

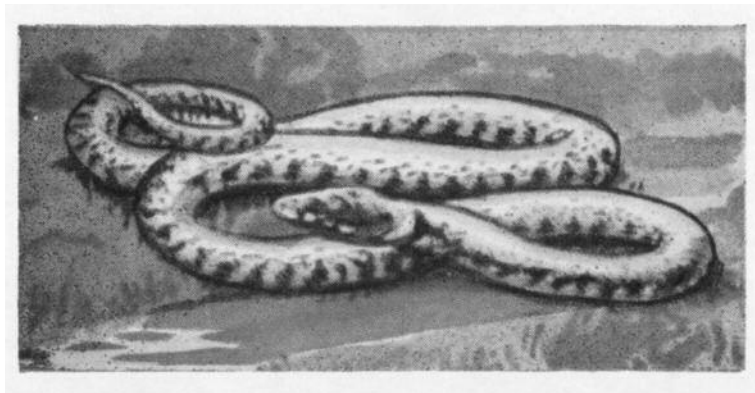
Corner Bar Magazine

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Page 1 – LIFE AND DEATH by Fariel Shafee. The author has degrees in science, but enjoys writing and art. She has recently been accepted by *Black Ink Fiction*, *Chamber magazine*, *365 Tomorrows* etc.

Page 3 – THINGS HIDE IN THE DARK by Jenean McBrearty. Ms McBrearty is a graduate of San Diego State University, who taught Political Science and Sociology. Her fiction, poetry, and photographs have been published in over two-hundred-fifty print and on-line journals. Her how-to book, *Writing Beyond the Self; How to Write Creative Non-fiction that Gets Published* was published by Vine Leaves Press in 2018. She won the Eastern Kentucky English Department Award for Graduate Creative Non-fiction in 2011, and a Silver Pen Award in 2015 for her noir short story: *Red's Not Your Color*.

Page 5 – HARVEST by A. J. Padilla. Mr. Padilla writes, "I am a college librarian who lives and works in New York's Hudson Valley. I have had stories published in *The Scarlet Leaf Review*, *Aphelion Magazine*, and *The Acentos Review*."



“LIFE AND DEATH”

by FARIEL SHAFEE

Under the scorching sun and in the midst of tumultuous emerald waves John lay thirsty, wounded. There was a large gash on his right arm. Parts of it looked festered. He drenched his hand in salty water, and simply hoped his body was strong enough to heal. There was no carbolic acid, honey or sugar with him. He, though, hoped that luck was on his side. Why else would he be here and not beneath those waves?

They had let him down on a small raft with eight cans of tuna and a large bottle of water. Only a small expansion of his life was what that these items offered. The ocean was vast in all directions. There was no ship at sight. But those others that surrounded him hours back had been cruel and benevolent – wishing to save his life by allowing him float to death. They could have simply tied a stone to him and pushed him off. But they did not. This was mercy.

“All ready,” Captain had almost reached that point of no return.

But nothing in life is definite until it is finally done. John’s death too now was undefined. He was still afloat. Something could happen – something bizarre and strange, ugly and beautiful at once. The universe could reveal its darkness and bits of light – the mysteries beyond man like it

did that evening.

John’s hands were tied then.

“Any last wishes?” Captain had laughed as though this was so funny. A bunch of mates had laughed out dirtily in unison with the man in charge. If they were echoes of him or other individuals in agreement was not obvious.

None of them knew how, by which law, the moments rolled into ones so disconnected from the past. The blue sky became red. The waves started to roll violently.



Some one sang from far away. Water rolled all around. Who could sing and where?

But then the sky turned orange at a corner and the clouds protruded into a narrow but sinewy tongue that flapped and beat about. Was that tongue there to sing or to swallow them all?

“Hush,” somebody warned. “We are at the rectangle of no return. No one speaks of it.”

“But that does not exist!”

“What else would make the sky into a tongue?”

“Who told you about this rectangle?”

“Did that person go in, experience the rectangular splendors, and return to tell this tale?”

“Hush,” the word this time was commanding and the whispers stopped.

Captain knelt down in the deck and looked up at the sky.

“Save us, Lord,” he pleaded. “We are but little creatures out into the ocean to try our luck. We mean no harm.”

No Lord appeared to save them in this rectangle that was nowhere on the map.

The orange grew more intense and teeth showed through the puffy cheeks. It was not a cloud. It was not the sky. It was a beast that had taken the sky over. Was it the whole sky? Did they see this beast from the shore?

Quickly, the sailors all grew mum. But that creature roared on like a wounded wild animal.

“Let us leave, Lord, mercy,” the captain shouted.

One does not kill when wishing to be

spared himself. One begins to believe in principles that involve certain precious qualities such as passion, empathy and love. Life suddenly becomes more precious. One values the lives of sinners and thieves alike then. John was just a boy. He had stolen three loaves of bread. Captain himself could have done it!

The man in charge could have made John walk the plank for disobedience, but he did not. He was not in charge any more. He was in charge of a ship that was at the mercy of a larger being. His own life was as fragile as a falling glass. Suddenly, the stupid, greedy boy too was like the rest, under the mercy of an inhuman, horrible monster. He too became human. So, they simply let John float.

John did not think for a while. He drifted as the murmurs and the subtle psalms wrapped them up all together. Then he closed his eyes, got ready for death.

When he woke up, his skin was burning. The breeze was salty and raw.

From a distance, John saw a lucid face swallow the ship, eat up his mates, and then fade away. Atop the saline water, he simply wished that another monster or a fairy would rise up and take him elsewhere, anywhere. ❖

“THINGS HIDE IN THE DARK”

by JENEAN MCBREARTY

Adler Owens went to bed early – 9:00—after lying to Felicity about how romantic the gentle rain sounded, and how he wished she were laying next to him. Gentle rain, hell. It sounded like the deluge, and he’d just had a lap dance that lasted two hours. “Love you, Babe,” he’d signed off before that last trip to the bathroom for his bottle of Mylanta. The steak and mushroom dinner he’d eaten at the ATO Fraternity reunion was reminding him it was twenty years since graduation. Why wasn’t he married, or happy? Bourbon might explain it. Or comfort a wretched effort to understand it.

“Give it up,” Adler told himself, and crawled between well-starched hotel sheets. “Make it a nice hotel,” he’d told frat-buddy-organizer Rob. “Last time I traveled, I came home with bedbugs.”

The Mylanta worked miracles, but he wondered if the roof would hold. The rain storm had morphed into a maelstrom. A thunder explosion jolted him upright. “Holy shit!” He wondered if the windows could withstand a lightning bolt.

A blaze of white streaked across the sky, illuminating the room, and, in that instant, he’d swear he saw the silhouette of someone sitting at the foot of the bed. He scrambled to turn on the bedside lamp

with half-paralyzed hands; his fingers wouldn’t bend.

“You shouldn’t lie to Felicity, Adler, she doesn’t deserve that.” The voice was low, slow and accompanied by an exhalation of white fog.

His heart fluttered. He slithered out of bed and crawled towards the door to reach the sliver of hallway light shining underneath. He stuck his hand between the door and the handle, pulled down, and collapsed on the threshold. “Help!” he cried. The hallway remained empty. “Help!”

He glanced over his shoulder to see if the thing was still there, and saw it moving toward the TV. When he turned back to the hallway, a man in a white waiter’s jacket stood above him.

“Mr. Owens, what are you doing?” he said as he pushed the door open wide and helped Adler to his feet. “Let’s get you to bed.”

“I can’t walk.”

“Yes, you can. One foot in front of the other. That’s the good fellow.” Adler plopped onto the bed, and the waiter turned on the lamps and closed the door. He fluffed Adler’s pillows, and tucked the covers around him.

“There was a man in here. Sitting on

my bed.”

“There’s no one here, now.”

Adler searched every corner. “Check the bathroom and the closet. I tell you, he was on my bed!”

The waiter opened the closet and the bathroom door. “There’s no one here.”

“Who are you?” Adler demanded.

“Jordan, the night concierge. Mostly, I help the drunks navigate the elevator. Give assistance to those in need.”

“Maybe there’s a hidden room. Or a secret passage. Lots of old buildings have walled alcoves and forgotten cellars.” As sweat beads rolled down his face, Adler clutched the man’s arm. “Stay with me, Jordan. I’m not drunk. I’m not crazy. The lightning ... he must have rode in on the lightning.”

Jordan sat next to Adler. “The lights did go out for a minute. Then the generator kicked in. It won’t happen again. The power failure, I mean.”

“Check the TV.”

“Check the what?”

“Check the TV. I saw him walk towards it. He might have slipped inside.”

“A wall-mounted TV? Was he a skinny fellow?” Jordan went to the screen and thumped it with his finger. “Anybody in there?”

“Turn on the heat, it’s freezing in here,” Adler ordered. His sweat had turned to hailstones.

“It’s Miami. It’s eighty-six degrees outside. You’re just anxious.”

“You’re damn right I am.” Adler hesitated. “Is this place haunted, or some-

thing?”

Jordan pulled an extra blanket from the closet and spread it over the bed. Anything for a customer. “Not that I’ve heard. I guess your phantom could have broken through.”

“Broken through? You mean the wall?”

From the small refrigerator under the TV, Jordan got two little bottles of booze and two plastic cups from the water tray. “Not through the walls. Through the time/space barrier. It happens. Here, have a drink. Whiskey or rum?”

“Whiskey. I’ve heard about quantum crap and quarks on Ancient Aliens. Do breakthroughs happen a lot ... here in Florida?”

