



# Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 20 – UBIK by Doug Hawley. Mr. Hawley is a little old man who lives with editor Sharon and cat Kitzhaber in Lake Oswego Oregon USA. In a previous life he was employed as an actuary. Now he writes, collects music, hikes and volunteers. *Ubik* previously appeared in *Storyland*.



# “PROTECTED SPECIES”

by MAX GRIFFIN

The crisp mountain air puffed in frigid clouds from Dakota’s lips as he whispered, “The wolf pack is right there, Mr. Stewart. They’re crouching in the brush on the far side of the elk herd.” He peered through his binoculars and scanned the snowy bramble in the little valley below them. “I see the alpha male and two, no, three more behind him. The rest of the pack has to be nearby.”

His companion shifted and grunted. “I don’t see no wolves. You sure?” He used the barrel of his gun to push aside the netting of their blind while he squinted through his telescopic sight. “Hey,” he muttered. “What the hell is that?”

Dakota lowered his binoculars and peered in the direction Stewart was pointing. A shadowy figure seemed to lurk in the shadows to their left, at the edge of the clearing. At first he thought it might be a bulky man wearing a fur coat, except the proportions weren’t quite right. Maybe a bear? When the trees shifted in a gust of wind, the figure vanished. Dakota whispered, “I think it was just a trick of the light, sir. Things can fool you here in the mountains.” Memories of his grandfather’s tall tales of *sásq’ets* brought a tight smile to his lips.

Stewart scowled at him and snorted.

“I ain’t seein’ no hallucinations, boy.” He squirmed on his camp chair and returned his gaze to the herd grazing in the valley below them. “When do I get to bag me a wolf?”

Dakota frowned and put a steadying hand on the man’s corpulent fist. “Hush. Not so loud. If you spook the elk, the wolves will go away, too.” He picked up his binoculars. The alpha’s tail twitched and its ears pointed at the prey. “They’ll make their move any second now.” A grosbeak whistled a faint *pui-pui-pui* across the valley, and Dakota inhaled the scent of pine and damp earth. A high, cirrus cloud passed over the afternoon sun and a feathery shadow fled across the valley. He kept his binoculars focused on the alpha as the lupine predator crept forward. “Any time now; they’re getting ready to attack.” He squeezed his client’s arm in anticipation.

Stewart pushed his guide’s arm away and spat. “I told you not to touch me, you little creep.” He stood and knocked his camp chair askew. The muddy ground of the pit Dakota had dug for their blind made squishing sounds as he clambered out, pointing his rifle across the valley.

In an instant, the elk’s heads snapped

toward them. Light glinted off the lens on Stewart's rifle. As if they were a single organism, the elk bolted in the opposite direction, directly toward the pack lurking in the brush.

Six wolves sprang into action, all following the lead of the speckled gray alpha male. They nipped at the heels of the youngest, slowest member of the herd. The animal scampered away, its eyes alight with panic, but the wolves were too fast. Blood sprayed crimson on the white snow drifts. The elk faltered, and a gray swarm of teeth and claws flowed over its body. While its brothers and sisters fled to safety, the hapless creature became meat for the wolves to butcher.

Stewart's rifle cracked and the report echoed against the granite cliffs. A wolf, her fur an immaculate white, spun away from the prey and flopped to the ground, staining the snow red under her body. The alpha male's head lurched upward, and his eyes glimmered at them. The rifle spoke again, and his skull exploded in a fountain of blood and brains. The rest of the pack howled and started to flee, but not before one more bullet snapped across the valley to claim a final victim. This one lurched and fell, still undead, across the remains of the alpha male, its body wracked by spasms.

Dakota snatched at the rifle and shoved it aside. "What are you doing? One shot. You were supposed to take one shot. That was the agreement."

Stewart spat again. "Ain't nobody gonna tell me what I can shoot, buddy-boy,

least of all's you." His piggish eyes glared from above his ruddy cheeks and his jaws jumped.

Dakota glanced at the rifle and wondered just how crazy the man was. "It's the law." He heaved a breath to control his temper.

"Who cares?" The hunter smirked at him. "You told me there's so many they'll just starve if we don't shoot 'em. 'Thin the packs,' you said."

The guide's lips tugged downward and his face heated at having his own words thrown back at him. "You know I gotta report this to the Rangers."

Stewart snorted in dismissal. "Report away, buddy-boy. What're they gonna do? Fine me? Big deal. Ought to give me a reward for killin' wolves. They're nothin' but worthless predators, anyway." He slung his rifle over his shoulder. "Come on. I want them ears, for my trophy case." He turned his back and trudged down the valley toward the carnage he had wrought.

Dakota sighed and followed. "Mr. Stewart, the wolves help keep an equilibrium to the ecosystem. Without them, the elk and deer populations explode. They graze on new growth aspen and cottonwood, so those parts of the ecosystem crash, which destabilizes smaller animals as well. The coyote population grows, trying to fill the niche left by the wolves, but they can't control the elk, and other smaller animals suffer. We bring balance back to nature by saving wolves from extinction and re-introducing them to the environ-

ment.”

“Yada, yada, yada.” Stewart paused to catch his breath and glared at Dakota. “I’ve heard it all from you tree-huggers before. All that extinction crap ain’t got nothin’ to do with humans. Nature is here for us to take what we want.”

