it's from a meteor or something. But let's save that for another time. I will expound more when I discover the particulars.
- When they investigated the Lord of the Lich's lair after his defeat, they found out he had thousands and thousands of filled-in books of S&H Green Stamps. For those of you too young to remember, these were stamps given out by grocery stores in proportion to your purchases, and you saved them up and filled in books of them and then redeemed them for merchandise. He had thousands and thousands of books of these, which is to say he had enough to buy, maybe, 40 toasters.
- Even though he looks to be in his early-mid twenties, Bradley who is thousands of years old will sometimes accidentally lapse into old-man speak and say things like "I remember when you could see a double-feature and a newsreel for a nickel" or "I remember when you could get a steak dinner - with mushrooms - for 15 cents." It annoys Taffney no end and at times help drive a wedge between them. He is an oddly broody young man who is also strangely at home at any local chapter of the VFW and yearns to travel to Florida every winter. When dining out, he will send back his coffee or soup unless it is boiling hot. He remembers when shopping in a department store meant there were people there to wait on you.
- There may be a sequel coming soon, but it won't involve werewolves, because I am going to save those for the next-next sequel when there really is nothing left to write about. But this one will have the big ass sword mentioned above, some mysteries of her yet-to-be-significant amulet, a rival Lichen who just set this story's Lich up for a fall, the big Junior College Harvest Moon Dance, and a few scenes in Taffney's mother's beauty parlor in which lichens surreptitiously go there under the guise of wanting fancy nails or big hair, but really to try to coyly find about her daughter.

Until then I remain faithfully yours, but for the sake of preserving against all peril the existence of my very soul, I descend once more into the world of hidden addresses, subterfuge, non-de-plumes, and mystery. But almost any check sent to Monroe Jenkins in care of the Budget Businessman Extended Stay Inn and Casino of Sunvalleydale will find its way to me.

The End

The Werewolfening of Taffney St. Cloud!

(being volume the second of "The Vampirening of Taffney St. Cloud" saga)

In the story you are about to read, the author retells, reshapes, and in all other ways makes semi-intelligible the information dictated to him by his elusive and always mysterious (if ultimately fictitious) correspondent on all things supernatural, spooky, or in any case unprovable, Mr. Piers St. Dumont d'Avignon, Esquire, who is registered at the Sunvalleydale Budget Businessman Inn and Casino as Mr. Monroe Jenkins (thank you for the blue chip enclosed in the last envelope in lieu of payment, Mr. Jenkins, but I have no way of redeeming it and suspect it came from a "home game night" poker set).

Forward, by Mr. Hawkins:

A lot of things have happened to our heroine, Miss Taffney St. Cloud of Sunvalleydale, formerly of the creepy town of Ravensberg (and formerly big-boned but now transformed per the adventures of our last episode into a stunning and buxom alabaster defender of the suburbs against various supernatural evil threats - see "The Vampirening of Taffney St. Cloud," available for free just about anywhere you go to download free ebooks because you are too cheap to pay for them and figure if it's on the internet it darned well better be free anyhow. But someday I will charge for it because my bursitis is acting up and Aspercreme doesn't pay for itself.)

Forward, by Mr. Piers St. Dumont d'Avignon:

Brace yourselves for yet another terrifying journey into the realms of the unknown! Be prepared to peel back the veneer of your pretty, easy, comfortable existences in suburbia and see the horrors that dwell beneath your very noses, that interact on planer levels of evil and damnationing and general anti-social mischief, that battle for your very souls as you go blithely to your trendy night clubs or get that hair weave on a dare or tell yourself "I deserve the high dollar shampoo just this once" and put that bottle of Suave back on the shelf. Prepare I say! Prepare to be shocked, then awed, then sent into a paroxysm of admirering at the heroic adventures of our unseen but faithful guardian against all things unholy, Miss Taffney St. Cloud. And so, without further ado, I commence.

Chapter the First

Taffney had to work in her mother's hair salon. Even people whose job it is to slay vampires and other forms of the undead have to have a day job, because they have to pay for things some way, and at night - well at night, they are busy slaying the undead and it is hard to work a cash register or fast food window or just about anything else when you are busy with that.

And then of course there was the matter of explaining Taffney's sudden transformation by an unexpected but long-foretold unique reaction to a Lich's bite from a somewhat plain, dark-haired, and big-boned girl into a tall and buxom stunning alabaster warrioress, the very anti-thesis of the undead's dark evil - all of which occurred and has been described in the climax of our last adventure. At first her mother tried to explain it by saying she was Taffney's cousin from New Jersey, Taffnina, but no one was buying that and then she said she was her cousin Inga from Sweden and a lot more people seemed to think that that was much more possible, but the trouble was that Taffney could not carry off the accent for more than a sentence or two and everything got all awkward and so after a while they just broke down and admitted that it was Taffney but that her mother had given her the best damned makeover ever, and so in addition to making the lives of all the local undead miserable her transformation ended up boosting business at her mother's hair-and-nails salon quite a bit. And anyway, Taffney liked working in the salon and she got pretty good at making ladies' nails all fancy with ornate polish and rhinestones on them, and so she had a good career to fall back on in addition to her slaying skills.

But you are not reading this story for information on doing hair and nails, for if you were you would soon find that there are better books out there, some with pictures, and so I proceed to the guts of our story, if you will, and the new threat of Vampirening that descended upon Sunvalleydale more or less in conjunction with the Sunvalleydale Junior College Harvest Moon Ball, and how a new fellow slayer

appeared, a compelling distraction to Taffney's affections for her stalwart but moody companion, the 12,000-year-old but twenty-something-looking Watchener Against the Ways of the Wicked, Bradley (who, as we detailed in the last volume, was liable to accidentally lapse into old-man speak over trivial things like his soup being too cold or about the cost of a movie or how kids were so fat these days because they didn't do chores or walk to school).

And so one day while Taffney was working in her mom's salon and had just finished up what she thought was a rather fine fake-nail job with rhinestones and yin-yang symbols, a dark, mysterious, masculine hand suddenly draped itself across her table. She followed the strong hand up to see a swarthy, handsome fellow more or less her own age seated opposite her, rippling with muscles and sporting a pencil-moustache like Errol Flynn and wearing a red shirt made of silk or rayon or some other shiny fabric, and it was mostly unbuttoned so as to show off his fancy gold jewelry. Some of the jewelry consisted of odd menacing twists of metal as if to form runes to ward against evil, but one looked like a unicorn although he immediately and brusquely insisted that it was not, that it was in fact an ancient fell beast far more menacing and mysterious, but she still thought of it as 'that pretty unicorn necklace,' and she resolved to get it from him before their acquaintanceship was over.

Her eyes locked with his own, and his dark eyes sank deep into her own and he asked, "Do you, Miss Taffney St. Cloud, do more than hands?"

"What?"