“More often than you’d think. When people think of eerie stuff, they usually think of the desert. Area 51. Roswell. But, let me tell you, Horatio, there’s stuff happening all the time in every corner of the globe.”

“Globes don’t have corners, Hamlet,” Adler said. “Do you really think this guy was an alien from another dimension?”

“Could be.”

They drank straight from the bottles. Who needed niceties when there might be aliens around? “How would an alien from another dimension know about my conversation with my girlfriend?” Adler said.

“You have a girlfriend?”

“She likes to think she’s my girlfriend. I don’t encourage it except on Friday nights after work.”

“What did the man on the bed say?”

“He said I shouldn’t have lied to her.”

Jordan shrugged. “It’s a generalization that’s probably true for every earth-guy he’s ever met. I told my girlfriend her jeans didn’t make her butt look big. The man guessed, and it’s a safe bet. Like those fortune tellers who say you’re going to meet a stranger. Most people are strange. We can’t know everyone.”

“He knew her name. He might have overheard me talking to her, but I called her Babe,” Adler said, and noticed he could move his hands, now. He curled and uncurled his fingers.

“Are you sure he said Felicity and not, say, Francine?”

“How do you know her name?” Adler said. His body was getting tense again. Even for a concierge, Jordan was a bit too know-it-all.

“She called earlier. I heard the desk clerk repeat the message back to her. Tell Adler Felicity called, and he should call you when he gets in, no matter what time it is.”

“I’m sorry. The guy was just creepy. It’s this rain. I’m from Arizona. The sun logo on our state flag says it all. How about I get us another bottle of whatever this was?” A little woozy, Adler sat on the edge of the bed for a few seconds before standing. Who knew fear could make jelly out of flesh and bone? But, he could walk, and grabbed a handful of little bottles. This time, Jordan didn’t have to unscrew the cap for him. “I’m warming up, now.”

“I shouldn’t drink on the job,” Jordan said as he opened another bottle of rum.

“Do you believe this –let’s call him the visitor – was after you?”

“You mean was the Slim Reaper after the Grim Sleeper?” Adler thought Jordan would appreciate the joke. But, no.

“Maybe, he was here for someone else, and you got in the way.”

“That’s right. If he was here for my soul, he wouldn’t have let me make to the door,” Adler explained more to himself than Jordan. “I was helpless. He could have scooped me up and carried me off to the Underworld.”

“Listen, the storm has stopped,” Jordan said. He went to the window and closed the drapes. “He won’t be back.”

“How do you know?”

“This room is protected now.”

“Protected from what, how?” Adler scanned the room again, this time for a sign of a talisman or totem that Jordan might have sneaked in.

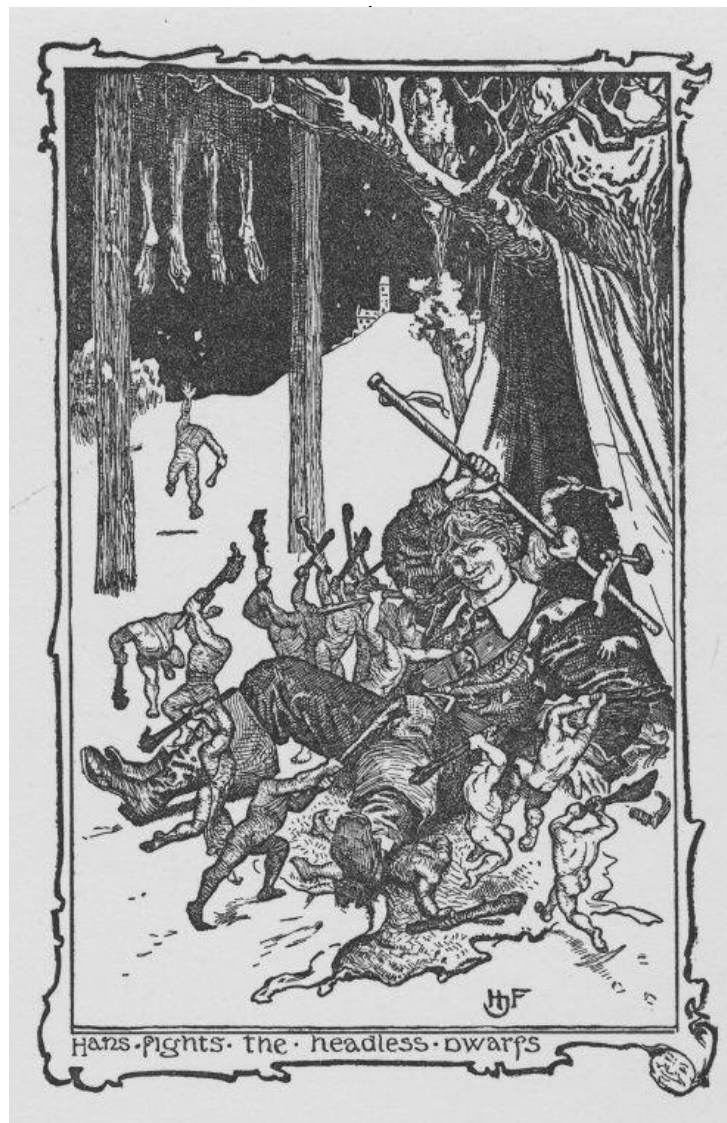
“You’re not the one he’s looking for. He’s made the same mistake a few times when I’m busy at night. We’ve got three conventions booked this week-end. But, he always shows up. Mr. Bad Penny, I call him.”

“You’re right about one thing, people are strange. You’re talking gibberish.” Adler was on his fifth little bottle.

He brought the blanket around his shoulders, foolishly believing cloth could protect him from Jordan, if he was a maniac. A humid pall had settled on the room.

“Who is he, Jordan? Tell me, if you know.”

“He’s my albatross. And I am con-



demned, as the ancient mariner was, to confess my sin.” Jordan seemed to age before Adler’s eyes. His face-flesh sagged into jowls and his hair had turned white. His hands shriveled, disappearing into the sleeves of his jacket.

“When I was eighteen,” he continued, “I met the new girl at Holy Spirit school, Maureen. Such a lovely girl. She didn’t smoke or curse. She refused to go out with me—or any of the boys. I asked her if she preferred girls, and she said she preferred God. As soon as she graduated, she was

going to be a nun. She showed me a picture of the St. Joseph’s convent she was entering. In Missouri. What better way to prove my manhood than to steal the affections of a girl away from God himself? I was determined that she give her unspoiled self to me before she gave her life to God. I murmured lies and flatteries, false professions of love eternal, and gave her a pawn-shop ring to wear on the same silver chain that held a silver cross. So cheap it was, that I didn’t ask her to return it when I tired of her. Your ‘shad-

ow' is my conscience: the Grim Reminder who comes with every drop of water. Maureen's tears, he calls the rain. The words he uttered to you, are a warning."

Jordan was an old man now. Bent and frail, it seemed his clothes had grown three sizes. Adler could barely hear him.

"What happens if you refuse to tell the person he chooses to hear your confession? If it was me, I'd say, get lost, and I'd move. I'd get a job where there are no strangers for him to scare the piss out of."

"I can't do that..."

"The hell you can't. Show a little moxie, Fella."

"I'm not as brave as you are." Jordan held out his hand to Adler, as if asking him to share his strength.

"I'm not brave, just smart." Adler finished the last swig of his last little bottle of courage, and grasped Jordan's outstretched hand—and fell backward into his pillows. Paralyzed, and just alive enough to hear Jordan speak and grow younger and stronger before his unblinking eyes.

"Did you not know that Ancient Mariner killed the bird out of desperation as well as pride? You should have listened longer to my story. I killed a young girl's vocation with drugs and perversion. But I am a murderer of men, too. With each kill, my conscience grows more powerful. I am most dangerous when I am most kind. Like most others, you are kindest to the old. You should have been kinder to Felicity."

What did Adler Owens see with his

wide-open eyes that wouldn't stay closed, according to the mortician who had to sew them shut? Jordan could have told him. With no more than a thought, Jordan had showed Adler a hologram replica of the virginal Maureen before her degradation—eyes heavenward in devotion, clean hands, and a charitable smile. For the next quarter hour, Adler witnessed her transformation; her skin turned gray and her arms became dotted with infected sores, her smile toothless, and her face hard and hopeless, shrinking into a decrepit shell until she dissolved into a putrid mass.

"Maybe this Adler fella was into women's fashions," Detective Ollie Short commented to Jordan as he put Maureen's crumpled filthy sheath into a plastic evidence bag. "It sure smells like something died in here. Don't you ever check on your guests?"

"Only when they call for help, and only when it rains," Jordan said. "I'm just the night concierge." The one who counts the beats of your heart, winding down your body clock as you lay awake, wrestling with your conscience. ❖

“HARVEST”

by A. J. PADILLA

June 1852

The empty wooden bucket was light as a feather, but on the way back, full to the brim with sweet spring water, Sarah Goode knew it would be heavy enough to make the handle dig into the flesh of her small hand. Then she would be forced to stop and rest on her way back to the cabin. When she was done fetching water, there was the midday meal to help her mother with. Her father and older brother had been out in the fields since first light and would be famished when they returned around noon.

Sarah smiled at the thought that she would soon be doing the same chores for her own home. She was sixteen now and betrothed to young Ethan Twain. He was all but finished building their cabin on the thirty acres he had bought from old Luther Wyndham. It was good land, fit for growing corn or wheat or just about any crop Ethan might want to grow.