“We’re at risk, too.” He tried to keep his frustration in check and his voice steady. “Nature is fragile. Even humans could go extinct.”

“Won’t never happen. We’re the top predator, and have been since the dawn of Creation. It’s the natural order of things. God gave us dominion over the fishes of the sea and the beasts of the land.”

Despite himself, Dakota scowled. “It *could* happen to us. Seventy thousand years ago Toba, a volcano in Indonesia, erupted and humans almost died out.”

“But we didn’t, did we? That’s all bull, anyway. How could anyone know what happened seventy thousand years ago? I’ll trust God’s Word, not some socialist scientist’s ravings.” Stewart hitched up his pants. “As to the wolves, try tellin’ your ecology crap to the ranchers. They know what worthless vermin those beasts are.”

Dakota held his peace while he reflected that it had been a mistake to let Stewart hire him. But he needed the money. His usual clients hunted elk; the wolf season was new, to keep the population down. The elk hunters had a genuine love of nature. They weren’t like most city folk, who were disconnected from the animals who gave their lives in order that people

might eat. They understood. But Stewart was different. All he brought was high pay, and all he wanted was the thrill of the kill.

Wind whistled through the aspens and clouds raced across the skies. Right now, he was stuck with this jerk, and he had a job to do. He shivered and glanced overhead. “We should probably head back.” In the distance, the pack sang a lament to the indifferent forest.

“I want them ears.” Stewart plodded through the crusty drifts toward the wolves. He knelt and used a hunting knife to scalp the white wolf before he turned to the still twitching gray laying atop the remains of the alpha. He started to saw at her, too. “Damned thing won’t hold still.”

The animal’s eyes rolled in her head and her paws feebly scabbled against the snow. Dakota pushed Stewart away. “Let me grant her peace, first,” he murmured. He stroked the animal’s fur while his blade, sharp as a scalpel, severed her jugular. Blood poured from the wound onto the alpha before its wine-dark stain spread across the dirty snow. The wolf shuddered and the light faded from her eyes. Dakota heaved a breath and wiped his knife on the alpha’s fur. “Now you can take your trophy, sir.”

Stewart glared at him through narrowed eyes before he sliced off the ears. “Too bad the head shot ruined the first one. How about you take a picture of me?” He stood, unslung his rifle, and held it at the ready, a toothy grin splitting his face.



押戾

一陽齋  
曲五圓筆

鎮西八郎為朝  
十八番の内八

Dakota pulled his cell phone from his pocket and snapped a quick photo. He glanced at the sky again and noted that billowing cumulus clouds had replaced the wispy cirrus. "We really should head back now, sir."

Stewart's gaze followed his to the skies and he snorted. "You afraid of a few clouds, buddy-boy? There're four more wolves out there."

"Sir, the weather in these mountains can change in a heartbeat. Trust me, we don't want to get caught in a storm. It's my job to keep you safe."

"Yeah, well I'm not payin' you to be chicken." He frowned and his gaze flickered back up the slope, toward their blind. "Hey, it's back. Illusion, my ass!"

Dakota turned and a shiver passed through his body. He was right: this was no trick of the light and shadow. A man-sized, furry creature stood on two legs, half-hidden in the depths of the forest, staring in their direction. Stewart raised his rifle and fired, but not before Dakota managed to snatch at the barrel. The shot went wild and the creature whirled and disappeared, still striding on two feet, into the woods.

Stewart swore under his breath and then shouted, "What did you do that for? I had it in my sights!"

"You're only licensed to hunt wolves. Whatever that was, it wasn't a wolf."

Stewart's voice held no doubt. "It was a bear. What else is covered with fur and walks on its hind paws?"

Dakota frowned. "That wasn't a bear.

It didn't walk right. It walked more like a man."

"You sayin' some mountain man's up here, walkin' around in furs and spookin' hunters? I don't believe it. It was a bear, I'm tellin' you."

Dakota just shook his head and trudged back to their blind, leaving Stewart to follow. He folded the camp stools and camouflage netting and loaded them into his pack.

By the time he was finished, Stewart had huffed his way back up the hillside. "What are you doing? I want to go after that bear." Sweat gleamed on his features.

Dakota shook his head. "We've got a two-hour hike back to the trail head and our jeep, *if we don't get caught in a blizzard. We need to leave now.*" He glanced at the edge of the forest where the strange creature had stood. *I'd like to be away from whatever was stalking us, too.*

"I checked the weather this morning before we left. Ain't no blizzard coming, buddy-boy."

Dakota pointed to the now overcast skies. "Sometimes these storms just pop up. No one can forecast them." He tugged at his parka. "It's getting colder, too. If you are so sure you know everything, why did you hire a guide?"

The hunter shrugged. "You know them wimp Rangers won't let hunters up here without licensed guides. But you work for me, not them."

"Maybe, but you don't pay me to risk my life. I'm leaving. You can come with

me or stay here and die. I don't care." He turned his back and strode toward the woods, where the strange creature had stood. His back itched as he imagined Stewart pulling out his rifle and pointing it at him. He breathed easier when the crunch of the hunter's clumsy footfalls and the rush of his wheezing breath reached his ears.