"For you see, I know who you are. Sunvalleydale is a magnet, a hellish vortex for undead activity, and in the circle of my people, nay of all people who watch and wait and wage with tireless strength their unending battle against the legions of the damned, your name has become known - if not your address, exactly. I had to figure that out for myself, for some strange magicks protect you and prevented me from cyberstalking you on any of the more popular social networking websites. So I decided just to come to Sunvalleydale and find you myself. I am Morocco San Pierre Del Tormo, latest of an ancient order of Wardens against the Wickedening, and my people are from the East of Europe, just past a range of mountains where the last of the tourist dollars peter out and what few castles left standing are real, and have no velvet ropes in them or anything like that. Nay, in that part of the land, in those mountains where the air grows thin and in those valleys where the shadows settle deep, grave evil still lurks, powerful and patient and strong, for some speculate that it is where the undead evil was first hatched, when Cain left the valley of his parents and found some wicked beast or sprite or daughter of the djinn and second cousin of Lilith to marry."

"Then what are you doing here?"

"I am following the scent of Evil, Miss St. Cloud, for you are still in your early days as a defender, and the rumor of your eventual greatness frightens them, and they still yearn to nip your bud, as it were."

"To do what?"

"Apologies for my English. In all my training for the slaying of the undead, the grammar of a foreign tongue is the last thing I have had time for. But they are here for your bud - your bud! To nip it they seek - do you not understand?"

"I guess so. Just say they want to kill me."

"To kill you - yes! That is the phrase. They want to kill you before you reach the magnitude of your full potential and become the beacon of white light to cleanse the world of their kind forever."

"See - you said that well. Real nice and clear. Don't be so down on yourself."

"One thousand pardons - my trouble with the English - it comes and goes."

And so they paused, and as his eyes looked into her own she felt a stirrening deep within, a sudden warmth and bond and kinship of the kind that did not require words to knit. He was darned handsome and mysterious and sincere and rugged. And - yes, just like her, he had a big, big sword.

He caught her eyes admiring it. "Ah, the blade, it is the scimitar of my people. On its curved sharp surface are etched many runes to bind against the spells of the sons and daughter of the first of the fallen."

"Mine's made from a meteor. Funny, Bradley never even asked me how I got it. In fact, I aint had a chance to tell no one... "

"Well now you shall have a chance to *use* it!"

With that he sprang up and drew his blade and lunged at her. Taffney jumped back shocked and knocked her nail-manicuring table over between them.

"You're kidding, right?"

But there was a fury in his eye. "Most assuredly, I am not!"

"But I thought you wanted a manicure. You've got awful bad nails!"

"This is not time for games Miss St. Cloud!"

He lunged at her and just as quickly she drew her shining white meteor-based blade from underneath a hair-drying station and hacked savagely back. He was stunned by the force of their blades meeting and reeled. Ladies seated in the salon drew their legs up as the pair's swords clashed in deadly parries and thrusts. Morocco bowed pardon to some of the matrons and leaped over them. Taffney gave no pardons and spun one lady around in her chair to get past. Clash and parry! Their swords met high, then low, but neither gaining the advantage.

"Oh my Taffney - he's mine if you aint gonna take him!" one of the ladies crooned and fanned herself while they fought.

But Taffney's mother stepped forward and blew a referee's whistle she had left over from when she used to help out in the school lunchroom back in Ravensberg. "Stop it you two - stop it right now! Can't you see you're just sublimating your sexual impulses into swordplay? And now you've gone and made a mess of my place!"

Morocco and Taffney stopped and stared at each other, panting, then Morocco lowered his sword. "One thousand apologies, Miss St. Cloud the slightly elder. I had to put your daughter to the test. I had to be sure she was the one. I had to see if she was ready."

"Heck yes I'm ready!"

"But who has trained you?"

"Bradley did. Maybe you should have just asked. You sure wouldn't have found out if you had cut off my head."

Taffney's mother stepped forward. "Look, you two carry this on outside. I got cleaning up to do. And I am taking this out of your pay, missy."

"Thanks, Morocco," Taffney said dryly. But they went outside.

"Please, four thousand pardons. The testing through battle is the way of my people. But there is a malt shop down the street, across from the community college, where we can continue our conversation. You see, I have been scouting this place for some time."

"Okay, but you're buying since you got my pay docked. And it does not count as a date."

"Agreed - it is not a date - for it is daytime, and they are only malts."

It was a bright, sunny day outside and the suburban streets were quiet and clean as they walked along toward the college.

"And I wasn't kidding about your nails," Taffney said. "They're gross. Did you claw your way through dirt or something?"

"A thousand pardons, I have no time for the fineries of my appearance."

"Well, for heaven's sake, chew them smooth if nothing else. And another thing - who the heck goes to a malt shop when there's a coffee house next door? Who? - dorks and old people - that's who."

"Countless pardons - in my country, we only can afford the oldest of American TV shows, those set in an era when your country was still in black and white, and they depict a popularity for malts. These ancient shows are all we can afford because our land is beset by the countless battles with undead, and it ravages the economy."

"Well you ought to sell tickets for folks to come watch it - see? That'd raise some money. That's American thinking for you."

"I will consider it."

"You sure should - it'd money you all right up."

And so they made their way to the malt shop on a corner across from campus, and on the front door was a flyer for the Harvest Moon Ball. It had a big yellow moon on it, plus the date of the dance and the address of the community college gym, and at the bottom in a bold font it read "The gym floor is new - no dark-soled shoes allowed."

Morocco turned to her and his face was deadly serious. "Ah, the Harvest Moon Ball! It is about that which I came from half-way across the world to warn you!"

"Warn me about what? How boring it is? It's just some small-town tradition from back before Sunvalleydale was a even suburb. See, it used to be a podunk little village all by itself before the city grew out to meet it. But nobody knows what the heck the ball is about anymore, except that it's an excuse to dance and drink. Mostly drink."

"No, it is much more than that."

"Sure it is, Don Juan - so are you going to buy me a malt or what?"

"Do you like malts?"

"Does anyone like malts? Well, old people and dorks do. But if you're fixed on buying me something, let's go to the coffee shop next door instead."

"Okay - very good. Strong coffee is the lifeblood of my people. It will fire one's soul for the battles to come. And as I have been trying to tell you, such a battle is..."

But Taffney stopped him just as they were about to enter the coffee shop. She put a hand to his chest. "Shutup - look!"

"What?"

"Bradley's in there."

They looked through the big glass window of the "Java Barn" and sure enough amidst the clutter of mismatched tables and chairs a young man in all black stood on a slightly raised dais, holding a crumpled piece of paper in his hand and muttering into a microphone while a skinny dude played the bongos beside him:

"I'm 12,000 years old but I aint learned a thing

My soul's like a cloud of black birds that all fly together

But no one's their leader, and none of them sing

The grounds in my coffee cup are organized better

They hide from the sun but love the grey weather

So top me off, baby, I'm writing a letter

To "Who Gives a Damn?", in care of "Who Knows?"

Let's plant it in the graveyard and see if it grows.

Love is a lie - Peace out."

He crumpled the paper and slouched back to a table in the corner.

"He's the guy who taught you how to fight?"

"Yeah - he used to be a fierce warrior, but he got all messed up when he was bit by the Lord of the Liches in our last outing. Well, and I bit him too, and I was all into gloomy poetry and feeling sorry for myself back then, and I reckon some of the went into him. He seems all depressed now, but you can still rile him up if you throw something at him, though it only lasts for a few seconds."