Their wedding was only two Sundays away. Ethan wasn't the best-looking bachelor in the valley, but he had beautiful gray eyes that made her feel a little breathless when he stood close and whispered compliments about her long golden hair and cornflower-blue eyes. Her step lightened as she began humming an air she'd heard Aunt Rachel play on her old pianoforte during a recent family gathering.

Sarah was almost at the spring when she

saw an enormous disk the color of quicksilver come down out of a cloudless sky toward where she stood. She tried to run but found herself frozen in place, unable to move or speak. She could only watch helplessly as the strange and frightening thing came closer. Sarah felt her eyelids grow heavy as a great feeling of fatigue washed over her. Her right hand opened reflexively and the empty bucket fell to the ground.

Her eyes were closed for what seemed only an instant, but when she opened them again the bucket lay some distance away and the sun had moved higher in the morning sky. She picked up the bucket and continued toward the spring.

As she walked, Sarah felt a dull ache in her side. She was a strong girl and rarely gave into pain. If the ache grew any worse, she would have Ethan hitch his roan mare up to a buggy and take her to Mrs. Sutter. She was the closest thing to a doctor in the valley and would probably be able to brew an herb tea or make a poultice for whatever might be ailing her.

When Sarah reached the spring, she knelt by the water's edge and, as she filled the bucket, suddenly remembered a wonderfully vivid dream she had ... when? Was it last night, or the night before? It was the most pleasant dream, all about a great silver dove that rode a warm summer breeze down to where she stood on a wide green meadow. It swooped down and gently carried her up into a perfect blue sky, higher and

higher until she thought surely they would reach heaven itself. It was such a comforting dream, one that she would remember with pleasure and share with others many times during the rest of her forty-nine years of life.

May 26, 1955

Jake's pickup rolled to a stop on the shoulder of the narrow road. His passenger, who had been asleep for the last thirty miles, sat up, his eyes wide with alarm.

"What is it, Jake? What's wrong?"

"Take a look at that, Buck."

Their home town spread across the distant valley. At its center, several fires burned in the moonless night.

"What the hell?"

"Looks like our fire department has taken the night off"

"Let's stop at Ned Stewart's place. It's just down this road. I'll call Sheriff Clement and find out what the hell's going on down there."

His friend's reaction was typical. When confronted by a troublesome situation, he immediately assumed command. The trait served him well as a sheriff's deputy, but it sometimes seemed to Jake as out of place as a blizzard in July. During the past three days, for example, although they were on a fishing trip and camped by an isolated, utterly peaceful mountain lake, Buck had walked around with a snub-nosed Smith and Wesson .38 Police Special tucked into his waistband, as if he wanted to be ready

to deal with the trouble lurking just around the next bend of an old tree-shaded Indian trail. Six extra rounds bulged in his shirt pocket, next to his ever-present pack of unfiltered Camels.

They pulled up to the Stewart house five minutes later. Even though it was well past midnight, lights were on in nearly every room.

"Will you look at that?" Jake said.

"Either Ned and Miranda are having a party, or the whole family's up watching the Late Show."

"Just as long as they're up. I really didn't look forward to waking Ned out of a sound sleep. He can be a mean son of a bitch sometimes."

Jake stayed in the car while Buck got out and rang the front doorbell. Nothing happened. He rang again and still no one came to the door. Finally, he pounded on the door and yelled out.

"Open up, Ned! It's Buck!"

Jake watched him walk over to a bay window along the side of the house and peer inside before returning to the door. He didn't bother knocking this time. He tried the door, found it unlocked, and went inside. Jake joined him a few moments later.

The two of them stood at the Stewarts' dining room table, looking down at a half-eaten supper of lamb chops, mashed potatoes, and vegetables. A glass of apple cider had tipped over and soaked through the white linen tablecloth, leaving a jagged brown stain. Buck reached over and touched the stain. It was dry.

“Looks like Ned left in an awful hurry.”

“He sure as hell must have,” Buck said, “right in the middle of supper and with his wife and kids in tow. Stay here while I check the rest of the house.”

Ten minutes went by before Buck returned.

“Beds are all still made. Not a thing out of place. Let’s take a look in the garage.”

Ned’s green Chevy pickup was parked next to his wife’s Rambler station wagon.

“What now, Buck?”

“I’m going back inside, see if I can get Clara to connect me with the sheriff’s office.”

Jake lit a cigarette and leaned against the big oak in the Stewart’s yard. It was his first taste of tobacco in more than a month. He had been trying hard to quit, but needed this smoke more than he could recall needing one in a long time. Even though he knew there was a simple, commonsense explanation for what they had found, the scene in the dining room left him feeling uneasy. Some sort of family emergency probably called them away and the children were no doubt with relatives. The same people who picked up the children most likely drove Ned and Miranda to the airport over in Pearl Valley. That would explain why both being in the garage. The answer had to be as simple as that.

Buck came out of the house and got in the car without a word. Jake waited for him to say something, to tell him that Sheriff Clement had been able to explain everything, but he looked straight ahead and said nothing.

“Well?”

“Phone’s dead. Could be the lines are down somewhere between here and town.”

Jake flicked his half-finished cigarette out of the window and lit a new one.

“You remember old Mr. Hamilton? Taught English over at the high school?”

“What about him?”

“His place is down this road five or six miles. He hardly ever leaves the house since his wife passed away. Maybe his phone is working.”

“Not if the lines are down. But what the hell? We might as well give it a try. Have to pass it on the way back into town anyway.”

It was a similar story at the Hamilton house. Walter Hamilton’s black DeSoto was parked in the gravel driveway, but no one was home and the front door had been left unlocked. A half-eaten TV dinner sat on the kitchen table next to an open copy of the Littlevale Gazette. Hamilton’s wire-rimmed eyeglasses rested on top of the paper and a Strauss waltz was playing on his counter-top Philco. Buck shut off the radio and briefly rested the palm of his hand on its cabinet. It was hot to the touch.

“If I had to guess, I’d say that whatever happened here and at the Stewart house took place around the same time Thursday, probably sometime after sunset.

“How do you know that?”

“The Gazette gets delivered between five and six in the afternoon, and it looks like Hamilton had enough time to prepare his supper and read nearly half the paper before he walked out of here.”

Buck went to the phone, picked it up and listened for a dial tone.

“Dead. I’m going to take a look outside.”

“What are you looking for?”

Buck didn’t hear the question. He had already gone past him onto the porch. Jake found him searching the overgrown hedges out in front.

“About what I figured. No paper here anywhere. The Gazette in there could be the last one delivered since late Thursday.”

“Fred White’s never missed an issue of the Gazette. You know that.”

“Well, it seems he missed one or two this time.”

“The paperboy must be sick. That’s all.”

“Fred always finds some way of getting the paper to his customers. Remember a few Christmases ago when the paperboy had a broken arm? Fred wrapped the papers in cellophane and tossed them out of that baby blue De Ville of his onto the front lawns of subscribers’ houses. Did that right in the middle of the biggest snowstorm in years. Craziest thing you ever saw. Most folks didn’t get to read that day’s edition until the spring thaw. No, Jake, something else is going on.”

“What do we do now?”

“Now we stop pussyfooting around and drive into town. If there’s an answer for any of this, that’s where we’ll find it.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence. A mile outside of Littlevale the pickup suddenly shuddered to a stop.

Buck looked over at Jake. Anger flashed in his gray eyes.

“Please don’t tell me we’re out of gas.”

“Tank reads three-quarters full. Look for yourself. I filled it when you stopped for a pack of cigarettes a few hours ago.

“Right. Sorry, Jake. Guess I’m a little rattled by whatever’s going on here. Dead phones, fires in the middle of town, people gone without a trace. We’re away three days and the town goes to hell in a handbasket.”

“Let me see if I can start this heap.”

Jake had been around cars all his life and had a reputation for being able to get even the oldest rattletrap running smoothly. He worked under the truck’s hood for twenty minutes before finally throwing up his hands.

“Looks like we’ll have to hike the last mile into town, Buck.”

“What’s wrong?”

“The whole electrical system seems to have failed. I don’t understand it. I can’t find a thing wrong and yet”

“Then let’s get moving. I’ll get Dale over at the gas station to tow it into town tomorrow morning.”

Buck had grown up in Littlevale and as a deputy sheriff patrolled its streets six days a week. He knew the town about as well as he knew his own living room, and yet, as he and Jake made their way down Center Street that May night, even the most familiar sights appeared strange in the flickering yellow light from a half dozen small fires.

Not a soul was to be seen anywhere.

“My God, Buck, do you think it’s finally happened?”

“What are you talking about?”

"We drove down this street Thursday morning on our way out of town and everything was the same as it's been as far back as I can remember. And now here we are, back on Saturday night, and the place is a ghost town. It's almost like ... oh, hell, I don't know."

"Listen, Jake, if you think you've got an explanation for all this, I sure would like to hear it."

"Russians."

"Russians?"

"That's right. We were up in those mountains, cut off from everything for three days. Who's to say it hasn't finally happened? The commies got sick of waiting for us to make our own worker's paradise and decided to jump in and do it for us."

"And you think they started with Littlevale? What makes us so special? The mill? The dairy? You think maybe they're after Potter's grocery store or Miss Swenson's sewing shop? What about the air base twenty miles south of here? Why wouldn't they go for that instead? Talk sense, Jake."

"How do you know they don't already have the air base? They could be everywhere, all over the country."