"Wait up. Don't go so damned fast."

Dakota paused at the forest's edge and knelt to examine the footprints he found there.

Stewart stopped beside him. "What you lookin' at? I thought you was in a hurry to get out of here."

Dakota glanced up and then pointed back to the tracks. "Look here, Mr. Stewart. Tell me what you see."

The man glanced at the ground and did a little double-take. His eyes widened and his mouth split in a grin. "Them's mighty big footprints. They look like a man's bare foot. About size twenty, I'd say."

"It's almost two feet long." He pointed. "Look, there's a big toe. It's just like a human foot, except huge."

"You sayin' that was Bigfoot we saw?" Stewart started to laugh. "Maybe we should look for the tooth fairy, too, while we're at it."

Dakota shook his head. "I'm not sure what it was. There are legends, but I've never seen one for real." His grandfather would have been certain it was a *sásq'ets*, but Dakota knew that was just

folklore.

Stewart's voice dripped with scorn. "It's just ignorant superstition. Ain't no such thing as Bigfoot."

"I'm sure you're right. In order to survive in the wild, creatures that size would need a pretty high breeding population. High enough that we'd have skeletal remains, a fossil record, or even live specimens."

Stewart looked smug. "Whatever. I toldja. It was a bear."

Dakota avoided rolling his eyes. *Whatever these are, they aren't bear tracks.* He ran his finger along the edge of a footprint and then sniffed at it. He wrinkled his nose at the foul odor.

"Smell like shit, buddy-boy?" Stewart grinned at him. "I say, let's track it down and solve the mystery."

Dakota shook his head. "We need to head back to the jeep. No mystery is worth getting caught up here in a late-season blizzard." He stood and hitched his pack to a more comfortable position on his shoulders. "Follow me. Yell if I'm going too fast for you." He turned away and strode into the woods, his passage silent as a ghost in the stormy gloom. Stewart's feet clumped behind him while twigs snapped and brush rustled in accompaniment.

An hour later, as they crested a rocky ridge line, an icy drizzle started to coat the rocks and snow drifts. Dakota stopped and waited while Stewart lumbered up the hillside toward him. "Would you like to take a break, sir?" Fatigue dragged at his muscles, and the ghosts of his ancestors seemed to

dance in the swirl of snow. *If I'm burned out, this guy must be dead on his feet.*

The hunter plopped down on an outcrop of gray rock and wiped sweat from his brow. "Seems tougher headin' back than it was comin' out." He uncapped his canteen

and took a hefty swig. "How much farther?"

"Maybe an hour, unless it gets icy. It's all downhill from here." He contemplated the route ahead, mentally calculating the best path. "If we follow the valley, it might





take a little longer but the footing will be more secure. I don't want you to fall."

"I won't fall. I'm like a billy goat." He wiped at his forehead with a filthy handkerchief.

"Well, I don't want to fall, either. We'll follow the valleys." He decided not to tell Stewart the valley route was new to him. It was a bit longer, but if Stewart sprained an ankle, or worse, they could be trapped up here.

His companion leaped to his feet and pulled his rifle off his shoulder. "Hey, there it is again." He pointed the muzzle ahead, down the craggy slope toward the murky shadows of the forest.

Dakota squinted through the drizzle. Sure enough, the ape-like creature was back. It lurked in the shadows, staring at them. Its mottled fur fluffed from its body in a gust of wind. An auburn crest of hair ruffled atop its head. A foul stench, like a mix of old sweat socks and rancid cheese, wafted their way on the wind.

Stewart wrinkled his nose and swore. "Sweet Jesus, that monster needs a bath." His fingers fondled his rifle and the safety snapped off.

Dakota put a restraining hand on the weapon's stock. "Don't shoot. It's just watching us." *Studying us, is more like it.*

The creature's golden eyes glinted in the faint light. It wiped its nose with a furry paw, and Dakota thought he saw a hand, with human-like fingers and a thumb.

Stewart jerked his weapon away. "That ain't no mountain man. It's an ape of some kind. A gorilla. What the Hell's a gorilla doin' here?"

Dakota kept his eyes on the strange beast. "It's not human, that's for sure. But no gorilla I ever heard of looks like that. Besides, a gorilla couldn't survive the winter in these mountains." He hesitated. "It looks more like a caveman, but that doesn't make sense, either."

The creature's paw raised and it seemed to wave, as though beckoning to them. Before Dakota could stop him, Stewart lifted his rifle and fired. Blood spurted from the strange animal's furry shoulder. It spun around from the impact and staggered against a tree. Its golden gaze settled for a moment on Dakota, as if to ask, "Why?" Then it vanished into the forest again, almost as though it had never been.

Dakota whirled and snatched the rifle out of Stewart's hands. He emptied the chamber and slung it over his shoulder. "I told you to not shoot."

"And I told you nobody tells me what I can and can't shoot at." Stewart rubbed his right hand. "I think you sprained my trigger finger. You're gonna be sorry when my lawyer gets done with you. That was assault."