"I don't believe you. "

"Gimme that sugar bowl - look!"

Taffney heaved the sugar bowl and clocked Bradley square upside the head. Immediately the young man's demeanor changed and he whipped out a razor-sharp sword. The other coffee house skulkers backed off in horror as he, Taffney and Morocco leapt across tables and chairs to fight, and Bradley easily held the two of them off as they hacked at him, first one, then the other, then both. But once he recognized Taffney and realized it was all just a test, he pulled up a stool and sank into being Mr Depressed again. The other patrons gradually migrated back to their tables, and Taffney and Morocco pulled up chairs beside Bradley's. A waitress brought them coffee and they all sipped from their cups and looked at each other, but then Taffney spoke up.

"Why the heck don't you just snap out of it, Bradley?" Taffney asked. "I had to kill fourteen zombies all by myself at the Mega-Save last night and I sure could've used your help."

"What's the point?" he asked. "The point is there is no point. We fight them, they fight us, folks get bit, people think it's cool and put on too much pale makeup and dark eyeshadow, and for what? See, there's no point in anything. Oh, and three of the folks you killed last night weren't zombies. They were just kind of pale and thin."

"Well I'm sorry. It got all hectic having to do it by myself. If only..."

"Yes?" He just barely looked up, and when his blues eyes met hers, for a very brief instant both their orbs widened and something deep and powerful and strong knit between them, like some tide of the ocean that rocked both of their boats, and her heart felt like the floor had just given way.

"Oh Bradley - that one kiss we shared in our last battle, before the Lich Lord bit you. Don't you remember it? Doesn't it mean anything to you?"

He turned abruptly away. "I can't let it mean anything. Love is a lie, Taffney. And I have Lich blood in me now. If I ever got close to you, if that Lich blood ever got the best of me, even for a second... No Taffney. I've got to be a loner now. I sink away from all emotion to guard myself against myself. And.." he paused. "To guard you from me."

"Oh Bradley! I can help - let me in!"

"I...oh Taffney, I just can't. In the end, I have to walk alone. And anyway, it looks like you have another helper now. What's his name?"

But Taffney just folded her arms and scowled at him. "Why should you care, Mr. Downer?"

She and Bradley stared at each other, and Morocco started feeling all fidgety and awkward.

"I feel like I should give you two some alone time," Morocco said.

"Oh no," Taffney said. "You stay right here. So old Mr. Broody thinks he needs to be off by himself - he thinks love is a lie? Well fine, Mr. Down-and-Pouter, cuz what you're missing out on is some of this!" She grabbed Morocco and gave him a big kiss on the lips, complete with a hug that crushed her massive bosoms up against his chest, and she ended it all with a cartoonishly loud smacking sound at the end. When she let him go the swarthy foreigner sat back a little dazed.

"There is great power in that one," he said. "Okay, you can have my unicorn necklace."

Morocco was still in a daze and Bradley was giving Taffney his 'so that's the way you want to play?' scowl and she was giving him attitude right back when several tall pale men in long black trenchcoats came up to their table. It was then that Taffney, Bradley and Morocco noticed that someone had taken their swords, and that they were unarmed and surrounded. The tallest and the handsomest of the pale men who surrounded them began clapping slowly and sarcastically.

"Well done, Miss St. Cloud. When you should have been building an army to defend the town against the evil that will fall upon it with the harvest moon, you have set your allies against each other. For you see, a great evil will come, for it is I who set up the old Lich Lord to fail against you in your recent battle, for it is time for the young to rise to power, for a new generation of vampirening to begin, one younger and edgier and more handsome and with much, much better fashion sense. For you see, the old man was from another era and was easy for the populace to hate. Heck, he wore his hair in a pompadour, for crying out loud. But we, we will conquer Sunvalleydale and then the world, with bites but also with more insidious means of corrupting souls. I am talking hair gel, Miss St Cloud, and techno-pop. At the Harvest Moon dance, with hundreds gathered in one place and our powers at their peak, we will create a new army of vampires en masse, the first brigade in our new army of undead for the harvestening of lost souls on a global scale."

"Not if I can stop you!" Taffney said, and she sprang to her feet, but just as suddenly she felt her legs weaken beneath her, and she fell down.

"Feeling tired?" the stylish Lich Lord said. "Perhaps there was a little something in your coffee - it is so easy to bribe a barista."

Morocco and Bradley began to feel woozy too. Soon they fell head down onto the table. "I... tried to... warn you.." Morocco said before he slipped into unconsciousness. Taffney tried to rise a final time, pushed herself up with her arms, but then she sighed and fell forward.

"Take them away," the young Lich snapped to his assistants. "The tunnels under the football field will serve to house them until the moon is waxed at midnight. The two men you can kill at the witching hour, for it is then the sacrifice will give us the most power. But as for Miss St. Cloud... let's just say that I have plans for Miss St. Cloud." He laughed slyly and his companions did too.

And so they hauled our three heroes off, even as the afternoon was waning and darkness was about to fall upon the unknowing sparkling suburb even as it prepared for a night of merriment, unaware of the great peril poised against it like a sharp sharp knife next to a balloon, and unsuspecting that its three protectors were helpless in the clutches of their foes.

And so, my dear friends - I must end my narrative for now - but only briefly - for though the town is in great peril I find myself in grave danger, for the moment, as well. But fear not, for I know a back way to the Budget Inn, and soon will continue our narrative in part two of "The Temptation of Taffney St. Cloud!"

Note from Mr. Piers St. Dumont d'Avignon:

I end the first part of my narrative in great haste because I think one of the more stylish young vampires detected me at the coffee house and so I am going back to my motel by way of the tanning salon, which I have found them to despise and willing to avoid at all costs. So at night after my rounds of snooping I go by there, bake for a while, then put on a clever disguise to throw them off my trail. I am getting a nice, even bronze color and feel ten years younger. The older ladies in the grocery stores eyeball me now, and I am not averse to it. I may grow a goatee too - a rakish one. So I am off to rest, eat a Hungry Man dinner, then transcribe my notes. Part two of the narrative is forthcoming, should I make it through the night in a bad hotel. The ice machine down the hall is broken.

Note from Paul Hawkins:

More to come as my ne'er-do-well correspondent supplies it. If he is going to start trying to strut his stuff and pick up old ladies in the produce aisle with his fake-bake tan, there may be some delay. Of

course, I trust his ineptitude will drive him back to the solitude of a cold motel with only three channels of tv soon enough, and so he will have time to let me know what happened to our heroine.

Chapter the Second

Note from Mr. Piers St. Dumont d'Avingon:

I purchased a ton of garlic today to ward against the undead, and so have stunk up my motel room enough to continue our narrative in relative security.

Note from Paul Hawkins:

As usual, my transcriptions and improvements upon the chicken scratch of Mr. Dumont resume below. The papers reek - I have cracked a window.

Consciousness returned slowly to our three heroes, and when they awoke the settings were still dim and mysterious around them, for they were in the dark, close tunnels that had been burrowed beneath the junior college football field, and which figured significantly in our last adventure. The dark dirt walls curved in closely around them, lit by torchlight.