Buck looked over at his friend. Short and stocky, he was the physical opposite of the tall, slim deputy. Mutt and Jeff, that's what they were called all through high school. The remark never failed to annoy Buck, but Jake always dismissed it with a laugh, which was how he dealt with most things back then. Even now, his easygoing friend rarely let anything trouble him for

very long. He had certainly never been one for crazy doom and gloom talk about Russian invasions. Buck understood that all the foolishness was driven by the same nameless fear that gripped his own insides even as he struggled to appear calm and in control.

"What were we listening to on the trip back home, Jake?"

"What?"

"Go ahead, tell me."

"The radio, what else?"

"That's right. And about how many stations would you say we listened to?"

"I don't know. Four, maybe five."

"Right. My guess is that those stations broadcast from cities scattered around more than half the state, and the last thing I recall hearing before dozing off was a Four Aces tune. Not a peep from our friends in the Kremlin. One other thing: Hamilton had his radio on. Remember? Only music was coming from that, too."

"I know what you're driving at, but the Russians might have already taken over radio and television stations. Hell, they probably did that first."

"Listen, Jake, we both did our time in Korea. You *know* what war looks like. If you were right about some kind of invasion happening here, wouldn't there be troops all around, military vehicles, planes and helicopters overhead?"

"You have a better explanation?"

"I don't have any explanation at all. Not yet anyway. But I sure as hell don't think we missed the beginning of a world war while we were away fishing for bass."

“I suppose you’re right.”

“Look, I can’t blame you for trying to make some kind of sense out of this weirdness. We’re almost at the sheriff’s office. Somebody there’s sure to have a few answers for us.”

The lights in Sheriff Clement’s office were on. Inside, the dispatcher’s radio spat out static, and the coffee pot – which the sheriff insisted be kept full of strong, hot coffee – sat empty on its hot plate. Buck checked the cells. All three were empty. He went to the radio and flipped the toggle switch to the send position. He called out to the town’s three green and white prowl cars. Silence was the only response. The sheriff and his deputies were gone, just like everyone else in town.

While Buck continued trying to reach someone on the dispatcher’s radio, Jake went over to the window facing Center Street. There was a white van parked across the way. It was Len Potter’s van. He had worked for Potter during his senior year in high school and driven that same van countless miles delivering groceries. Len lived just outside of town with his wife and two boys. At this time of night that van should have been parked in his driveway. He started to tell Buck about the van when he saw something move in the alleyway between the bank and the post office. He tried to make out what it was, but it remained a formless shadow.

“Buck?”

“Yeah?”

“I think someone’s out there.”

“What! Where?”

“In the alley across the street.”

Buck ran out of the office before Jake could say another word. He followed him and found Buck kneeling over someone on the pavement. In the half-light from a nearby dumpster fire, he recognized young Andy King. The teen’s face was streaked with dirt and caked blood covered abrasions along his forearms. He was muttering something unintelligible.

“Help me get him inside.”

They half-walked, half-carried Andy to the office and lay him down on a cot in one of the cells.

“Is there a first aid kit in this place, Buck?”

“Should be. Sheriff Clement picked up a couple of war surplus kits last year. I’ll see if I can find one.”

He found a kit and handed it to Jake.

“I’ll get a pot of coffee started while you patch him up.”

“Make mine black, no sugar.”

Fifteen minutes later Buck returned with the coffee.

“How’s he doing?”

“A lot of scrapes and bruises. Nothing really serious that I can see. We probably should get him to Doc Mueller’s, make sure nothing else is going on.”

“I think your army medic’s training is all he can hope for right now. Has he said anything?”

“Only some stuff under his breath that I couldn’t make out. He’s very agitated, could be in shock. I can’t be sure. I think the best thing for him right now is rest.”

Jake covered the teen with one of the

jail's coarse woolen blankets and sat by him until he dropped off into a fitful sleep. When he returned to the office, he saw that Buck had pinned a deputy's badge to his shirt front and was wearing a holstered Colt Police Positive.

"I'm going to take a look around town. By the way, consider yourself deputized until further notice."

"I thought only the sheriff could do that?"

"If he was around, I wouldn't need a deputy. But right now I seem to be the only law in town, so I'm deputizing you for the time being. Keep an eye on things until I get back. I won't be long."

Jake watched him leave the office. Oddly enough, this strange business seemed to have revived Buck, brought him out of the dark mood he'd fallen into since the breakup with Fran. The fishing trip they'd just returned from — three days of peace and complete isolation — had been Jake's idea. He was sure that his friend would be able to sort things out after a few days away from his job.

Nearly everyone in town who saw Buck and Frances Church together expected them to marry when they were done with high school, and maybe they would have, if events sixty-five hundred miles away hadn't intervened. Both Jake and Buck were drafted the September after graduation and were eventually sent to Korea with the 24th Infantry Division. At the same time, Fran started classes at a downstate teacher's college. When Buck returned to Littlevale three years later, he and Fran started seeing

each other again, and talk of marriage was soon rekindled among family and friends. But, for the second time in their lives, things did not work out as others believed they would.

Fran's trip to a teachers' conference in April of that year was only supposed to last four days. At the end of five days Buck received a special delivery letter from her telling him all about how she had run into a man from her time at college and how that meeting unexpectedly blossomed into a romance. She was terribly sorry things turned out as they had and would always remember him with great affection.

Fran was married a month after the letter arrived in Littlevale.

Buck refused to talk about what happened. Jake's hope that a few days in the tranquility of the mountain lakes would allow his friend to open up about his feelings led nowhere. He made no mention of Fran the whole time they were away. Sullen and quiet most of the time, when he did say something it was to comment on the weather or the luck they weren't having catching bass.

Buck returned just as Jake was finishing his second cup of coffee and his third cigarette.

"I got a couple of extinguishers from the firehouse and put out the fires. Most of them weren't much, a few trash cans, a dumpster over on Central, and a delivery van behind the post office. By the way, you can forget about taking Andy to Doc Mueller's. He's disappeared, too. It's the same story everywhere I looked. People

seem to have walked off in the middle of supper or while they were watching TV or just changing their damned socks. It looks like everybody went nuts at the same time.”

Andy’s scream sent both of them running to the cells. They found him sitting up on the cot. He looked up at Buck and for a moment seemed not to recognize him.

“How ... how did I get here?”

“We brought you in from the alley across the street. How do you feel, son?”

“Tired, really tired.”

“Do you feel well enough talk, tell us what’s happened here?”

“I ... I guess so.”

“I’ll be right back, Jake.”

Buck returned with a small portable tape recorder and put it on the floor by the cot. He pulled up a chair and sat next to Andy.

“What’s that for?” Jake asked.

“Sheriff Clement bought this contraption a year ago. It’s supposed to substitute for Mrs. Chisum when she’s not around to take things down in shorthand.”

“You make it sound like someone’s committed a crime.”

“As far as I’m concerned, Jake, the whole damn town is a crime scene and I’m going to follow procedure.”

He reached down and turned the recorder on.

“Today’s date is May twenty-sixth, nineteen fifty-five. It is now one forty-three A.M. and I am taking a statement from Andrew King, age seventeen, a resident of Littlevale. Jake Benson is here to witness this statement. I am Deputy Sheriff Malcolm

Buchwald. Okay, go ahead, Andy.”

“They’re gone, Deputy Buchwald. All of them.”

“Hold on there, Andy. Who’s gone?”

“Billy, Paul, Rocky, Steve, Hector, the Twain sisters, Polly, Pete Sotero, Dale – all of them.”

“Are you sure about what you’re saying?”

“Yes. I’m awful thirsty. Can I please have something to drink?”

Jake brought Andy a Coke from the machine in the office. He gulped it down and it seemed to revive him. He lay back on the cot and closed his eyes.

“Go on, son.”

Slowly, in a voice drained of all emotion, Andy King told them his story.

It began Friday, just after sunset. Anyway, that’s when it started for me. I had a date to take Polly McAlister to see the new movie at the Starlight. Her family’s farm is over by the foothills south of town, so I borrowed my dad’s old jeep and drove there to pick her up. We were a few miles outside of town when Polly pointed up at the sky and said, “What’s that?”

It looked like a big shadow creeping across the sky, blocking clouds and stars as it moved along. I thought it was a zeppelin at first. You know, like you see in old newsreels? Only this thing was much bigger and shaped kind of like a giant wheel with lights in the hub and along the rim, so I knew it couldn’t be a zeppelin. We stopped and watched it move over town before it disappeared behind the hills to the north. Polly

said it was probably some kind of weird storm cloud and that we needed to get going because we were going to miss the start of the movie. She hates that, I mean walking in after the movie's already started. So we headed back into town and neither of us said another word about what we saw.

The jeep died on us a mile or so outside of Littlvalle, which didn't surprise me too much because my father had been having trouble with it. I tried to get it started, but nothing I did worked. Polly sure wasn't too happy about that.

"I suppose that means we have to walk the rest of the way," she said.

"I guess, Pol. I'm sorry."

"Wonderful, simply wonderful. Now we're going to miss the start of the movie for sure."

"Come on, Pol. It's only another mile or so. We've got plenty of time. Besides, somebody might come along and give us a lift into town."

"I sure hope so."

I pushed the jeep to the side of the road and we started walking. After a quarter mile or so we began to hear this weird buzzing sound, sort of like bees, and Polly noticed what looked like lightning off to the north.

"Well, that's just peachy. I hope we get to town before the rain starts, Andy."

The sky was clear, moonless and full of stars.

"I have no idea what that is, Polly, but I don't think we have to worry about rain."

"Do I have your personal guarantee that it won't rain?"

"Yes."

"Thanks, but I'd rather have an umbrella."

It wasn't too long after that we started seeing the horses, one or two at a time, running free along the side of the road.

"Looks like some farmer left his paddock open."

