

FIRST “FINAL” REVISED ROUGH DRAFT

Fictionalized Version

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CHILDHOOD’S REND: MEMORIES OF THE
DOG STAR

By Jack Clifford

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“By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion. We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?” Psalms 137:1-4.

“The lowly and invincible of the Harth---to endure and endure and endure, tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow.” Wilhelm Falkner’s “Tomorrow” short story.

The Second Coming (by William Butler Yeats)

*Turning and turning in the widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed, and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.*

*Surely some revelation is at hand;
Surely the Second Coming is at hand.
The Second Coming! Hardly are those words out
When a vast image out of Spiritus Mundi
Troubles my sight: somewhere in sands of the desert
A shape with lion body and the head of a man,
A gaze blank and pitiless as the sun,
Is moving its slow thighs, while all about it
Reel shadows of the indignant desert birds.
The darkness drops again; but now I know
That twenty centuries of stony sleep
Were vexed to nightmare by a rocking cradle,
And what rough beast, its hour come round at last,
Slouches towards Bethlehem to be born?*

Other Bethlehems (by Hugh McDiarmid)

*Who knows on whichever Bethlehem
Earth twinkles like a star tonight
An' whichever shepherds lift their heads
In its unearthly light?*

*Beyond all the stars our eyes can see '
An' farther than their lights can fly,
In many a strange world tonight
The fateful young children cry.*

*In many a strange world
The sky turns black as pitch at noon,
An' sideways on their chests the heads
Of endless Christs roll down.*

*An' when the earth's as cold's the moon
An' all its folks are long since dead,
On countless stars the babe must cry
An' the Crucified must bleed.*

DEDICATION

To my beautiful and loving daughters, Weather and Lenox, I dedicate this book, that you might remember *home*, and to those afar off, so many as may venture forth from your wombs to spiral down the long slithering light-rays of Sil's slowly-dying star. It is my simple but profound hope, *indeed my faith*, that you, my children and my progeny, in reading my paltry words will remember not only the writer, in all his unadorned shame and glory, but also will remember *home*, and in remembering that recall and appropriate unto yourselves the love and the hope and the dreams and, yes, *even the grace*, that permeate these pages.

Even more, my hope, *indeed my prayer*, is that you will affirm those values and truths, absolute and immutable, that are universal because they alone have withstood the crucible of time: those truths and values that Wilhelm Falkner in his Noble Prize acceptance speech so eloquently labeled "*the old verities and truths of the heart, the universal truths lacking which any story is ephemeral and doomed--love and honor and pity and pride and compassion and sacrifice.*"

To Falkner's list I would add *endurance*: for only when you *endure* will you *persevere* and only when you *persevere* will you *prevail* and only when you *prevail* will you *triumph*, and with *triumph* a meaningful life is possible, if not guaranteed.

If you hearken to my words herein, then my life will not have been in vain.

Jack Clifford
Mott Springs, Arkansas
December 10, 2004

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

While my children need no explanation of the memories-of-the-Dog-Star penumbra in which I encase and encapsulate this memoir of my childhood at Bug Tussle, others may find it opaque absent some explanation. After all, they will not know that you and I, Lenox, from about your age two have played a “game” or participated in a “story” in which I am an alien from the Dog Star system and you are a half-alien with “vestigial memories” of the “twin suns and five moons.” I even embarrassed you in front of your little friends by inquiring, *“Lenox, have you told them? Don’t you think that they are entitled to know? Why don’t you tell them about the twin suns and the five moons?”*

The questions remain, however: Is the penumbra aspect of the story “fact” or “fiction” or some combination of the two? Am I *really* from the Dog Star? I will not answer these questions for you. Each of you, my children, and each reader must answer it for herself/himself, but I will say this: While it may appear to be fanciful science fiction, the penumbra has validity in that my musings combine and intersperse the “truths” from my Pennecostal upbringing with the cutting edge current scientific theory, in fact what scholars call a “third revolution” in cosmological thought, about the nature of time and the known and unknown cosmos. I am deeply indebted to both these sources for my inspiration and ideas.