As the fog of drugged sleep cleared their heads, they looked up to see the stylish, young Lich Lord standing before them. Then an additional shock registered through Taffney - she looked down to see that she was now clothed from head to toe in a garish, tattered, white wedding dress.

"What's the meaning of this, you monster?" she shouted.

"All in good time, Miss St. Cloud - in good time."

Taffney shrieked and the other struggled fiercely only to find themselves securely tied into chairs. "Oh, I assure you those bonds are quite tight," he said, "though I would be disappointed if you didn't struggle some. In any case, I trust you had a pleasant sleep. My minions are already off to the ball, to be ready for when I give the signal, for the creation of my army to commence."

In her mind Taffney pictured the interior of the junior college gym, all clean and bright with balloons and crepe paper in the rafters, and with a cheesy band playing and a throng of happy, unsuspecting people crowded on its floor in various displays of bad but enthusiastic dancing. She tugged violently at her wrists tied behind her back but to no avail, and Morocco did the same. Bradley did a little, but then decided what's the point.

The Lich Lord watched all this and seemed pleased, and his henchmen laughed a little. Then he cleared his throat. "Hundreds of people are packed into the gym, that nice, tidy, brightly-scrubbed, property-tax

funded bit of suburban banality and excess, all hopping in their socks and making merriment with no remembrance of the reason why, only that it is an excuse for fun, and they do so unsuspecting of the hellish fate that awaits them, for my minions wait just out of sight with fangs bared, ready to bind them forever to a living death of hellish undead damnation and servility to every whim of my bidding. But the time to strike has not yet come, for the Harvest Moon has yet to reach its peak, and since you are helpless and I am in the mood for some exposition, I will tell you a little something. But Morocco, surely you knew? Our peoples they go far back, yours and mine. Perhaps you could tell Miss St. Cloud a little something - about who really settled Sunvalleydale, and how they came here after first settling back east, in a town called Ravensberg, and how it has always been their lot to be persecuted by their fellows for their beliefs, to be punished and ever driven further to seek a new home, and in the process to court and suffer the wrath of the vampirening?"

He looked at Morocco, and Morocco looked back fiercely, but Taffney looked at him angrier still. "Morocco - you knew something? Well thanks a heap for not giving me any warning!"

"A thousand pardons, but try I did - but you interrupted me to talk bad things about malts, and the people who consume them. And then you made me shut up so you could go in the coffee shop and make goo-goo eyes to Bradley."

"Oh sure - blame me!"

"A bucket full of pardons, but may I be slain by my own blade were it not the truth...!"

"Enough, enough!" the Lich Lord said. "I do not trust this rube from the old world to tell it all correctly anyway. It's obvious they sent someone, well, expendable. The truth is this: Ravensberg was first settled by immigrants from Morocco's own land, the very people who married with your own ancestors, Miss St. Cloud, one of whom was a great warrior who achieved some secret victory ages past against a Vampire Lord, and passed some secret hope and destiny when the time came right across the ages to you, unlikely statuesque warrior daughter of a hairdresser."

"So you got something to say? Spit it out. And you better get around to this wedding dress get-up."

"I like your spunk, Miss St. Cloud. Very well. You see, Sunvalleydale was not always a suburb of a greater Western United States metropolitan area. Formerly, before the city expanded, it was a sleepy agrarian community several train stops out from any city, and in fact it was because of its very secludedness that it was sought out by loners and outcasts, by people seeking refuge from the prying eyes of urbanity and civilization. In fact, it was founded by outcasts. It was founded by rhubarb farmers who had come to the New World from Eastern Europe to flee from persecution by the rhubarb-hating majority populace. In particular, they were really, really hated by the onion and potato farmers. It was a blood feud most grim, and yes, even murderening occurred. At first these migrants settled Ravenberg, but when even there the ire of the potato farmers was around, they resettled here, out West, but they brought a great curse with them, did they not, Morocco del Tormo?"

"I know not what of it is of which you speak."

"Oh really? You know not of the *werewolves*?"

"By the many fancy runes on my curvedish blade, I have never heard of such a word."

The Lich Lord laughed. "And I will tell you why! Because they were hunted to extinction! Yes, everywhere the rhubarb farmers went, with their bastard werewolf blood, we hunted them, and they used to celebrate the full harvest moon as the hallmark of the waxing werewolf blood and its protection against the vampirening power, but that protection is long since gone. They are all dead - we have long since seen to that. You are all a sad, sad mongrel race now, del Tormo. Any nobility has long since been bred out of you, and no one now even remembers why the harvest moon was celebrated, much less what protection it afforded. No wonder your country is now so ravaged, and why this one is about to be. You are all so weak, so empty, and so tired - such easy prey for a whole new generation of edgy, sophisticated, nay enticing vampirening!"

Taffney glared at him. "Now you're just babbling, fancy boy."

"Oh really? I assure you I have big plans for the entire vampirening community, and they are about to be hatched tonight. You see, it's time for the old ways to make way for the new. The old Lich Lord, he ran things the way they used to when they first came over here from the old country, but they were grossly inefficient. He and his kind used the shake down - you know - selling "insurance" to businesses to make sure nothing unforeseen happened - but that worked on too small a scale, and only within the limited demographic of our own vaguely Eastern European ethnicity. No, here in the twenty-first century, in the multi-national community, we must think larger. I am talking multi-level marketing, Miss St. Cloud."

"You bastard - you're talking pyramid schemes!"

But he waved her off with a toss of his hand. "Such an unflattering term, coined by the small, jealous minds of those too unambitious to sell, sell, sell their souls to get to the top of a pyramid on their own. But trust me, this is the business model we need to spread the ranks of the undead throughout the populace quickly, and for the chosen few such as myself, most profitably. For you see, it takes a lot of money to buy Prada and Gucci, Miss St. Cloud, and to pay for full body waxes and for those devices that keep one's stubble beard forever at a three-day's growth. That's why we intend to set up a zombie pyramid scheme empire. Oh, those on the bottom of the undead ranks will probably at first have to settle for store brands and off-the-rack ready-to-wear from JC Penny, but they will always be telling themselves 'just one bite more - just one more vampire or zombie created and plugged into the system beneath me, and some day I will be one of the undead success stories I am always reading about in the stylish Undead Marketing magazines.' For you see, Miss St. Cloud, we already have a logo and a slick periodical all ready to be sent out to our members, and bronze, silver, gold, and platinum membership plans, and cruises for high-undead-point earners from every region, and lapel pins for every hundredth zombie they create, and pep rallies to motivate them to bite more and more people - oh yes, there are plenty of ways to motivate them and keep them thinking that just one bite more will keep them ahead of the Undead Jones, put them one bite closer to that brass ring -- but of course we founders, the ruling caste at the top of the pyramid, will always be one notch better off, one inaccessible strata above them

in terms of conspicuous consumption - consumption of blood, Miss St. Cloud - of blood, but also of fancy shoes and other fineries."

"By the power of dear heavens," Morocco said. "I think that he is serious! And by the curved blade of my ancestors - it in actuality might work!"

"Of course it will work, you thick-accented, English-mangling twit. In fact, I have a little demonstration to further convince you. Henchmen, dim the lights."

"But it's torchlight - it's already dim."

"Just do it!"