The wind shifted once more, and the sleet bit into his exposed cheeks. Dakota hitched at his pack. "You can do whatever you want once we're out of here. Right now, I'm in charge. There won't be any more killing." He stalked to the forest's

edge and examined the spoor left by the creature. Blood splattered like rust on the bark of the birch tree where creature had leaned, and a crimson trail dribbled across the snow and into the woods, in the direction of the valley route.

*Great. If the poor animal is injured, it might be dangerous, especially now that we've attacked it.* He surveyed the forest and then glanced back at Stewart. "Come on, already. It's starting to ice up."

They wove their way along the valley. The route followed a frozen stream that snaked through the woods. Near the bank, brambles and snow-covered baby fir trees clogged the forest floor. The hillside rose in a steep incline on each side of the valley to a crest of exposed granite spires. In the course of the next half hour, the sleet changed to snow and soon clouded their vision. Dakota checked his portable GPS. *Still on track.*

Stewart huffed behind him. "Wait up, will ya? I need to rest a minute."

He checked the screen on his GPS one more time. "Five minutes. No more."

Stewart swept snow off a fallen log and slumped onto it. "How much longer?" His earlier bravado seemed to have vanished.

"Maybe another thirty minutes. It should get easier from now on." He took off his pack and settled next to Stewart on the log while he surveyed their surroundings. Potholes in the ice on the stream exuded tiny trails of steam. The wind whistled through the treetops, but down here in

the valley the air was still. Snowflakes swirled in crystalline ripples and sparkled like tiny gems where they landed on the ground. A squirrel chattered at them from a branch and then disappeared into the depths of the forest. Dakota pulled his jacket tighter and longed for the warmth of the jeep and the promise of civilization. His grandfather's face seemed to fade in and out of haze, and he shook his head to clear his vision. *Get a grip, man. It won't be long and you'll be out of here.*

Stewart squirmed and their log shifted. "What you think that critter was?"

"The one you shot? I don't know. I hope it's not suffering."

Stewart rolled his eyes. "Jesus, it's just an animal. What difference does it make?"

Dakota decided to not honor that with a response.

"Tell you what. I think we should come back tomorrow and hunt it down. If you want, we can give it a *coup de grace*, put it out of its misery."

"What? So you can get another trophy? I don't think so."

"So what if I get another trophy? You get your bleeding-heart's desire, and I get what I want. What do you say?"

Before he could reply, the wind shifted and a foul stench floated their way: sweat socks and rancid cheese. Dakota stood and rotated full circle, his eyes scanning their surroundings.

"God, there's that stink again."

Stewart's eyes glinted in the faint light.

"You think I killed it?"

"I'm not sure. We're downwind from it." He glanced at Stewart's florid features, unslung the rifle and pulled a round from his pocket. "Wait here. I'm going to investigate. I'll be right back."

Stewart whined, "I want to go, too."

He shook his head. "Stay here. Whatever is up there, I don't want your footfalls to announce our presence. I'll come get you when I know it's safe."

He trudged into the woods, following the scent. His feet whispered through the newly fallen snow, but otherwise no sound marked his passage. One minute, two minutes and the smell grew stronger. He walked in an envelope of sensation, with the forest appearing in front of him and disappearing behind him a fog of snowflakes.

Then, like a wraith emerging from the netherworld, the creature coalesced in a whorl of snow. It stopped and stared in his direction, waiting, watching. A crisp, white bandage covered the shoulder Stewart had wounded. Its eyes glowed amber in the darkness as it raised its hand in greeting.

Dakota froze. The rifle weighed heavy in his hands, like an anchor. Frozen puffs of air fled his open mouth and mixed with the driven snow.

Then the creature spoke.

"Do you require assistance, little one?" Its voice, soft, yet deep and mellifluous, cut through the frigid air like a hot knife through butter.

Dakota blinked, but the creature was

still there. An unnerving memory danced in his head: a museum diorama of a *Cro-Magnon* confronting a *Neanderthal*. He cast a frenzied glance behind him, half expecting to see a door back to reality.

Instead, the creature glanced at something in its paw, in its hand. Something that glowed, like a cell phone.

Dakota's eyes widened as symbols slithered like snakes across the screen in the beast's hand. His voice trembled when he spoke. "What are you?"

The creature hesitated. "I'm not sure what you would call me. Do you have those who protect animals from harm? Who help keep nature in balance?" The words bore a strange sibilance, as though his tongue fought with the phonemes of English.

Dakota's head swam. This had to be a dream. "Rangers. We call them wildlife rangers."

"Yes, that's it. I've read of them. We do something similar." He glanced at the screen again. This time a reptilian face with an elongated, green snout peered from the device. It emitted a sequence of hisses and whistles.

Dakota looked from the screen to the creature's face. "I don't understand. You're saying you work for the Fish and Wildlife Service? To protect endangered species?" Hysteria flicked at his brain now, and he fought to shove it down.

"What a quaint term." The beast grimaced, and exposed blunt, yellow teeth. "You might say that's what the P'Sthok do, to atone for their sins."

Dakota staggered against a tree. This couldn't be real. "I don't understand. What are you telling me?"

The creature shook its head and a curious expression crawled across its features, almost like sorrow. "It all happened so long ago, nearly seventy thousand of your years ago. The P'Sthok's ancestors came here, and brought death and destruction with them. Your species, and mine too, almost went extinct."