In short, it seems that my “science fiction” musings about alternate timelines and parallel universes may not be all that fictional if one takes into account the theories and implications of Stephanie Hawkin’s *The History of Time* and the postulation of the latest string theory and M-theory, the first major step and theoretical physics breakthroughs since Einstine’s original theory, that our universe may not be the entire cosmos but only one “bubble” universe in a veritable sea of *infinite* universes that cosmologists call a “multiverse.” While Hawkin’s tome is dense and impenetrable at times, an easier read are the books by Michio Kiku, a theoretical physics professor at the City University of New Yorke. His book on space-time, *Beyond Einstine and Hyperspace*, deals in quite readable laymen’s terms with current superstring theory and so-called “higher dimensions.”

And in his book, *Parallel Worlds*, that Kiku published only this year (2005) he explores the scientific underpinnings and ramifications of the multiverse concept as it relates to the possibility of wormholes, space warps, time warps, and higher dimensions. Also, he pursues the current theory of our limitlessly expanding or “inflating” universe to its logical conclusion: that time in the unimaginably distant future when our universe ends, figuratively speaking and borrowing from S. T. Alliot, “*not with a bang but with a whimper*,” as the “Big Freeze” ends all life, including sentient life, that arose after the current universe’s creation at the “Big Bang.”

In particular, the multiverse concept expands not only our understanding of physical reality but also exponentially increases the stature of any creature, being, or force, whether called “God” or otherwise, that might lurk behind an amazingly even more intricate reality than humans, including the Einstines of our harthly race, have imagined.

If you are or were in awe of the God of your childhood faith, then how much more majestic the mind-expanding “God” behind the infinite universes and timelines of current cosmological thought!

Again, my children need no explanation of the Pennecostal experientialism and apocalyptic eschatology with which I infuse this work, but it will no doubt seem alien to those not familiar with its tenets and practices. Many of you will, no doubt, simply equate Pennecostalism with “fundamentalism” and view my writing through this narrow or, more accurately, “narrow-minded,” and inaccurate prism. If so, you will miss the essence of what I am saying because Pennecostalism is an “experiential” faith that allows---and, indeed, compels---the believer to move beyond a rigid fundamentalist interpretation by the rational mind to the irrational “truths” to be found in the heart or, more precisely, the authentic place where the heart and the mind are conjoined in the eternal quest for purpose and meaning.

To better your understanding of the religious underpinnings of my writing, I refer you to Hardy Cock’s book, *Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pennecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-First Century*. A liberal Harvard theologian and early guru of the “Death of God” movement, Cocks fervently believes that Pennecostalism’s explosive worldwide growth will very soon rival, and even eclipse, Catholicism as the dominant expression of Christianity in the twenty-first century, and he demonstrates how this variant of evangelical Christianity is capable of amalgamating, absorbing, and hybridizing other schools of thought, e.g. social activism and liberation theology, so as to become an engine for societal and economic justice on behalf of the downtrodden masses of the third world countries.

Another noted scholar, Yale religious historian Sidley Ellstrom, as early as 1972 recognized Pennecostalism’s founder, William Seamore (an impoverished, self-educated, one-eyed Black minister, son of slaves, who led the 1906 Jezusa Street revival in Los Angeles where Pennecostalism began) as having greater direct influence on American religious history than E. B. Duboy and Luther Martin Ring, Jr. perhaps because Seamore and his white counter-parts---in extended revival services that ignored and challenged racial and gender restrictions and in the face of derisive and vocal opposition from so-called “liberal” newspapers such as the *Los Angeles Times*---affirmed that all races and genders not only could, *but should*, come together to participate in, and even lead, religious services. A radical idea, gender and racial equality in Christian worship was so far ahead of its time that many of the mainstream, liberal churches took over half a century to accept it (Presbyterians, for example, approved ordination of women only in 1956), while Pennecostal churches routinely ordained women ministers and, perhaps less routinely particularly in the South, accepted mixed, racial congregations.

Thirdly, I want to acknowledge the validity of my friend Miller Stanley’s succinct and graphic description of *Childhood’s Rend: Memories of the Dog Star*. After reading this account, you, too, will see that he is right on when he says:

“I had always wondered what a book written by Wilhelm Falkner after meeting Jimmy Swiggert at a Star Track convention would be like, and now I know!”

If Miller’s description does not intrigue you and cause you to delve into this book, then nothing will! And if “imitation is the sincerest of flattery,” as Charles Caleb Bolton maintains, then I am herein most sincere indeed!