"Good grief," Taffney said as she watched him take out a laptop. "I think he's gonna make us watch a PowerPoint!"

"Oh dude," Bradley said. "Not a PowerPoint..."

"Now now, I prefer the term 'multimedia presentation' and it's very compelling. I worked a long time on it and am proud of the text fly-ins. It even has upbeat background music and a voiceover by a friendly-sounding guy with a non-regional accent."

"No way," Bradley persisted. "That stuff is brain rot. Just suck our blood and be done with it, man."

But the head Lich ignored them and fiddled with the laptop. But fortunately for the three captives, the thing only fired up for a second or so then petered out.

He spun and thundered at his henchmen. "Who let the battery run out?"

They shuffled their feet but none of them spoke.

"Well, whoever it was, I hope you enjoyed the hell out of your 'funny ostrich' video, because that's all I saw before the screen blacked out."

Again silence, so the leader calmly closed the lid of the laptop and had the torchlight raised again.

"It's all well enough - let your own imaginations make it more dreadful than even PowerPoint could. But to you I extend to you an offer, Miss St. Cloud, an offer that explains your splendid white dress. My offer is this: join me as my bride, and I will let your friend Bradley live. I cannot cure him, but at least he can be his sad broody self forever. And it will remind you both of my generosity and of the absolute futility of defying the Liches. He will be an emblem of hopelessness, more miserable than the lowest member of the undead armies, and you, as my bride, will have surrendered your power of the white light forever, because the unholy mockery of marriage that the Liches enter into is binding, and no destiny can supplant it, not even your noble one, for it is a ceremony that will forever divorce you of your destiny - but one that will save your friend. Consider my offer, Miss St. Cloud."

Taffney paused. She swallowed. "You give me your word? You'd spare Bradley?"

"My word, Miss St.Cloud."

"And what about Morocco?"

He laughed? "As for Del Tormo - we Liches have no use for outsiders trying to move in on our territory. We will kill Del Tormo. Let his last thoughts be of his own undead-ravaged country and of its crappy three staticky channels of black-and-white tv. His blood shed at the height of the harvest moon will provide the energy for our scheme to complete. And your blood, Taffney, from one small cut across the palm of your hand, will bind your fate with mine as my unholy bride forever - though on my word, it will let your precious Bradley live."

Taffney looked at him. "I could never trust you."

"Oh really? Very well - then Bradley dies along with Del Tormo."

Bradley looked at him. "Dude, whatever. I kind of expected no less. Look, life is a lie, reality is a nursery rhyme for babies. Mother's Day was made up by Hallmark. Love is a fairy tale made up by the global rose, diamond, and chocolate conglomerates. Beauty is, well, beauty is a lie made up by the Pope and a lot of renaissance artists in secret alliance with the Medicis..."

The Leader of the Liches threw his hands out. "Good grief he's annoying!"

But Bradley was still going on. "Health is a lie made up by the fitness drink companies and everyone who hawks power bars..."

"Does he ever stop?"

"Truth is a candied fable to distract infant minds into subservience. Justice is a fib spun by the people in power to make it legal for them to steal from everyone else. Sincerity is a falsehood mass-produced and spun from whole cloth by the fruit cocktail consortiums..."

The Leader of the Liches pulled at his own hair. "Good grief he's dreadful! I can't take it anymore! I'm leaving now to oversee things at the ball - I have the creation of a hellish army to oversee." He turned to his henchmen. "You keep an eye on these three."

With that he spun on his stylish heels and with a sweep of his cape stormed off down the into the darkness of the tunnels.

Bradley turned to Taffney and hissed: "I thought he'd never leave!"

"What?" she whispered back. "Do you mean that..?"

"Yes Taffney, I may be depressed, but I was laying it on thick on purpose, to make him sick of hearing me and leave. You see, I'm not gone completely - not yet. I -- I care about you, Taffney. I figured if he'd leave, I might find a way to get us out of this."

"Oh Bradley!!"

"Hush - they're looking at us!"

"oh bradley!" she whispered as softly but as sincerely as she could.

He met her eyes. "I think maybe I've been wrong, Taffney. Maybe love isn't a lie. Maybe...maybe - if you're with me - maybe if we're together - maybe we can fight the dark powers that tempt us both - that will always be tempting us. Maybe Taffney, as long as we're together, and we don't stop believing in each other, maybe there is hope."

They stared so deeply into each others eyes that the whole rest of the world might as well have dropped away beneath them, and they would have gone on like that forever if Morocco hadn't cleared his throat and scooted his feet because they were making him feel all uncomfortable.

Morocco's distraction served its purpose and Taffney snapped back to the moment. Then she batted her eyes and waved at the henchmen. They scowled back, so she gave them some sass:

"Remember," she said, "if any of you touches me, your big boss will be upset. It'd be best if you all thought twice about getting your fingerprints all over his bride!"

She stared at them until the grumbled and looked away, and then she hissed at Bradley: "So, you got a plan?"

"Yes," Morocco hissed. "A plan if you have one - what is it?"

"Jeez, sometimes your grammar really does get bad," Taffney said.

"A thousand pardons."

"Look," Bradley said. "When they were carrying us in here someone bumped my head against the wall and it jogged me halfway awake. I saw where they had hidden our swords. If we can only get to them, I think we will have the advantage. Then we can defeat these henchmen and hopefully get to the gym in time to thwart whatever the Grand Lich is up to."

"Then what are we waiting for?" Morocco said. "For although these bonds are strong, these chairs are weak, and once we smash them the ropes will fall free - like this!" He threw himself backward against the wall, and the chair hit kind of hard, but in the end nothing happened, except that he tipped over.

"Like this!" Bradley said, and he too threw himself and his chair backward against the wall, and this time the chair did kind of chip a little, but not that much. The guards had started to pay attention to them, though, and began walking over.

"Good grief, you idiots, all you had to do was give the word. I've been working on my ropes for twenty minutes now with the rhinestones on my fancy fingernails." And with that Taffney strained her arms and biceps strongman style, and sure enough the ropes burst loose and she sprang forward, and the henchmen did too, and a mighty fight ensued. She threw one then another of them against the wall,

then two came at her at once and she lifted each with one arm and clunked them together. But the minions just kept coming.

"Guys, a little help?"

But neither Bradley nor Morocco could break free. Each kept shouting "Like this!" and throwing himself and his respective chair back against the wall, but it turns out the chairs were really sturdy, and so all them managed to do was repeatedly injure themselves.

And so Taffney alone found herself engaged in an immense melee with a dozen or so young Lich lords, and at first it seemed she had the upper hand, but after a while, through sheer numbers, they overwhelmed her. Finally one of them reach around from behind with a chloroform-soaked rag and held it over her nose until she passed out.

Wounded and angry, and mostly upset at having to get their fine clothes all disheveled, the Liches tossed her unconscious body back in her chair, eyed the other two heroes with disgust and then phoned their leader. His instructions were clear:

"Bring our precious Miss St. Cloud over to the gym to be with me. There we shall be crowned king and queen of the Harvest Moon Ball, as well as husband and wife, and let her despair forever over the damnation she failed to prevent."

"What about the other two?"