"Seventy thousand years ago? You mean the Toba eruption?"

The device in the beast's hand hissed and whistled once more. "I'm sorry. I must go soon." A furry hand reached out and stroked Dakota's cheek. "They're more mature now, and better trustees of what Nature has given them. Your species has thrived under their protection. Your planet is a sanctuary, a park for wildlife."

"A park?"

"Yes." The strange accent seemed to assume a tone of regret. "But now nature has fallen out of balance. I have no doubt that the P'Sthok, in their wisdom, will repair their error. Soon, perhaps, they will reintroduce my species, to compete once again with yours." He blinked, and Dakota thought he could stare at those golden eyes forever. "I saw you protect me from the ravager, the one who wounded me. I owe you a debt, little one."

"But he shot you anyway." Dakota's heart ached. "I'm so sorry."

The device in the creature's hand flashed and hissed once more. Those amber eyes glanced downward and it mur-

mured, "I have said too much. Beware of what the future holds for your kind. I must go now."

A blue glow suffused the forest and the creature shimmered in the uncertain light. A puff of air and the scent of burned electrical circuits replaced its foul stench, and then it vanished. With no more substance than a whisper, a dream, or a prayer, it was as though it had never been.

Dakota shuddered.

A wolf howled in the distance.

Stewart's ponderous footfalls thudded through the woods and he emerged from the falling snow, dragging the backpack behind him. "Let's get out of here. I'm ready for a dose of civilization."

Dakota glanced back at where the creature had sat. Perhaps it had been a dream, a delusion. Fatigue could do strange things here, in the wilderness. He remembered the creature's last words. He thought of the wolves, thinning the elk herds, and wondered what fate awaited humankind.



# “CYANIDE AND HAPPINESS”

by A. L. DIAZ

The first time I killed someone, I did not expect it to be so anticlimactic.

I lived by the motto of having many acquaintances but few friends. Unlike most kids in elementary school who speed dated their friends, the tight group of three and I made our own fun, never straying from what we deemed “Our Super Awesomeness.” In fact, we deemed ourselves The Super Awesome Twins, despite the fact there were four of us total. Alas, my childhood epitomized the stereotype of sunshine lollipops and rainbows everything.

Real life, however, manages to seek this kind of happiness and put it in its place; that place being with all other fantasies.

People move, they attend different schools, or their parents decide other children distract from proper education. Whatever the reasons, the ending results left me friendless come fifth grade, but with a plethora of acquaintances. And while exchanging letters via mail or hanging out every so often helps, it does not cure the loneliness during the weekdays. And while I had many acquaintances, none of them ever made the cut for friendships.

I didn’t think anyone ever realized I had no “real” friends or that I ate alone during lunch. Perhaps I radiated some

stench of loneliness only dogs and she could smell.

Marie York. She never liked me, though I never understood why. Since she moved from Washington, she seemed to have an unhealthy sense of entitlement. She must have been a racist, too. Out of everyone in the whole class, she chose me, the only Asian in class and our grade.

Marie first graced us with her presence in sixth grade. For a year we never talked and our paths never crossed. She hung out with hoodlums and I stayed at home and did random internet searches or watched CSI with my dad. She gambled and pierced things with her friends and I gardened with my mother. She got high in the abandoned warehouse parking lot, and I learned there was an abandoned warehouse parking lot.

Yet seventh grade came and for whatever reason she decided to initiate her torment.

It started small. Cheating off my tests, stealing my homework for answers, clichéd taking of lunch money with her punk druggie friends, despite the irony that she looked like something that walked out of a teen pop magazine rather than something found in mug shots. That is probably how she managed to stay off her mother’s radar.

The first of any of her bullying directed at me started on the first day of class when she decided to place her foot out as I walked to my desk in homeroom. A classic trick, but still effective. Lucky for me, I had fast enough reflexes to free a spare foot and catch my balance. But when one of our fellow classmates decided to comment on my ninja reflexes, Marie retorted with, "That's because she's a fucking Asian."

I never paid too much attention to Marie after that, since she tormented anyone who wore glasses or had their original parents. But it seemed she concentrated most of her disdain on me for reasons I never understood. She varied her attacks from the classic thumbtacks and glue on the chair to starting rumors about me which, not to delve into much detail, resulted in late night texts from male classmates asking what they could get for three dollars.

Attacks escalated after an incident when she and her cronies attempted to corner me in one of those online chat rooms. As they all attempted to insult me via virtual text and photoshopped pictures of my head superimposed on an image of a panda, I couldn't help but realize how cyber bullying was one of the dumbest forms of bullying. And while photos circling that MySpace nonsense never bothered me, it bothered Marie a lot that I wasn't bothered. So in retaliation of my indifference, her and her friends TP-ed and egged my home. The next day at school, her and her friends had smashed my locker. At the end of that school day, her and her gang somehow managed to find me, corner

me, and teach me a lesson or two.

I could tell as many teachers as I wanted, but they would never learn that banning a child from school for a few days does not qualify as a horrible punishment. And my poor parents could only do so much to comfort me before I would need to take matters into my own hands.

And lucky for me, I was much smarter than she was.

I stumbled across the information by accident a few years before Marie even got here.