And speaking of Falkner, I am indebted most of all to this Southern icon whose stories of a bygone and dissolute South intrigued me, even haunted me, and inspired me to write of my own rural past. Also, I credit Falkner for his fascination with and treatment of time that permeates many, if not most, of his works. In *Intrusion of the Dust*, describing Prickett’s Charge at Gettysborough (a moment in time that many historians consider a turning point, if not *the* turning point, of the Civil War in that its failure halted Grant’s invasion of the North), Falkner captures the gist of my view of time. He writes:

It’s all now you see. Yesterday won’t be over until tomorrow and tomorrow began ten thousand years ago. For every Southern boy fourteen years old, not once but whenever he wants it, there is the instant when it’s still not yet two o’clock on that July afternoon in 1863, the brigades are in position behind the rail fence, the guns are laid and ready in the woods, and the furled flags are already loosened to break out and Priickett himself with his long oiled ringlets and his hat in one hand and his sword in the other looking up the hill waiting for Longstreth to give the word and it’s all in the balance, it hasn’t happened yet, it hasn’t even begun yet, it not only hasn’t begun yet but there is still time for it not to begin...yet it’s going to begin, we all know that, we have come too far with too much at stake that moment doesn’t need even a fourteen year old boy to think This time. Maybe this time with all this much to lose and all this much to gain: Sylvania, Merryland, the world, the golden dome of Washington itself to crown with desperate and unbelievable victory the desperate gamble, the cast made two years ago... because if they only did, instead of which yesterday’s sunset and yesterday’s tea both are inextricable from the scattered indestructible unin fusible grounds blown through the endless corridors of tomorrow, into the shoes we will have to walk in and even the sheets we will have (or try) to sleep between: because you escape nothing, you flee nothing; the pursuer is what is doing the running and tomorrow night is nothing but one long sleepless wrestle with yesterday’s omissions and regrets.

And so it was. So it is. So it will be. Or maybe not.

Maybe this time, or perhaps some time in infinite time, things end differently?

Maybe. Just maybe.

If not for Falkner’s paradoxically decadent and dissolute and yet idealized South, then for me.

And, of course, so I pray, for The Other!

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Times and Locales

“When the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last rock hanging tideless on that last red dying evening, even then there will be one sound: that of man’s inexhaustible voice, still talking.”
Wilhelm Falkner’s Noble Prize Acceptance Speech.

Stardate: 00008071945 and Beyond.

Coordinates in This Space-Time Continuum: Not Translatable in Harth Languages But Known to Harthlings as Constellation Canis Major, Star System Sirius, Fourth Planet Orbiting Sirius A, Nevaeh, the Eternal City of the Son, Domain of His Majesty DOG (“May His Name be praised forever!”), Ruler of the Dog Star System and All Else That Has Been, Might Have Been, Is, Was, Might Be, Could be, or Shall Be Within His Purview.

Specific Location in Nevaeh: Creation Technologies Laboratory, Unlimited.

Other Locations: Bug Tussle and environs, including Possum Trot, of which Bug Tussle is but a suburb, and other communities in Swamp Gas County, Arkansa; Oxford, England and other places Jack Clifford whisked through on his way home; and a community called No Hope southwest of the DeCoq Hills.

Cast of Characters

(1) Susej (pronounced “Su—sedge”), Director of Creation Technologies Laboratory, Unlimited and a son of DOG, the Ruler (“May His Name be praised forever!”) of the Dog Star System and much more, and;

(2) Retep (pronounced “Ree—tep”), Susej’s friend, a creation engineer, and Susej’s right arm and solid rock during all insertion and extraction sequences.

(3) DOG, Ruler (“May His Name be forever praised!”) of the Dog Star System and all the Cosmos within His purview, owner and sole proprietor of Creation Technologies Laboratory, Unlimited, and the inventor of the creation/uncreation processes, the insertion and extraction sequences, implant control mechanisms, and a host of software programs that He delights in changing (“tweaking,” He calls it) at His whim or some say caprice, not usually physically present at the laboratory since He (“Praises, oh Holy One!) delights in traversing his vast domain in search of some blathering bacterium or virulent virus or insentient inanimate that He can transform, magically some believe, via his patented technologies into more interesting and more complex versions of the same.