"More than one, Andy. I've seen half a dozen already."

"That's really weird. We better stop by the sheriff's office and let him know."

"Only if it doesn't make us late for the movie."

"Okay, Pol. We'll go see Sheriff Clement afterwards."

But Polly forgot all about the movie when we got to town. People were packed nearly shoulder to shoulder in the town square. You'd think that with everyone jammed together like that there would be a lot of noise, some pushing and shoving, an argument here and there, but it was just the opposite. The scene was quiet as a church procession. In fact, people hardly moved at all. They stood staring off to the north at these strange lights in the sky that looked something like heat lightning, only brighter and a weird copper-color. At the same time, there was the same buzzing sound Polly and I had heard before. It seemed to be coming from everywhere at once, as if a giant swarm of bees was hovering over the town. Dogs were going nuts, too, howling or whimpering, their tails tucked between their legs. And there were more horses, lots of them, whinnying and galloping around in all directions. It was the craziest sight you

ever saw.

Sheriff Clement showed up after a while and I was sure that would be the end of it. He'd break things up quick and send everyone home. He was with one of his deputies, the red-haired one named Ken. Sheriff Clement pulled his gray Stetson down a little at the brim, the way he does when he means business and isn't about to take any bull from anybody. He was part way into the crowd when he glanced over to the north and saw the lights off in the distance. He seemed as hypnotized by what he saw as all the rest of them. It was so spooky, like a bad dream you have when you're sick with a fever — only what was happening was no dream.

But there were some of us, maybe a dozen all told, who weren't much interested in the lights, except maybe the way anybody would be interested in something new and strange, and without thinking about it we drifted toward each other. We ended up by the gazebo in the square, all of us scared by the way people we'd known all our lives were acting. I think being together made us feel a little less afraid.

Rocky was the first of us to speak up. He said the lights were nothing special, just the Aurora Borealis, and that everybody would get bored with them sooner or later and go back home, but Paul said no, it couldn't be the Northern Lights. We were too far south for that. Something else was causing them and the strange buzzing sound, and he was sure that what he had seen in the sky earlier that evening was behind it all.

Polly looked at him when he said that. "You saw it, too?" she asked.

"Sure. The damned thing was big as a four football fields. No way to miss it if you were outside and had eyes to see with."

That's when we all started talking at the same time and it turns out everybody had seen the same thing. Hector probably got the best look at the thing since his dad's farm is over by the hills north of town and whatever it was flew directly over their place.

"It was gigantic," Hector said, "floating up there, hundreds of feet above the trees, making no sound at all. I don't know what it was, but it sure as hell wasn't anything I ever saw before."

We all got quiet after he said that, probably because we were thinking the same thing but nobody wanted to be the first to say it out loud. I mean, you read all the time about people claiming they've seen strange things in the sky, things they can't explain. I always thought that stuff was a lot of baloney. You know, like somebody thinking Venus is a space ship or some joker making things up so he can get his name in the paper. But I've known Hector all my life and you can believe anything he tells you.

So there we were, scared and knowing the words but afraid to say them and sound stupid in front of the others. It was Steve who finally said what the rest of us wouldn't.

"You mean you saw a flying saucer, Hec?"

"Call it whatever you want. I'm only telling you what I saw."

Right about then the buzzing sound stopped and the lights over the hills changed. They started blinking much faster, and that's when the crowd began moving off to the north, first one or two at a time and then in big groups. The scariest part was that Sheriff Clement joined them. Steve ran over and tried to stop him, but he had this blank look on his face, like he couldn't hear a word he was saying.

Both Twain sisters panicked when they saw him leave. They got kind of hysterical, crying and calling out to him. Sheriff Clement was the one person the town could always depend on when there was trouble and now there he was, wandering off, lured away by something none of us understood. I suppose the Twain sisters felt like he'd abandoned them. Hell, all of us felt that way.

Well, after half an hour or so we were the only people left in the town square.

"Anybody have any ideas what we should do?" Dale from over at the gas station asked in a sort of joking way, but you could tell he was just as spooked as the rest of us.

Miss Eudora said we should call the State Police.

"I'm quite certain they will be able to put an end to all this foolishness," she said.

And that's just what we tried doing, only none of the phones in town worked. We ran around trying just about all of them and not a single one was any good.

"Look, I don't know about the rest of you, but I've had enough of this," Hector said. "My dad's pickup is parked over by the

mill and I'm going to take it and go for help. Anyone who wants to can come with me."

He left and I guess not a one of us could think of anything better to do, so we fell in step behind him and hiked across town to the mill. We watched him get into his dad's truck, take the key from under the floor mat, and turn it in the ignition. Nothing happened. He banged on the steering wheel and cursed a blue streak.

The Twain sisters said he should try their car. It was a brand-new Hudson Hornet and there certainly wasn't any reason in the world why it shouldn't start up perfectly well. One of the sisters, Eunice I think, gave Hector the keys from her purse and he ran off with Steve and Paul and Pete Sotero.

The rest of us stayed by the mill waiting, and after a while Polly looked around and asked where Billy Preston was. He had been with us at the gazebo, but she hadn't seen him since before we left for the mill. He's a cousin of hers, you know. After Billy's mom passed away last year, she kind of stepped in to help his dad look after him.

"Maybe he walked off with all the others," I said.

"No, Billy was with us from the start."

Eunice Porter remarked that she heard him muttering something about going off and getting to the bottom things. That sure sounded like Billy. He's always been kind of a loner, a bit odd, different from the rest of us. There was this time, back when we were all in grade school, that he started crying in

class and saying that his Uncle Felix was dead. Miss Marsden, our teacher, couldn't get him to settle down. Sure enough, we found out later that his uncle had passed away that morning while we were all in school. He had a heart attack and dropped dead inside his barber shop right around the time Billy was making a fuss and Miss Marsden had to walk him over to the school nurse. It's kind of scary how sometimes he knows what you're going to say before you say it, almost like he'd reading your mind. Some of the older folks in town swear Billy was born with the power of second sight. Anyway, I told Polly that it was just his way, leaving to go look for answers on his own, and that she should stop worrying about him.

Hector and the others came back after a while and said the Hudson wouldn't start. One of the Twain sisters, Miss Esther, said that wasn't possible, that the Hudson was just off the showroom floor. So Steve handed her the keys and said, "Well, Miss Esther, why don't you go ahead and try it for yourself." She looked offended, like Steve had insulted her, which I thought was pretty funny because with all the crazy stuff going on around us how are you going to let something like that bother you?

Steve told us that on their way back they had stopped at his house and tried his mom's car but that it wouldn't start either. Their phone and that was dead, too.

Then Paul, who's usually the quiet one in our group, spoke up.

"I think we should all go get ourselves guns."

"What good's a gun going to do us?" I asked.

"All I'm saying is that we should be ready to defend ourselves against whatever it is that's hypnotizing people into walking off toward the hills."

Polly said to him, "What about us? Nobody's hypnotized us and we saw those stupid lights just like everybody else. Why are we different?"

"I don't know the answer to that, but you're right. We're the only ones not marching off meek as lambs to the slaughter. And that's exactly why we need to get ourselves guns."

"I hope you are not including my sister and me in your plans, young man," Eunice Twain said. "I've never handled a firearm in my life and certainly don't intend to start now."

"That's up to you, Miss Eunice," Paul said, "but anyone who doesn't have a gun can get one at my dad's hardware store right now, free of charge. How about it? Who's with me?"

Hector and Steve were ready to join him, but Rocky held back.

"Hold on now. Maybe this is all some kind of mass hysteria," he said.

Paul looked over at him.

"You think mass hysteria is making all the cars and telephones in town not work? I know damned well what's causing this and so do the rest of you, even if none of you are willing to admit it. And I'm not going to wait around 'til whatever is inside that thing we all saw tonight turns me into me into a damned zombie. Not me. I'm getting

a rifle and going after *them*.”

Then a voice from behind us said, “You won’t have to, Paul.”

We all turned at the same time and saw Billy sitting bareback on Josh Turcott’s old roan mare. He had come up on us from out of the shadows back of the mill. We were all so busy talking we didn’t hear him ride up.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Paul asked him.

“It means just what it says. You won’t have to go after them.”

“And why not?” Paul sounded angry, or maybe more afraid than angry, but I guess sometimes it amounts to the same thing.

Billy got off the mare and came up to us.

“Because they’re coming for *us*.”

Eunice Twain let out a little cry and her sister put an arm around her shoulder, trying to comfort her, even though you could see fear lighting up her own face like a Roman candle.

“How would you know that?” Rocky asked.

“Because while the rest of you were standing around wringing your hands and wondering what was going on, I rode north into the hills to look for some answers.”

Old Mr. Peabody said, “Son, if you know what’s happening here, you need to tell us.”

Mr. Peabody sounded impatient and crotchety, but that’s nothing new for him. He always sounds that way, even when all you’re doing is buying stamps at his post office. I’m pretty sure he was just as terri-

fied as the rest of us.

Billy told us what happened.

“I rode up into the hills toward the lights until I got close enough to see it, the ship I mean. It’s a creepy sight, this gigantic silver disc floating a few feet above the ground with no sound at all. A couple of the ... the *things* from inside it were standing around talking. Or I thought at first that’s what they were doing, but then I realized that their mouths weren’t moving.”

“They weren’t using words and you could hear them? Is that what you’re telling us?”

Mr. Peabody sounded like he thought Billy was making the whole thing up.