"As for the other two, they've lost any privilege of waiting til the moon is at its zenith. Kill them now."

And so half of the Liches departed carrying the unconscious Taffney, in her tattered white wedding gown, down the dark halls on the way to the harvest moon dance. But the other handful remained, and one drew a mysterious, twisted, ancient, evil looking blade and ran his fingers carefully over it as he eyed the two remaining heroes.

"Let's see - who goes first? I've always hated beatniks..."

But Morocco stood up in his chair and stared at them with a fierceness in his eyes. "You are going to make me do what I hoped to avoid, for it is always the last resort to defeat one evil by unleashing another. But these charms I wear- you see? They are not for protecting me against the fell powers of the undead - they are sigils for protecting me against myself. But gentlemen, the moon is full!"

With that he shook his head savagely, and one by one the charms fell off, even the fancy unicorn one, and when the last one was shaken free of his neck a startling transformation occurred. His body arched and rippled and grew - hair sprang from his arms and chest and his pants and shirt split - his face stretched and twisted until it grew large leering eyes and fangs and fur. And finally, and with ease, he split his bonds and threw himself free of the chair with a mighty roar.

He turned to Bradley and slashed his fellow's ropes and spoke with the last shred of humanity he had. "One thousand pardons for what I must unleash tonight. For the werewolves they had not been extinguished after all - not all of them. As for you, you must save Miss St. Cloud."

And then a great final, wracking wave of transformening came over him and he was more hulking hairy beast than man, and he the himself savagely on the few Liches who had remained to guard them, and he rent them to a man with a flash of claws and blood and fangs.

But Bradley did not stay behind to see it. He raced down the dark tunnels, half terrorized by the evil Morocco had unleashed, and half hoping he was not too late to avert the fate the Lich Lord had in store for Taffney. He soon came to the place where they had hidden their swords. He grabbed his and Taffney's and raced into the night, toward the lights of the gym on the hilltop before him. He looked up and saw the moon was full and huge and yellow. He must get there in time. He must avert the marryening of Taffney St. Cloud.

Note from Mr. Piers Valincourt Dumont:

And so ends the second transcription of the thrilling supernatural doings here in Sunvalleydale. I had hoped to push through to the end, but I actually won some money here at the Budget Businessman Inn and Casino, and I must say that my new, rich tan has attracted the attentions of a special lady, one Gilda the hat check girl. And so we are off for a night on the town to find the best steak dinner fifty dollars in slot machine winnings can buy, and screw the hotel's broken ice machine - tonight, the ice is on me.

Note from Mr. Paul Hawkins:

A fool and his money were never parted more quickly than Mr. Piers Dumont Monroe Jenkins is parted from his. But let him have his night of fun. He has long been my faithful correspondent. I only hope he knows when to stop with the whole tanning thing. I fear he will overdo it and end up looking leathery like a wallet you might make at summer camp. But for now, I wish him well. I know he will supply our third and final installment soon.

Chapter the Third, and Final

Note from Mr. Piers Dumont:

And so I conclude the exciting adventures of our heroine. I find it uncomfortable to write because I fell asleep in the tanning booth and am now extremely sunburnt. My lady-friend has left me but I am sufficiently dexterous to rub aloe vera onto myself. Except one spot on my back. In any case, here is the exciting conclusion of our tale.

Note from Paul Hawkins:

Damned fool got aloe vera smeared all over his notes. I can hardly read them. And they stink of garlic, too. Still, I hope he enjoyed his steak dinner.

The gym was bright and warm inside with the excited atmosphere of many packed-in bodies and the glow of the building's shiny wooden floor and lights high amongst the rafters pushing through orange crepe paper and bunches of orange balloons. The lich lords marched in, carrying Taffney amongst four or so of them.

"Can't handle her drink – hah!" someone exclaimed boozily and hoisted a cheap plastic cup of watered-down beer above his head. Others laughed then drifted back off into their merriments.

The lich lords were about to march her across the gym floor to where their leader waited near a dais when a tall, brawny, short-shorts wearing gym coach interposed in front of them. "Boys – them fancy shoes of your aint going out on my brand new floor."

They scowled up at him but he folded his massive arms and moved his massive body one notch closer, and so after a few moments they shuffled off to one side, grumbled, and unzipped their stylish half-boots and lined them up neatly against the wall between the mens' and ladies' restrooms, where they kept company with rows and rows of other, shabbier shoes, all shed by their owners for the sake of the sock hop.

"Thanks boys! Now carry on. And for heaven's sakes get your prissy noses out of the air and have some fun!" He slapped one on the back way too hard, and if it weren't for the fact that the time was not yet quite ripe for the Lord of the Liches to unleash his plan for world domination, the slighted fellow would have bit him then and there, or tried to. But instead they maintained what dignity they could and moved en masse through the crowd of bodies like a black duck moving across a pond, and after some bumping and squeezing and jostling, they made it to the other side and into the slight clearing where their leader waited.

A keen observer would have seen the Lich Lord glancing at some peculiar symbols which happened to be placed above each door. They were largely unnoticed by the attendees because they looked so much like the emblems accidentally left behind by the Croatian Students' Association last week. But these ruinous sigils, etched and carved in an ancient script remembered by only the most heinous and damnationest of races, and passed down through the birthenings of only the most esoteric of fell scribes, were arranged so that when the harvest moon was at its peak and the light fell through the gym skylight, it would be passed and mirrored and transported from symbol to symbol until an eerie amber glow filled the room that turned the very moonlight into a curse that paralyzed everyone within the hall. The Lich Lord would then send his minions amongst the revelers to administer one bite at a time, and after biting each person they would stuff into his or her pocket a stylish four-color pamphlet touting the

undead multi-level marketing opportunity. Each person in the room would then bite two others, and so on, and so on, and the pyramid scheme would quickly conquer the entire room.

The Lich Lord turned to his henchmen. "The time is almost here. They are about to announce the king and queen of the Harvest Moon Ball. I trust you have stuffed the ballot boxes sufficiently?"

"Of course. The election of you and Miss St. Cloud is assured."

"And what of Bradley and Morocco?"

"Dispatched, my liege."

"Very good, then it will be a ceremony of triple meaning: for at one moment the moonlight will synchronize with the sigils and incapacitate our audience, while at the same time I will perform the ritual that will make Miss St. Cloud my bride. I had hoped to compel her to the ceremony of her own reluctant consent, for it would have increased my power, but even forced, once she is my betrothed it will have removed an impediment from our ambitions, and the former enemy of our peoples will be my zombie bride forever. And finally, I will of course be king of the ball. It will be a foretaste of the greater things to come, and besides, when I was a child I never got picked first for anything."

They demurred but he persisted. "No, there is no need to be obsequious – it's true. I admit it – I was a late bloomer. But that is about to be changed now and forever."

Just then the lights dimmed in the hall and everyone in attendance could see the huge yellow moon through the skylight overhead. They paused and the music died down and everyone looked up in wonder and appreciation. It was then that a vivacious young blonde woman with a big white smile moved up to a microphone, tapped it to make sure it was on, then held open up a large envelope and unfolded the piece of paper that had been inside it.