Back in the buzzing cacophony known as dial-up, my mother let me surf the internet which seemed like a luxury to me at the time. I never had a real need to go online other than to play games or read funny stories on child-friendly websites.

But where this came from, I cannot even create it. It called to my inner curiosity with an article called "11 Foods That Will Kill You." Tomatoes, potatoes, and lima beans made up the list, but one I remembered the most was almonds. I loved almonds and as a little kid learning that my favorite kind of nut could kill me kept me from eating them for quite some time. But I never told anyone of my fear and eventually went back to eating them once I learned nougat contains almonds.

I have no idea why, but I developed a sudden urge to investigate almonds again come eighth grade. An opportunity came one day when I had to go to the library for a report. The teacher made sure we used at least three book references which meant I



had to spend my Saturday sifting through volume after volume of authors claiming they know the most about Martin Van Buran.

My mind could focus for so long before I went on a mental detour. The thoughts of almonds conquered my train-of-thought so I decided to see what the library had to offer. I hesitate to say God led me to it for I doubt He'd want me to murder someone with such premeditation. Perhaps the Devil led me to it. That seems most apt.

The Western Journal of Medicine. The library held a copy printed from 1982 that contained a case study of a woman who came close to dying after she started a regimen of drinking a glass of bitter almonds blended in water in order to get more protein. I never read the whole article, but I got what I needed to know: how much cyanide per almond and how much it would take to kill a human being.

"Mom, I'm planting an almond tree."

The winter of my eighth-grade year I searched everywhere to find myself a bitter almond tree or even seedlings to plant and I managed to find one on some international website. Before my mother even agreed to my request, I had already ordered it with one of those use-anywhere gift cards and I had the spot picked out in our backyard where I planned to put my new child.

When I made this sudden announcement, my mom only said, "You're a weirdo."

My mother did not help me with any of the gardening. We made the agreement that the tree would serve as a pet-like

object, in which I fed it, took care of it, and cleaned up after it. Of course I complied. I needed this tree. And with a total of five years before my tree would even produce anything, I had no time to waste raising it.

High school came. Though a much bigger school, I still had no friends. Everyone gets suspicious of the girl with no friends, the one who lingers in the background and attempts to discourage any and all forms of human contact. If I did anything illegal, everyone would believe it. I needed friends, which meant biting my tongue and pretending I enjoyed people.

I joined orchestra. I joined the anime club. I even tried out for the school play, which ended with me as a background character all four years. Whatever I had to do to get friends, anyone to support me if things did get sour.

I resisted social media for the longest time after the incident with the panda picture Marie posted years ago, but I decided I needed additional cover. I created a Facebook profile and an Instagram and made sure everyone I knew friended me or followed me. If I wanted people to believe I was normal then I had to act normal. People love socially-capable smart kids. They can do no wrong.

And if I wanted my whole plan to come to fruition, no pun intended, I needed to come down with a fascination with culinary arts.

That first Thanksgiving of my sophomore year I made a cake for my family com-



pletely from scratch. From the whole pastry part to the filling and the frosting, I needed to let everyone know that I had a new hobby. And that yes, they will be experiencing much more of my confectionary delights in the future.

The summer of my senior year I put my whole plan into action.

That summer stereotyped summer, hot, birds chirping, the sound of lawn mowers and children laughing. My target lived down the street from me.

I took one deep breath of grass-infused oxygen and walked up the steps of that Barbie dream house wannabe, what with its white picket fence, white siding and fancy flower boxes in the upstairs windows. There was only one car in the driveway, a traditional red Mustang that looked so infuriating just sitting there, and I knew she was home since she went nowhere without it. I clutched the small container with a trepid hand and took one last deep breath before I knocked on the door with four quick raps. I could hear rustling from inside and already I could not hold the container steady.

Footsteps grew louder as they came closer to the door and I took one more breath before Marie's face appeared from the other side of the door.

"What are you doing here, loser?" Even at home, Marie made sure she looked ready to receive gentlemen callers. She leaned on the frame and ran fingers through ginger locks.

I took a deep breath and smiled. "I just

wanted to say that I thought we got off on the wrong foot. And I wanted to give you a peace offering." Swallowing hard, hoping that nodule in my throat would go down, I handed Marie the Tupperware container.

"The hells are these?" Marie pulled the lid off and plucked one of the candy-coated almonds from the container and glared at them.

"They're cinnamon sugar almonds," I said, folding my sweating palms behind my back. "I made them from scratch. Grew the almonds myself, even."

"That's stupid." Marie plopped one of them nuts in her mouth and shrugged.

"Almond plants are really hard to grow and—."

"Whatever." She added three more almonds in her mouth and closed the door in my face. The burning in my lungs could subside now, but the trembling only got worse.

I did skip all the way home, hoping that at that moment Miss York was enjoying those nuts. Not that it was a foreign concept for her.

The moment I arrived home I cleaned my room down to the last post-it note, making sure it was perfectly perpendicular to the floor. I Googled Bollywood videos. I caught up on my television shows. I even watered my almond tree. But I did not hear anything all day. Not even come dinner-time. My mother came upstairs to let me know she had dinner ready, pizza and a bottle of soda she picked up after work. I thanked my mom with a huge grin, but never went down to eat.