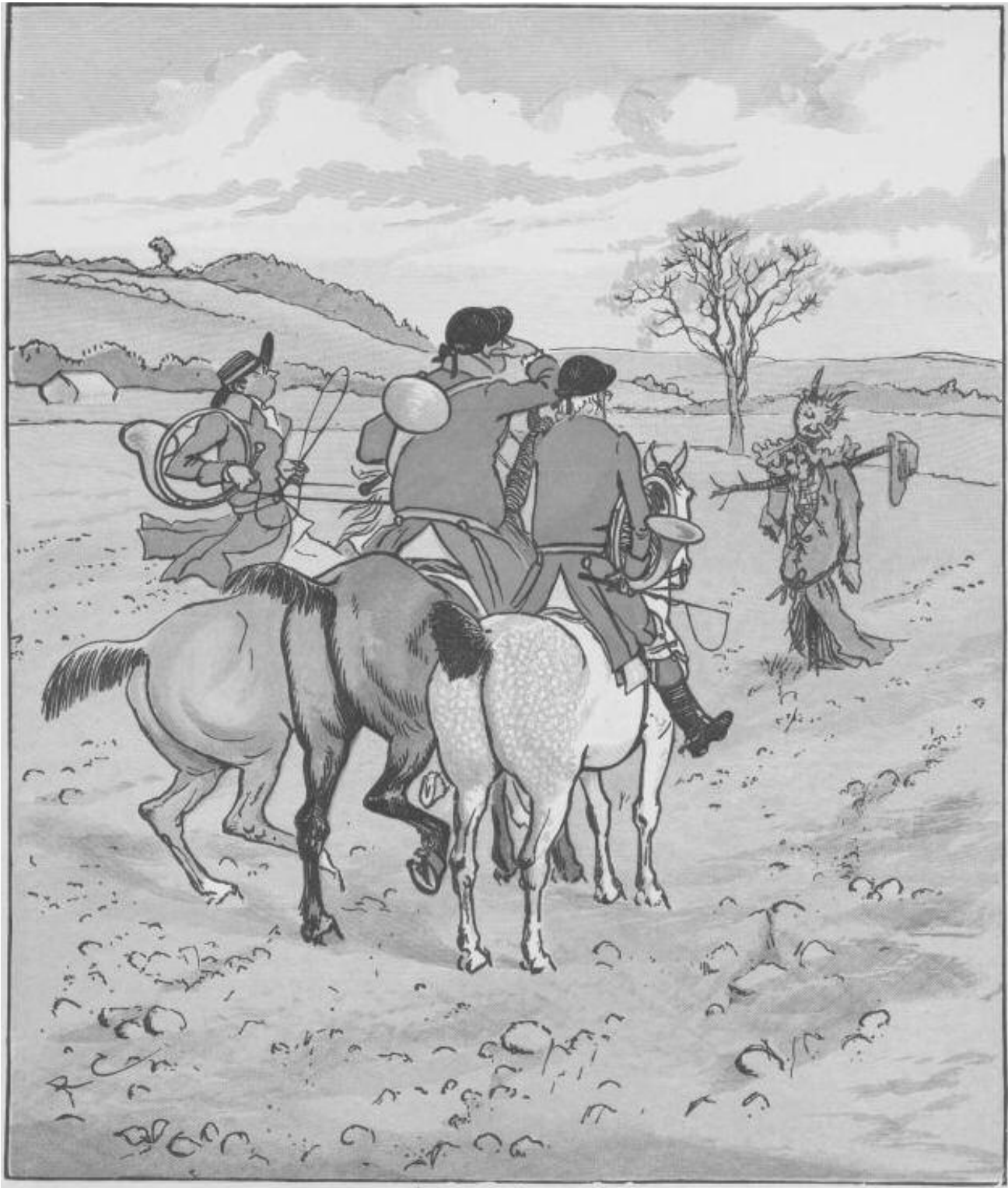
“Yes, that’s right. I heard them the way you hear yourself think inside your head.”

“And you saw the things?”

“Sure did, Mr. Peabody. And they don’t look much different than any of us.”

“No little green men, eh?” Mr. Peabody looked about ready to laugh in Billy’s face.

“The two I saw were wearing one-piece suits made out of some kind of glittery stuff. To look at them you’d swear they weren’t doing a thing except standing there staring out into the woods, silent as a couple of fence posts, but what they were doing was *exchanging thoughts*. That’s what came through to me. They didn’t use words, only images, like if I wanted someone to understand what a chair is by showing them what it looked like instead of describing it. At first, I didn’t know what was going on. Pictures of things kept popping into my head, a few at the beginning and then a heap of them flooding in, like a movie run-



ning at double speed. It took me a while to figure out how to slow the pictures down by concentrating hard on each one separately, and when I did that I was able to make out bits and pieces of what they were saying ... or thinking. There's one other weird thing about what happened. I got the feeling they knew I was hiding there all along and didn't care."

"You still haven't told us why they're here," Mr. Peabody said.

"Well, I'm really not sure."

Mr. Peabody jumped on that. "So, you don't really know anything, do you?"

"I'm sure of a couple of things, Mr. Peabody."

"And what might those be, young man?"

"They've been here before. Lots of times."

"In Littlevale?"

"Here and other places all over the world. And they'll be back again. They visit just long enough to collect what they need and leave."

"And what is it they need to collect in Littlevale?"

"Us. You and me, and all the rest of us who didn't walk off into the hills toward the lights."

"Us? I don't understand, Billy. What do they want with us," Polly asked.

"That's what I'm not sure of. I think it has to do with something that happened when they visited a long time ago, way back when there weren't as many people around as there are now. It's something inside of us, something they put into people ages ago

that's been passed along. It's gone missing in most folks today, but still shows up now and again."

"And just what is this thing that makes some people so valuable to them?" Mr. Peabody asked.

"I wish I knew. All I can say for sure is that it makes us useful to them. It's something that's missing from the people where they live. They're going to use us to bring it back. That's why they've come for us. And there's one other thing."

"What's that, boy?"

"When they come back again, whenever that is, it will be for the last time.

Something awful is going to happen then, Mrs. Peabody. I ... I got these awful images from them of deserted places, abandoned cities and towns, fire and death everywhere. That scared me and that's when I ran off."

"And what if we don't want to go with them?" Polly asked. Her eyes were big as saucers and she looked ready to cry.

"I don't think we're going to have a choice, Polly."

"This is lunatic talk, boy," Mr. Peabody said. "And what's more I don't believe a syllable of it. Now all of you listen to me. I'm going to get on that mare you rode up on and make my way south to the airbase. Maybe the military can figure out what the devil's going on in this town."

"You can't, Mr. Peabody."

"And why not?"

"They won't let. You didn't follow the lights out into the hills and that makes you one of us, one of the ones they came for. It's like at harvest time, when you gather up

wheat and leave the chaff behind.”

“Really? I’d like to see someone try and stop me.”

He went up to where Billy had left the mare, pulled himself up onto its back, took the reins and rode away at a gallop.

“I’ve heard enough,” Paul said. “I think we should leave anyone who can’t or won’t fight inside the mill. It’s strong as a fort and probably the safest place in town. Whoever is willing to pick up a gun and fight can come with me right now.”

Most of us followed him. Billy stayed behind just long enough to make sure Polly, Miss Eudora, and the Twain sisters were safe inside the mill.

At the hardware store, Paul broke the glass on the front door and let us in. He handed out some Winchester 30-30’s and a couple of pump action shotguns, along with boxes of ammo. Then we all started out for the hills.

We walked together at first, figuring it was safer that way, but after a while we decided to split up and come at them separately, from all directions at once. The first one to find the ship would fire off a shot and the rest of us would come running. Anyway, that was the plan, but I never heard a shot or saw any of them again.

I stayed up in those hills for hours, ducking in and out of places, never staying in one spot longer than a few minutes, resting for a bit and then moving to another hiding place. I ran until I was ready to drop in my tracks. All the while I kept thinking about the stuff Billy told us and I think I figured something out. If they look so much

like people, then maybe they can be hurt like people. So why should any one of us go without a fight?

Hours went by and when I didn’t hear from any of the others, I decided to fire off a couple of rounds from my Winchester. Nobody fired an answering shot or showed up where I was. I know it was a stupid thing to do. The shots could have brought those things along with my friends, but I was scared and desperate. I finally decided to stop waiting for the others and go back into town. All I had left was the hope that some of them had done the same thing and we’d all meet up there, maybe think of another plan for what to do next.

But Littlevale was still a ghost town when I came back down from the hills. I looked everywhere, even fired off a few more shots, but it was no use. They were gone, all of them, even the ones we left inside the mill. I was alone and made up my mind then and there that whatever got the others wasn’t going to get me. So I worked my way around town and ended up in Miss Bea’s flower shop. I hid in the cellar where she keeps her flowers. It’s got stone walls three feet thick and is cold as an ice box down there. I was too tired and scared to do anything except sit there shivering and worrying one of them would come for me. I kept my rifle trained on the basement door, but nothing ever happened.

When I finally did come out, the town was quiet and the lights in the northern sky were gone. I stumbled around a long time, tired and hungry and terrified, wondering about all the townspeople I saw going off

toward the lights, the ones the visitors didn't want, wondering what became of them all. I finally passed out in the alley where you found me.

They're gone, all of them, gone for good. Every friend I've ever had in my life is gone forever.

Why did this happen, Deputy Buchwald? Why? Can anybody please tell me that?

Andy turned away from the two men and wept silently. Jake pulled the blanket over the boy's shoulders.

"Try to get some rest, Andy."