"This is it boys," the Lich Lord said, and he straightened his coat and hastily ran a lint brush over his lapel, and two of his assistants worked to hold up Taffney at his side. As they did so her head lolled slightly but then began to hold itself up, and her eyes widened and suddenly she noticed who was at her side and she seemed to be becoming quickly aware that something terribly, terribly wrong was going on around her.

But she was still groggy and the face of the Lich Lord leered into hers and seemed to fill her entire field of vision. "All smiles dear, all smiles!" he said to her. "You look so beautiful in that dress, and this is our hour."

The pert girl at the microphone announced: "Tonight, it is my great pleasure to announce that this year's king and queen of the Harvest Moon Ball are..."

But before she could finish a huge, hairy, snarling shape came crashing through the skylight. The announcer woman shrieked and jumped back and the crowd recoiled in panic. The snarling form, which

was none other than Morocco, pivoted and lashed out at the Lich Lord, who recoiled in mortal peril. But just as quickly his henchmen intervened to defend him, for their wills were in his very thrall.

"Buy me but half a moment!" the head Lich said. "The moon is almost in position!"

Six Versace-sporting liches formed a wall between the werewolf and his prey, but he tossed and rent them quickly with his claws.

The head Lich drew an ancient twisted dagger and drew a slashing wound across both Taffney's open palm and his own. "Just a few seconds more and we will be joined!"

At that very moment, as Morocco threw the last of the henchmen aside, the moon moved one final degree into its zenith, and instantly its light bounced from sigil to mystic sigil, and the room was filled with an instant orange glow and everyone within it froze like flies in amber. And since the moonlight had been twisted by the symbols' curse into the very opposite of its beneficent self, Morocco felt his lycanthropic powers suddenly ripped from him, and he writhed on the floor in pain. The Lich Lord stood above him and glowered.

"So there was one of you left after all - one pathetic, last mongrel of a race of dogs. It shall be my pleasure to kill you. But first, I have a ceremony to complete!" He grabbed Taffney's wrist and held high the hand he had slashed, and then he raised his own.

"Join my in unholy union Miss St. Cloud - prepare to be my bride forever."

Taffney rallied and tried to pull her hand away, but her strength was still diminished. A white light, however, appeared at her aside, and she turned to see Bradley wielding her very own meteor sword and holding it to the Lich Lord's throat. But the sword was shaking, and the Lich Lord laughed.

"Ah, so broody Bradley thinks he can be the hero? But the will is no longer in you, is it? Since your battle with the former Lich lord, since his bite, you no longer have the will to resist us."

But Bradley stood his ground. "You forget that because the Lich Lord bit me, and has since been slain, I now possess the power of the Lich Lord himself!"

"But only if you are willing to embrace it - and you are not the man for that."

"I will be," he said, though with some shaking in his voice, "for my love!" And with that he dropped the white sword, and a dark look came over his face, and a kind of intense shadow shrouded him and his stature increased, and in a moment more he towered like a thunder cloud about the pale smaller man.

A voice came out of him like thunder. "I will not have you take my bride! Instead I will take your life, and your puny ambitions, forever!" With that he grabbed the man's own sword and raised it above his head, and with a plunge like an avalanche he brought it down upon his rival, and instantly the stylish vampire flashed then crumbled into a pile of dust, and only his red Prada loafers remained.

Taffney spun and slumped against him. "Oh Bradley - Bradley! I knew you'd come!"

But he glowered down at her, and the darkness did not leave him. "Oh Taffney, don't you see? I had to embrace the thing I feared the most to save you. But even now my will is slipping away. The lure of evil is too strong." He rose above her in a cloud of smoke and unholy vapour, and his eyes began to glow like red coals.

"Come back to me Bradley," she screamed, "Come back!"

"It is too late - I have become that thing I hate, and you must go."

No, you did what you had to do, but now you must stay!" With that she picked up her white sword, slashed his palm, and gripped it tightly with her own.

"I will not let you go!"

She gripped his wounded palm with her own and clenched it with a savage fury, and from the very pressure of her force a white light grew in their locked hands, and then slowly that light went up his wrist and through his body, and as it progressed the shadows fled from him, and his menacing stature diminished, and soon the clouds were pushed away from him and he stood pale and clean, upright but weak.

And at that very moment the moon moved one notch further through the sky, and the spell of the sigils was lifted, and the crowd slowly awakened, but not before a certain lycanthrope regained his wolfish form and bounded through a window and out into the night.

People began to blink and stagger around, and Taffney quickly chucked the bodies of the slain liches behind the podium curtain and reminded herself to remove them later on.

The basketball coach strode into the middle of the gym and held his hands high above his head and blew his whistle way too loud. "The beer's been spiked! Warning, everyone - I think the beer's been spiked."

And the woman at the microphone did a little double-take like she kind of wondered where she had been for the last minute, and while she was doing so Taffney took the paper from her hand, made an edit, and gave it back to her. She looked up and thanked the tall, beautiful, nay statuesque warriorress and then announced: "Ladies and gentlemen, I give you the king and queen of this year's Harvest Moon Ball, Taffney and Bradley!"

And the crowd, tough still kind of dazed and strung out, applauded, and someone yelled "Kiss her already!" and so Bradley did. And as they applauded he leaned in toward her and said, "So we joined hands in the Lich's ritual - does that mean we're married?"

She looked back at him and squeeze his hand one notch too hard. "If it aint got no diamonds involved, it aint no wedding ceremony for me!"

And so they left the Harvest Moon Ball and vanished into the pleasant warm night that had settled on Sunvalleydale, and for a while they wondered what had become of Morocco, and Bradley advised her that once one of his kind embraced the wolvening, they found it awfully hard to come back. But they

vowed to be patient, and wait, and to be there for their friend should he ever reappear or need their help. But for the moment they were more focused on each other, and they might have had further adventures between them, but that would be the matter for another book, and anyway they deserve their privacy, at least until such time as I feel I have more stories to tell.

Epilogue by Paul Hawkins:

And so there you have the story, as told by me and spun from the garbled notes of my ever-unseen correspondent, Mr. d'Avignon Jones. I have not heard from him recently but did learn that he and the hat check girl had patched up their relationship. And seeing as he is in need of the administration of *aloe vera* in unreachable areas, their relationship might have deepened at an accelerated rate, and I might not hear from him again for quite some time. But if I do, I'll let you know. He still owes me an explanation of an amulet he once mentioned, and he never did let Taffney explain precisely how she got her sword.

The End

Requiem, Adios, And Thanks for Playing Our Little Game

Julia Child and Chef Boyardee - The Truth

Chef Boyardee started out as the most promising protégé of Julia Child's then shifted dramatically in his work. It happened about the time he swerved from existentialism to socialism. Screw art food - cheap spaghetti for everyone, and lots of it. He was a man of the people now. Buckets of red sauce and buckets of blood in the streets, if necessary. Damn those were turbulent times in Europe.

His decision inspired Warhol. In fact, he influenced a generation. In his old age he was unrepentant. He made a buttload of cash on the college lecture circuit. In time he came to be feted by the best, but whenever he was invited to a fancy dinner he demurred, and always chose to retire to a quiet corner and eat his own spaghetti from a can - a can like a million other cans, because he liked to think of himself as a man like a million other men, all struggling to find meaning in a world where the collective counted and the individual was ceasing to matter.