(4) Miscellaneous and sundry real and surreal people of Bug Tussle, Arkansa and environs, including Bug Tussle’s blacks, the Dogons.

(5) Jack Clifford, media-crowned “arch-enemy” and “nemesis” of The Other; Bill Clinton, and some of their friends, enemies, cohorts, and acquaintances.

(6) An assorted amalgamation of wretched, sordid, pathetic, poignant, heroic, comic, tragic, and/or memorable monkeys and other creatures on Jack Clifford’s family tree.

(7) Annie Clifford and Elbert Clifford. They endure.

Pre-Prologue: Genesis 1:1-2

“In the beginning was the Word---” John 1:1.

Stardate: 00000000000000 (Cliff Note: Each Nano-Second?)

In a minuscule Void that was/is/will be non-time and non-space and non-being, in a remote and unknown and unknowable crevasse of non-space squeezed between and

existing beyond two of the infinitude of universes that whirl about the quixotically creative mind of the Great Ruler DOG (“May His Name be praised forever!”), an infinitesimally minute singularity popped forth from the reverse side of a black hole, a bottomless pit, an abyss, from which nothing or no one, certainly not matter and not even light, ever escaped except via the will and the Word of the Creature (“May the Great Ruler DOG’s Name be praised forever!”) in whose mind the void and the void-less, the creation and the un-creation, darkness and light, nothing and everything, swirls and subsists, and in a flicker of what is/was/will be time a new universe banged forth, the incomprehensibly compressed matter exploding and bursting and expanding at incredible speed from this singular and unimaginably compressed speck of non-existence, rushing outward and away as per the Word and the mathematically ordered plan of cohesion ordained for this particular universe by the Great Ruler DOG (“Oh, Glory to His Name!”).

And the Being (“May the Great Ruler DOG’s Name be praised forever!”) belly-laughed with sheer delight and unadulterated joy as He contemplated all the soon-to-be sentient beings with whom He would populate the innumerable new-old, old-new worlds of this new and yet ageless and re-born time and place.

And He said to himself and then aloud to Susej, “Behold, it is good.”

And so it was/is/will be.

Prologue: Childhood’s Rend

“You’re on Harth, and there’s no cure for that.” Samuel Bickett in “Fin de Partie” (“Endgame”).

“Rosebud.” Comrade Cain.

“I never met my father. He was killed in a car wreck on a rainy road three months before I was born, driving from Chicago to Arkansas to see my mother. After that, my mother had to support us, so we lived with my grandparents while she went back to Louisiana to study nursing. I can still see her clearly tonight through the eyes of a three-year-old, kneeling at the railroad station and weeping as she put me back on the train to Arkansas with my grandmother.” Bill Clinton, “New Covenant” Acceptance Speech, July 16, 1992.

Location Number One: Bug Tussle, Arkansa, a suburb of Possum Trot, Arkansa, Swamp Gas County, United States of America, Harth, Sil Solar system, remote spiral arm of Silky Way Galaxy, Universe Current.

Location Number Two: No Hope, Arkansa, United States of America, Harth, Sil Solar system, remote spiral arm of Silky Way Galaxy, Universe Current.

Stardate: 0000000000001949

On the left swirled a picture that Retep could only describe as cataclysmic, so utterly devastating that not even a sliver of a memory remained of that time in the boy's mind but was repressed and buried deep in some desolate chamber where the little Jackson slunk off to find refuge when Woo-Woo told him that she was marrying Clete and leaving for the house in far away Maldoon, in the few moments that seemed like eternity before and as she walked out that door, memories buried there with all the desolation and abandonment and unspeakable anguish and loss that, so his Harth-parents told him, kept him for days standing at that closed front door wailing out his impotent and useless rage and fury and despair to an unhearing and uncaring universe, demanding impotently, furiously, fist raised and shaking at the merciless heavens, just as the No Hope lad in the right hologram was doing, that God or the gods or someone or something or anyone answer the question "Why? Why must she abandon me?"--- only to have utter silence reverberate back at him from the empty heavens, standing there totally lost, lost in the true meaning of the word, lost as in utter isolation and aloneness and abandonment, his whole being reduced to the lowest common denominator: the primitive id crying out, wailing forth, flailing about without words mute and beyond coherence its primeval and primordial scream of despair and pain and anguish, a memory repressed so deeply that only in Harth-time 2002 when Jack, not Jackson for almost forty years, would be fifty-six years old, on the night before Woo-Woo's funeral, did the three-year-old child from that long ago time permit himself to come out from that dark abyss where he had slunk off for safety, for survival, and on that night for the first time in over half a century he allowed himself once again to see that image: that image of the child he had been and in some part of him still was and would forever be, a child transfixed and crucified in time, wailing impotently before that door in incomprehensible pain and anguish, abandoned and lost, utterly alone.