Buck shut off the recorder and left the cell. Jake stayed with Andy until the boy fell asleep. When he went back into the office, he found Buck standing by the gun rack, holding Sheriff Clement's prized Thompson sub-machine gun.

"Where are you going with that thing?"

"That's one hell of a story Andy told us tonight. It'll be light in a little while and I plan on taking a good long look around to see if I can verify any of it. In the meantime, I'm going to hike out to the hills north of town and see if I can't find some little green men."

"You believe Andy?"

"I don't know, but I need answers and I intend to find them. The good people of our town didn't all go off on a picnic. They've got to be somewhere. And if those people Andy was telling us about really have been taken away, then someone's going to answer for it. I promise you that."

"I'll go with you."

"No, Jake, you stay here. Look after the boy. And don't forget the radio. Anything comes through that thing you jump on it right away, let whoever it is know what's going on here."

"Take care of yourself, Buck."

"Don't you worry about me, buddy. I've got Mister Thompson here to keep me company," he said, patting the machine's gun's black muzzle.

"Not much can happen to me with him by my side. I'll be back before sunup."

Jake watched as he left the office and turned north on Center Street. He poured himself another cup of coffee and sat at Buck's desk. Did he believe Andy? He'd known the boy most of his life and he wasn't the kind of kid who would lie about anything, but this business about people being kidnapped by creatures in flying saucers was pretty hard to accept. Something strange happened in their town while he and Buck were away. No doubt of that. The explanation, though, was probably far less dramatic than a visit from a bunch of space men.

A sound from one of the cells broke the silence. The boy was probably awake again. He'd bring him another Coke and maybe ask him a few questions before Buck got back. Jake called out to Andy as he got a Coke from the vending machine and walked through the door leading to the cells.

"I brought you another ..."

He never finished the sentence. The woolen blanket lay crumpled on the floor

next to the empty cot.

Andy was gone.

Present Day

Most residents of Littlevale could not remember a time when Malcolm Buchwald wasn't sheriff. He turned eighty-eight on his last birthday and now left much of the day-to-day police work to his young deputies, but to most townspeople his tall, slim figure still embodied all that was good in their small, peaceful town.

On a sunny afternoon in May, Sheriff Buchwald and Mayor Desmond were showing a heavysset, well-dressed man around Littlevale. The man was Eric Showalter and he was in town to look over the abandoned mill as a possible site for his company's manufacturing business. A favorable report would mean much to the town's economic future.

The three men were standing in front of a granite memorial at the center of town. It was the final stop on their tour.

"Now that's curious thing," Mr. Showalter said.

"What is?" the mayor asked. He looked worried, as if the deal he and the town council had worked on for so long were suddenly in jeopardy.

"That date," he said, pointing to the memorial.

"What's curious about that?"

"I see quite a bit of the country in my search for new properties, and this is not the first memorial I've run into with the

same date carved on it, each one with a list of people lost in some local catastrophe. Only last month I came across a near duplicate of this one while looking over a property in Maine, in a town just about the size of yours. Why, in the past year or two I must have run into half a dozen of them. That's one hell of a coincidence, wouldn't you say, Sheriff Buchwald?"

"I guess May of fifty-five wasn't a very good month for a lot of places," he said.

Buck remembered those terrible days with unusual clarity. After the great mill fire, the people of Littlevale banded together and somehow found the strength to get past the deaths of so many friends and neighbors. They rebuilt the mill and a year later erected a monument in memory of all who had lost their lives in the fire.

"I suppose so. Well, gentlemen, I really must get on to my next stop, but I want to thank you both for taking the time to show me around your beautiful town. I think I can guaranty that the report to my employers will be a positive one."

Mayor Desmond smiled and Buck could almost see the calculations going on in the old politician's head. He was doubtless thinking about the new jobs that would be brought into their town and the tax revenue generated by those jobs, enough to fund a raise in his salary and perhaps a little something for his pals on the town council.

"It has been our pleasure, Mr. Showalter, I assure you. Now why don't I walk you to your car and let Sheriff Buchwald get on with the business of mak-

ing our town safe.”

Buck shook hands with Mr. Showalter, wished him a pleasant journey, and crossed the town square to his office. Deputy Arnold was at his desk. He was a ruddy, muscular young man with thinning straw-colored hair and a short temper. Sitting across from him was old Ted Young, looking much the worse for wear after what Buck guessed had been yet another night spent with a bottle of Knob Creek.

The sheriff went to his desk and stared down at a stack of unfinished paperwork. This was the part of his job he hated. But the papers were all waiting for his signature and that could not be avoided, so he sat and opened the center drawer, looking for a pen. He glanced down at a familiar yellowing envelope with its three-cent stamp. It had been sitting there more than half a century, since just after the death of Sheriff Clement. Every year, on the anniversary of his marriage to Fran, he took it out and reread it – a “Dear John” letter in reverse. He had angrily destroyed her first letter, the one telling him about her marriage to a man she’d met at a teacher’s conference in the state capitol. That marriage had been a disaster from the start and ended in divorce less than a year later. It was all there in the letter, along with her desperate wish to return home to her family, and her abiding fear of doing just that because of what people would say. That fear kept her living alone for months after the dissolution of the marriage. The letter hadn’t asked Buck for help, only forgiveness.

He had read the letter several times

before jumping into his car and driving non-stop for seven hours. He arrived at the door of her rooming house exhausted and badly in need of a shave. He’d never seen anything as beautiful as Fran’s surprised and tearful face when she opened the door. They were married by a Justice of the Peace that same day.

He closed the desk drawer and forced himself to go about reading and signing the papers in front of him.

As he worked, he could hear his deputy yelling at Ted. Their back and forth was becoming heated. Buck got up and walked into the outer office. His young deputy was clearly frustrated. Buck went over to Ted and put a hand on his shoulder.

“What is it this time, Ted? Another drunk and disorderly?”

“No, Sheriff. I swear. I hardly touched a drop last night.”

“Sure,” Deputy Arnold sneered, “hardly touched a drop and somehow managed to pass out in front of the memorial.”

“You both know I suffer from a condition.”

“Yeah, a ninety-proof condition.”

“He jests at scars who never felt a wound’.”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

“Hold on now, Ken. Ted is quoting a bit of Shakespeare, aren’t you Ted?”

“You are a scholar, sir, as well as an exceptional guardian of law and order in our fair town.”

“I’m no scholar, Ted. I just had the good sense to marry a schoolteacher and

some of her learning has managed to rub off on me over the years. So, Ted, why are you here this time?"

"As I was trying to tell your deputy, something strange happened out there by the memorial last night."

Deputy Arnold rolled his eyes and pushed himself away from his desk.

"I need a cup of coffee. How about you, Sheriff?"

"Sounds good, Ken. Thanks. I'll take over here, if you don't mind."

"Be my guest."

Buck sat down at Deputy Arnold's desk.

"Now what's this strange thing that happened last night, Ted? Tell me all about it."

"Well, I passed out — because of my condition, you understand — by the memorial around two last night."

"Teddy, why don't you do your drinking at home like everybody else in Littlevale?"

"Fresh air, Sheriff. Best thing for a man. I never could stand being cooped up."

"Okay, Ted. Tell me. You passed out in front of the memorial last night. Then what happened?"

"Due to my condition."

"Yes, due to your condition. What happened then?"

"I woke up sometime before sunrise, four, maybe four-thirty. I sat up on the grass out there and that's when it happened."

"That's when what happened?"

"The ground started shaking, like in an earthquake."

"Earthquake? There was no earthquake in Littlevale last night, or any other night in living memory, Ted."

"Please allow me to continue, Sheriff."

"Okay, Ted. Go on."

"So, as I was saying, the ground started to shake. I got to my feet and looked around but nothing else in the square was moving, not even the leaves on the trees. Only the memorial was shaking. That's when the memorial made a soft buzzing sound, as if a swarm of bees was trapped inside the thing, and all of a sudden it lit up from the inside. A beam of copper-colored light shot out of the very top of it, shot straight up into the sky. Then, just as suddenly as it started, it was over and everything went dark and quiet as a tomb. The whole thing only lasted a few seconds, but it scared the bejesus out of me. Well, I went home straightaway and got right into bed. This morning I started thinking about what I saw and thought to myself, Theodore, you should go see Sheriff Buchwald and tell him all about it."

"And I thank you for doing that, Ted. I really do. Now why don't you go home and get some rest. A few cups of strong coffee probably wouldn't do you any harm, either."

"You don't believe me?"

"Of course I believe you. Now why don't you do as I say and get on home."

"Aren't you going to write a report or something?"

"I certainly will. But right now you need to go home."

"If you say so."

“And for Pete’s sake stay away from the hooch.”

He watched Ted walk unsteadily out of the office and turn south on Center Street, no doubt heading for his first drink of the day. Buck shook his head and went back to his own desk and the stack of unfinished paperwork. Deputy Arnold returned to the office a couple of minutes later.

“Crazy stuff, eh, Sheriff?”

“Ted’s had a real hard time of it since he lost his wife and daughter.”

“Did he have to let what happened turn him into a drunk?”

Buck looked over at Arnold. He was a first-rate deputy, and might someday take over as sheriff, but he had yet to learn that compassion can be a very useful tool for a lawman. Littlevale is a fine town, a good place to live and raise a family, but it’s not without its problems. An understanding of those problems is as much a part of a deputy’s job as his knowledge of town ordinances.

“What a bunch of malarkey! The memorial lighting up and shooting rays off into space. Where does he get this stuff?”

“Forget it, Ken. It was probably just a bad dream brought on by too much bourbon. Now, how about some of that coffee you offered me?”