That night hit me with the largest bout of nausea and insomnia I would ever have.

I would not actually hear about Marie York's death until a week later.

Her mother apparently found her in Marie's bedroom unconscious in a pool of her own vomit but by the time the ambulance arrive they pronounced her dead on the scene.

All the research I found on bitter almonds told me those suckers held anywhere from four to nine milligrams of cyanide in each bitter almond and it takes anywhere from fifty to 200 milligrams to take down a person, depending on the cyanide. Anyone doing the math might figure she would need to eat at least a hundred before she died, but based off what the mother founds, Marie barely made it through twenty.

I thought it respectful to go to her funeral. After all, I was the one who killed her.

But much like I expected, there was not going to be a funeral anytime soon. Instead, there was an investigation.

The police wondered how Marie could eat so many bitter almonds, especially since bitter almonds are illegal for sale in their raw form in the US.

When I found out the police discovered cause of death and started an investigation, I played the waiting game. A call. Something on the news. Police officers breaking my door down. But nothing happened.

School was in session for almost two weeks when the teacher handed me the note the office assistant delivered:

THIS IS A NOTE FOR: Meredith Ko

PLEASE REPORT TO: North Hall 1

AT: NOW am pm

No one ever called me to the front office. No one ever needed me.

I could feel my body spasming again as I organized my books back into my bag and tried to leave without making any noise, though the old door made a loud pop that echoed through the large hallway.

My own mental pacing made me forget the proper breathing cadence while everything else in my innate intelligence told me to run. By the time I reached North Hall 1 I could not say, "You needed me?" without sounding as if I was on the urge of hypothermia.

Two police officers stood in the counselors' office, the shortest of them talking into a black walkie-talkie.

"Meredith Ko, we have a warrant to take you in for questioning regarding the death of Marie York." The taller of the two ushered me out of the building and into the back of the squad car parked in front of the school, sans handcuffs thankfully.

Classes were in session but that did not stop a few fellow students from poking their heads out of windows to get a gander at the kid getting in the back of the police car. No one would know it was me, though. It was such a large school that people who didn't know me wouldn't even care.

No one spoke the whole ride over. I plucked at dirt under my nails over and over, but I could not seem to get them any cleaner.

“You don’t need to speak to us until your mother and father get here,” the lady said to me when she put the glass of water on the table in front of me.

She wanted me to have it, but I saw enough cop show to know she would lift prints off the glass. I kept my hands under the table.

“Would you like something to eat? Something from the vending machine?”

I shook my head and kept my eyes down. If I looked at her, keeping myself from crying would be impossible.

“Where is she? What are you accusing my daughter of?” the undeniable voice of my mom echoed outside the room and I could hear policemen directing her towards the room I was at. The nice lady who offered me food tried to calm my mother down, but in her usual high energy my mother would not allow it. She wanted to know why the police had taken me in for questioning and she wanted that answer now.

I did not want to look at my mother when she took the chair next to me since she was still adamant that I had done nothing wrong.

“I’ll have you know my brother is a good lawyer and he will destroy your prosecutors,” my mother said to the nice lady, sliding her hand on the table.

“Mrs. Ko, I am not here to accuse your

daughter of anything. We know she’s a good child and—”

I could not help but cry.

I admitted to everything.

I told them about the tree, that I did not know unprocessed almonds can kill people. About how I was just trying to be nice so she would stop picking on me. And that I was terrified the police might assume I did it on purpose which is why I did not come forward earlier.

My mother face-palmed while the nice lady lost her smile and started writing things down on some papers. No one wanted to look at me as I cried, but I did feel lighter.

At that point I needed a lawyer. Uncle Jay saved my life as the police took anything of pertinence to the case: laptops, cell phones, receipts, phone histories, even floppy disks, which I did not even know we still had, and a bunch of other things I had no idea could provide the defense attorney with evidence of my conviction. They took my poor almond tree, too. That made me the saddest. My uncle coached me on law stuff, told me not to worry and to cooperate with everything the police demanded of me. The more I cooperated, the more the judge and the jury will see I am a good person who got bad information on the internet. He would add, however, hopefully it did not reach the court.

When I went back to school the following Monday, everyone who knew me treated me weird.

“Did you do it on purpose?” the girl who sat next to me in Spanish class would ask me every day.

“It was an accident. Don’t you think I feel bad enough without you asking me?”

“Marie was a bitch, though,” she would usually say, doing the same eyebrow wiggle as if she wanted it to be true.

My English teacher, mean as she was, would greet me whenever I went to class. But once she got word of my arrest, I only got a smile or a nod, if I was lucky. I told her it was an accident, which she said she knew that, but I never got a hello from her again when I went to her class.

Only in my honors classes did anyone know what was going on. Four out of six classes was not too painful. Thank goodness most of the students were there to make me feel better. No one talked about it to me, which meant either they respected my privacy or they had already reached their own conclusion of what happen. I still had my cover friends as well as my real friends, at least. But I could tell even they had their doubts. Not about whether I did it on purpose or not, but whether I could make it out of the trial completely unscathed. Needless to say I had my doubts as well.