He could kick himself in the ass for not having thought up Spaghetti-O's. Now those things were chock full of symbolism. Eternal recurrence - oh, the horror.

The Short Happy Life of Some Schmuck

He was a bookish man given to frequent complaining about the stressful, rigorous life of dual responsibilities to work and family, and usually this upset her greatly, but when he began the phase of

his complaints that started with "If I lived out in the wild..." she would grant herself the luxury to sit back and smile, because the thought of him trying to start a fire by rubbing sticks, much less with the aid of matches or a blowtorch, amused her greatly and sustained her.

In her mind he was always surrounded by towering pines, and the shadows were deepening, and the eyes of bears were in the shadows. Sometimes she was one of the bears.

The one time he camped in the woods was the only verified sighting of Bigfoot ever, and he just happened to wear the same size shoes as his wife. She recounted with horror how the towering monster has tried on her pumps and then murdered the man. There was no court in the land that would convict her.

But his estate proved rather slim - he had grudgingly held onto his "Orange Julius" stock for twenty years, proclaiming to his dying day he had not been wrong to choose it over Microsoft. Even Bigfoot knew how boneheaded that was. He shook his shaggy head at the news and handed his new old lady a Pabst Blue Ribbon he had stolen from the ice chest of a family of campers from, oh, let's say Wisconsin. In time she grew to resent how much he liked to wear her shoes. He always stretched them out, and, frankly, the whole fetish made Bigfoot seem a little weird.

Saint Dunstan the Equilibrious

Saint Dunstan the Equilibrious lived in the Middle Ages and was good-natured but not exactly the sharpest knife in the drawer. He was somewhat fat and wore the usual brown scratchy cassock and had eyes that kind of looked in two different directions at once, but that was not so unusual back then and in any case is not what he was noted for. Instead, he became famous for his ability to recover his balance even in the most precarious of situations, even when it looked like he was sure to fall. Sometimes it took a good five minutes of stumbling, arm-twirling, and staggering for him to regain his balance, but this only added to the drama, because it made it look like for sure this time he'd fall, but then he wouldn't. It's like in the angels would hold him up, but only after letting him go at it for a while.

Because of his extraordinary skill the friars liked to liquor him up and set him to work on the highest parts of the great cathedrals, especially in icy weather, and people would come from far and near to see him precariously tread the scaffolding and almost-but-never-quite fall to his death several times an hour. The bishop saw a way to make a little scratch off this and set a donation basket out front of wherever Dunstan was working. Even a pauper would fork over a dented coin to see him in action.

He lived to a ripe old age and never fell once. In his last few years he could be seen perched high on the cathedral roof, feeding the pigeons and talking with them, as if in a soft-toned, patient language that only flying things and angels could understand. Their chats stretched the time of his remaining days and became his lauds and vespers. It was all highly unorthodox but what was the bishop to do? There was no one brave enough to get him down.

He died a peaceful death and was commemorated and celebrated in that town for centuries, or at least until the inventions of television, atheism, and birth control, which collectively purged many interesting things from many cultures, anyway.

Today there is no reminder of his fame except for a neglected plaque in a small park in the middle of a busy dirty European city. It is in the tiny kind of park that lives between skyscrapers and makes tourists wonder why it is there and makes the local people no longer notice it. But old folks believe that if you sleep next to the plaque for three consecutive nights something that is of grave concern in your life will resolve itself, and your life will once more be in balance, and you will find peace.

No one knows if this is true or not. Only homeless people sleep in the park these days – often for weeks on end. Usually, however, although they are shabby, they seem peaceful enough, and this makes the busy rushing city alpha types furious – all of which serves as a small reminder that maybe television, atheism, and birth control haven't made them terribly happy after all.

The Sky Father

Once, upon coming home from his work as a janitor, the skinny divorced man saw his long-haired, shiftless 15-year-old son absorbed in the glow of a video game - as usual - and so he dropped his lunch pail and spread his arms out wide and announced, "From now on, my son, I want you to call me your Earth-Father, because you have reached an age to know that, someday soon, I will introduce you to your real father, your Sky-Father, and you shall achieve an understanding of your true destiny, and a life of great responsibility combined with care-free leisure shall be yours for the rest of your days."

He did not expect his son to believe it but he had delivered it with such aplomb that his son kind of did, for maybe a whole half-a-second, and after the boy realized it was of course all made up, it made the old cruddy house look that much shabbier. This made his old man feel bad and so the next day upon coming home from work he said, "Bad news, son, Sky Brother-in-Law beat you to Sky Dad's inheritance. He and Sky Lawyer screwed you out of it, but you can work with me cleaning up the middle school at night. Pays ten bucks an hour."

The boy worked nights with his dad cleaning the school long enough to save up the money for a banged up pawn shop guitar and a one-way bus ticket out of there. After he'd left, his old man felt lonely, but then he began to feel a strange reassuring comfort that, somehow, the boy had made a major step toward manhood and that this was exactly what Sky-Father would have wanted.

With his son gone the savings in grocery costs let the old man buy beer one notch more expensive than store brand. The days rolled by monotonously. Sometimes after two or three beers and him sitting on the back porch the idea of Sky-Father would return to him, and in his mind he first looked like a gold-robed man of average height – with a tilted chin and a kind of regal nose, maybe – fancy to be sure but not superlative. But more and more as time passed he began to imagine Sky-Father on a grandiose scale, as a big man with a rolling white beard of clouds and his face never quite visible but hidden somewhere in a brightening glow up in the sky that he could never quite look into.

He'd like to meet the guy even though he'd made him up. If he were real he'd be the kind of guy who'd look out for him when the dogs were at his heels and who'd waive his bill if he had to stay at some fancy hotel some night. "Let my friend sleep in late - and comp his breakfast."

Years later when his son had settled down and married and he and his wife were expecting their first baby, the son told the old man how influential that one stupid story of Sky-Father had been. By then the old man (still skinny but with a pot belly) had talked himself into believing that Sky-Father himself had planted the stunt inside him, knowing the hopeful future it would sow. In any case, it was the closest thing to religion either of those two nitwits ever stumbled towards, but in its own way it was enough. It pleased them to think their fortunes were not merely their own but were assisted by a big, happy, cloud-based compadre.

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About the Author (Because You Need to Know)

Paul Hawkins is an American author living and working in Norman, Oklahoma. He has a lovely wife and three wonderful children who rarely disobey while he is watching. He has a Maltese dog that can stand on its hind legs beside the dinner table for minutes on end because she knows the old man will cave and toss a scrap when everyone else is looking away (because he sternly instructed the kids not to feed her scraps). He writes stories in his spare time and never knows when the muse will strike next. Sometimes she takes a lot of time off, and then Paul builds ships in a bottle, the best part of which is emptying the bottle first.

Read his novels "[Angels and Electrons](#)" and "[Prometheus Fit To Be Tied](#)" and recommend all his stuff to your friends.

He practically owns the internet because he has a Facebook page. Check out the links below and adios, godspeed, and do something nice for someone today.

Paul Hawkins in Norman, Oklahoma

February 1, 2013

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