“Sorry, Sheriff, I forgot, what with listening to old Ted’s fantasies.”

The door to the office flew open and a boy of about twelve ran in. He was tall and thin and bore a remarkable resemblance to Buck.

“Hey, grandpa.”

“Hey yourself. How are you, Norm?”

“Good.”

The boy’s limitless energy and enthusiasm, the way he barreled his way through his young life, never failed to make Buck smile.

“How’s mom?”

Okay I guess. She’s busy making a dress for Aggie this afternoon.”

“And what might you be up to on this beautiful spring day, young man?”

“I have a science project due next week, grandpa, and I’m kind of stuck for an idea. I thought maybe, if it’s okay with you, I could look around the basement here and see if I can find something to use. Maybe an old radio or something.”

His grandson loved to tinker with things. He was always taking apart some contraption or other to see how it worked. The boy was especially good with electronics.

“Go ahead, Norm. But you be careful down there, understand?”

As far as Buck was concerned, the station’s basement was a junk pile that should have been cleaned out ages ago. Norm, on the other hand, found its contents endlessly fascinating.

“Sure, grandpa. Thanks.”

He shot past Buck to the basement door.

“Here you are, Sheriff. Cream, two sugars.”

“Thanks, Ken. By the way, what happened last night over at the Halsey’s?”

“Same old same old, Sheriff. Art Halsey was walking in his sleep again. Found him

in his pajamas on Decatur Street, headed into the hills north of town. That's the second call this week."

"Did you talk to his wife about having him see Doc Walters?"

"Sure did. She promised to have him there this morning. Funny thing, though."

"What?"

"Something similar happened only last week. Mrs. Riggs, used to teach school, lives over by the mill?"

"Sure. Edith was a few years ahead of me in school."

"Well, last week we get a call from her husband, must have been two or three in the morning. He says he got up for a glass of water and when he came back to bed she was gone. The poor old guy was frantic, didn't know what to do. We found her a mile or so from home, still in her nightgown, almost exactly where we found Art Halsey."

"Coincidence, Ken. That's all."

"I'm thinking these are all older folks and maybe they're going a little soft in the head."

"Art and Edith aren't that much older than I am, Ken, and last time I checked I've still got all my marbles."

"I meant no offense, Sheriff. You're as young as you ever were."

"No need to go overboard. I know how old I am and it doesn't bother me one bit, except maybe on rainy mornings when my bones creak a little."

Norman emerged from the basement carrying something under his right arm.

"Can I have this, grandpa?"

"What have you got there, Norm?"

"It's a tape recorder, a really old one."

The contraption was covered with dust and grime and looked unsalvageable.

"And just what do you plan to do with that old thing?"

"I'm gonna try to make it work again. I found a reel of tape inside it, too."

"I suppose our office can do without that gizmo. You be careful, though. Don't you go hurting yourself."

"I promise to be careful, grandpa. Thanks."

The two men smiled as they watched the boy run out of the office.

"That Norm sure is something, Sheriff. He thinks our basement is some kind of Aladdin's cave."

"Maybe it is, for him. He's done a good job with some of the trash he's turned up down there. As I recall, he got our old set of walkie-talkies working like new."

"And fixed that ancient dispatcher's console. That was a couple of years ago, wasn't it?"

"That's right. He was all of ten years old when he did that."

"You let me know when he gets around to working on cars, Sheriff. My wife's Buick is about due for an overhaul."

"Isn't it time for your afternoon patrol, Ken?"

He looked up at the old wall clock. It had been there on Buck's first day as deputy and these days lost about ten minutes a month, but he didn't have the heart to replace it. He had no doubt that Ken, or some other future sheriff, would toss it away the moment he took over. For now,

Buck would let it stay where it was as a silent tribute to the memory of Sheriff Clement.

“Three o’clock already? Time sure does fly around here. Care to join me, Sheriff?”

“No, I think I’ll stay here and catch up on some paperwork.”

“Guess I can manage our hotbed of crime by myself.”

“You probably wish Littlevale was more like the places in those crime shows you and my other deputies are always gabbing about.”

“Well, maybe just a little. Not much around here to keep us busy.”

“Would you take a moment during your rounds to check in on Ted? Make sure he got home alright.”

“Will do, Sheriff.”

He sat back in his chair, the same squeaky leather chair Sheriff Clement had used all the years he wore the badge now pinned to Buck’s uniform shirt. So young Ken hungered for more excitement than Littlevale could offer? He should instead be grateful for the peace and tranquility they were enjoying. Their town had known enough tragedy. Buck remembered all too well the blackest day of them all. A boy burst into this very office yelling that the mill was on fire and that there were people trapped inside. No memory in his long life was clearer. People crowded into every street and alleyway that night, watching silently as enormous clouds of black smoke rose into the air and relentless flames consumed the town’s oldest building. He could still see the faces of townspeople lit by the fire’s

eerie copper-colored flames, each face a mask of terror and helplessness. He’d never been able to explain how or why all those people came to be inside the mill at that time of night, or why the town’s volunteer fire department had not come out to fight the inferno long before it went out of control. But in the end it didn’t matter. The poor souls in the mill were dead, all of them, done in by the relentless flames. They never even found enough of them to bury. His best friend Jake had tried heroically to save them and it had cost him his life.

As always, thinking about that awful night exhausted him, and he suddenly felt very sleepy. He rose, took the bronze key ring from its place on the wall, and let himself into one of the empty jail cells in the back. He removed his hat and holster and lay down on a cot.

Memories of the fire still haunted him, summoning painful emotions even after more than sixty years, and summoning something else as well: a vague but persistent feeling that there were other, even more troubling memories struggling within him toward the light of remembrance. He tried as he had so many times before to reach into that deep well of memory, but the effort, as it always did, proved useless and left him feeling spent and confused.

Buck closed his eyes and, as if on command, was instantly asleep.

Lester Jackson saw the light coming from the Media Lab and cursed under his breath. He had been custodian at the mid-

dle school for thirty years and it never ceased to annoy him how wasteful the staff could be.

“Damn thing burn all night if I wasn’t around to turn it off,” he muttered.

He approached the door and heard a voice coming from inside, a young voice speaking in a sleepy monotone. He opened the door and found Sheriff Buchwald’s grandson sitting in front of a big reel-to-reel tape deck.

“What you doing in here, boy? School let out hours ago.”

“Hello, Mr. Jackson. I ... I was just listening to a tape I found in grandpa’s basement.”

“That’s fine, I guess, but I’m about to lock things up and I’d hate to leave you in here all night.”

“I’m almost done. Can I stay another ten minutes? Please?”

“Well, I still have to check the second floor, so I suppose it’ll be alright. But you be ready to leave when I get back, hear?”

“I’ll be ready, Mr. Jackson. Thanks.”

Norman waited until the old custodian left the room before he went back to listening to the voices on the tape. One was his grandfather, sounding much younger and kind of nervous, not at all like the wise, self-assured man he loved so much. Another voice belonged to Jake Warner. Grandpa had told him dozens of stories about him. His friend Jake was one of the people who died in the big mill fire a long time ago. That was the worst thing to ever happen in Littlevale. Mr. Warner’s name was on the memorial out in the center of town, along

with all the other victims of that awful day. The third voice on the tape belonged to another name on the memorial, Andrew King.

Norman listened to the tape twice. The quality was not very good and he had to play some parts over to understand what was being said, but the meaning of Andrew King’s words was clear. He was describing something that happened on the night of the big fire, and yet the voice on the tape never so much as mentioned it. The voice talked instead about strange lights off in the hills and a giant ship that had come down out of the sky. It all sounded incredible, too incredible to be true. Norman decided that the tape was a recording of some sort of performance, an amateur theatrical his grandfather had been involved in. It was funny to think of grandpa doing something like that. He was so quiet and solemn and not at all the kind of person to involve himself in such things. Norman would be sure to play it for him as soon as he got the old portable tape recorder working again. They’d listen to it together and have a good laugh.

“Ready to go, Norman?”

Mr. Jackson was standing in the doorway, holding his blue metal lunchbox and wearing a look of impatience on his dark face.

“Sure thing.”

Norman hurriedly rewound the tape and put it into the pocket of his windbreaker.

“Let’s go.”

The custodian’s old red pickup was

parked by the school entrance. Norman climbed into the passenger seat.

“Does your mama know you’re here, boy?”

“She’s not worried about me, Mr. Jackson.”

“And just how do you know that?”

“Because nothing bad ever happens in Littlevale.”

“Is that so?”

“Not with my grandpa as sheriff.”

“Sheriff Buchwald is a good man, Norman, but you still got to be careful. Staying out like this without telling your mama just ain’t right.”

He leaned forward and turned on the radio. Music, tinny and laced with static, came from the truck’s only working speaker. Jackson rolled down his window and lit a cigarette. He took a long, deep drag and blew the smoke out into the cool night air.

“Now let’s get you on home, boy.”

Norman was glad for the ride. He wanted to get home quickly and call grandpa,

tell him all about what he’d heard on the tape.

“What’s that, Mr. Jackson?”

“What’s what?”

“Over there.”

He pointed to the hills north of town. Lights were flashing on and off in the distance, illuminating the skies with an odd copper-colored glow.

“Lightning, I guess. Storm must be brewin’ up north.”

“Strange-looking lightning.”

“Lightning’s just lightning, Norman. Nothin’ special about it.”

“I hope it waits until I get home.”

“What’s that?”

“The storm. I sure hope it waits until I get home before it hits us.”

“Me, too, son, me too.” ❖

END TRANSMISSION