Sometime in October, however, I felt my phone buzzing in the middle of Chemistry class. Three buzzes meant a text. I waited until the teacher turned his back to us before I slipped my phone to my desk to see who would text me during class. Right there on the screen said “MOM.”

Why would my mother text me during class? Texting me in the middle of a school day meant only one of two things: something terrible just happened or the greatest thing in the world happened.

The latter happened:

“YOU GOT CLEARED!! THEY’RE NOT GOING TO CHARGE YOU!! :D”

When I got home I went to my room and closed the door. I threw my things on the floor and back-flopped on my bed, letting pareidolia take over to form faces in the plaster on the ceiling. Deep from my stomach I could feel a bubble coming up my throat. It turned into an uncontrollable fit of laughter. They found me innocent.

Aside from needing to improvise, I never expected murder to go so smoothly.

I did get to lose some of my pawn friends after the ordeal. I even gave up baking claiming I felt too traumatized. I never found out how the police found out I had an almond tree or that I even gave her the almonds in the first place. But even with that hiccup, I couldn’t have asked for it to go any smoother.

Ignore what you hear on television. This is how you kill and get away with it.



# “UBIK”

by DOUG HAWLEY

## Excerpts from the Lake Oswego Weekly Express:

*From the Garden Column October 3, 2017 –* Jersey Wilkins discovered a very strange plant in her yard last week. The plant, which vaguely resembles wheat stalks with corn kernels, has grown to about a three feet high all over her back yard. None of the members of the LO Garden Club can identify the plant. It has the very unusual, almost supernatural property of appearing different color depending on the time of day and the position from which it is viewed. Ms. Wilkins says that the plant has taken over her garden in just a few days. All of her other garden plants have disappeared.

*From the international section October 10, 2017 –* The world is in a panic after the otherworldly plant, now called *ubik*, short for ubiquitous, has spread around the world and is displacing the grains that feed the world – rice, barley, wheat and others. Samuel Jeffries, the head of the biology department at Oregon State University said “The plant seems unrelated to anything else in the world and poisons the ground for other grains. We project the much of the world’s food supply will be destroyed

quickly if we don’t find a solution. As of now, no one knows of anything that will kill *ubik* and not simultaneously make growing the usual grains impossible. Of course, all the appropriate experts are working on the problem.”

Many are relieved that *ubik* does not interfere with marijuana grows, but are worried about munchies being unavailable after smoking.

The new plant has everyone guessing about its origins and the rumors are going wild. Monsanto has denied any knowledge of the disaster, but several of its facilities have been fire-bombed by eco-terrorists who blame it for *ubik*. Some claim extraterrestrial origin based on last year’s meteor shower. Interviews with military brass have been met with uniformly stoic “No comments”.

*From the front page October 17, 2017 –* Jersey Wilkins, who was the first person to have noticed *ubik*, made a discovery about the plant. “Out of desperation, with the stores running out of food, I decided to eat some *ubik*. I scraped the kernels of the stem and ate a few. There was no immediate problem and a few days later there were no ill

effects. I can't say that it tastes much good, but I feel fine."

Professor Jeffries was asked why no scientists had tried what Ms. Wilkins had done. "When we analyzed ubik, we found unidentified compounds which we were afraid could be poisonous. We still don't know about long term health effects from ubik."

"We have discovered that ubik may be harmless for other mammals as well. Livestock owners tried to keep their pigs, cattle, sheep and goats away from the plants without success. So far all of the animals that have eaten it seem to be thriving, even healthier than before."

*From the front page October 31, 2017 –* With the whole world desperate for food and none of the usual grains available, ubik distribution sites have been set up around the world. The normal grain fields, now filled with ubik, and surplus from private yards and gardens are being used.

Scientists warned about the unknown long term effects of ubik, but with millions who would starve otherwise, the various governments decided that they had no choice.

*From the local news –* Lake Oswego distribution points are at 15687 Boones Way and 53 State Street. LO is fortunate in that most residential properties are growing their own.

*From the national section January 12, 2019 –* The current best seller at McDonalds is the Uburger, made with a ubik bun and a ubik fed beef. Nutritionists have hailed the McDonalds healthy menu. With corn gone, there is no more high fructose sugar, so all fast food has been improved. It is early, but it appears that cancer, heart disease, obesity and diabetes have decreased.

Green World is one of many groups petitioning Monsanto to develop an artificial flavor for ubik so that it will have a pleasant flavor. National leader Scott Samson said "Yes I know that it isn't like us, but radical problems call for non-traditional thinking. We need something to make ubik taste better. My preference would be peanut and chocolate."

Dr. Jason Miles at Oregon Health Sciences University sees a much healthier future with ubik, while Professor Gene Smith worries about unknown side effects from ubik and the danger of relying on one crop that suddenly appeared and could disappear just as suddenly.

A lighter note – A survey with accuracy within 2% indicates that 72% would trade their healthier blood pressure to get their body and head hair back that disappeared on the ubik diet and 60% of women are happy that men don't have beards anymore, particularly the scruffy hipster kind.

*From the business section –* Sassy Salon is offering two specials. Head painting is half

price for the rest of the year. For those in the 72% wanting their hair back, lifelike

head and body hair is discounted 25%.  
❖

**END TRANSMISSION**