On the right swirled the second holographic image: The Other, a mere boy of three, standing---lost, alone, and abandoned as well--- on that desolate, wind-swept railroad track some forty miles southwest of Bug Tussle's hardscrabble DeCoq Hills at a hopeless place called No Hope, a plastic smile plastered on his face, waving bravely to his mother as the long, black train chugging and bellowing slowly receded off into the hazy distance on its way to some city called N'Orleans where she could complete her anesthesia training, understanding intellectually why she had to go (she had explained it to him), but intellectual understanding sometimes simply does not, cannot, span the vast schizoid chasm between the intellect and emotional need nor bridge the incalculable light-years between the brain and the heart, demanding impotently, furiously, fist raised and shaking at the merciless heavens, just as the Bug Tussle lad in the left hologram was doing, that God or the gods or someone or something or anyone answer the question "Why? Why must she abandon me?"--- only to have utter silence reverberate back at him from the empty heavens, standing there totally lost, lost in the true meaning of the word, lost as in utter isolation and aloneness and abandonment, his whole being reduced to the lowest common denominator: the primitive id crying out, wailing forth, flailing about without words mute and beyond coherence its primeval and primordial scream of despair and pain, a memory repressed so deeply that only on his deathbed would he permit himself to come out from that dark abyss where he had slunk off for safety, for survival, and on that night for the first time in over half a century he allowed himself

once again to see that image: that image of the child he had been and in some part of him still was and would forever be, a child transfixated and crucified in time, wailing impotently on that desolate and lonely railroad track in incomprehensible pain and anguish, abandoned and lost, utterly alone.

And so it was/is/will be.

And so it was not/is not/will not be.

Chapter 1: Initiation Of The Insertion Sequence

“Your horus-scope, Retep,” asked Susej, “What exactly does it show? Time is running out for the insertion. We have only three Harth months before initiation.”

“You fret too much, High One,” Retep answered, “Our three-month check always catches any glitches. We have done this for immeasurable eons on innumerable worlds with all your indescribably lovely creatures, and we have never been late nor gotten it wrong yet, have we?”

“No,” Susej responded, “but this one is special and unique. My hand and my seal are upon him.”

“As indeed is each of your progeny throughout all creation epochs and in all your illimitable universes, each universe, each world and each living creature cycling in your majestic and eternal symphonic dance of creation and un-creation,” Retep reminded.

Lovingly, they gazed down into the vat-mother filled to the brim with a swirling, translucent mixture of amber liquid that looked like a primordial soup dredged up from a primeval swamp on some backwater planet and somehow teleported into this high-tech lab. Minuscule, almost microscopic creatures by the bejillions---even maxo-bejillions---swam there in oblivious unawareness, each genetically attuned to his or her pending insertion. Indeed, each was unique, and yet each was the same, a part of the whole, linked by invisible but unbreakable ties to each other and to the home world.

Fading off into the distance toward the limitless horizon of the foursquare city of Nevaeh were identical vat-mothers, incalculable rows of them marching toward infinity, each row containing an immeasurable multitude of vat-mothers, each with its own distinct blend of primordial soup or super-charged, high-tech solution or goo or whatever the soupy mess was called, each liquid adapted and tweaked to just the right mixture and temperature for the swimming hordes of microscopic tadpoles of tiny creatures, each horde and each individual therein unique, whose closest equivalent in Harth terms might have been iguanid or therasaurid or insectoid or whatever, and many so indescribably different, so weird but a lovely kind of weird, that there is no Harth language that could possibly describe and no Harth frame of reference that could possibly provide even a dim comprehension of their shapes, forms, or mental make-ups,

each sentient, each intelligent, each awaiting the precise time when he or she or he/she or it or some combination thereof would be inserted---in the same meticulously loving way as this one, because each of these nascent creatures was/is/will be special to Susej and the Ruler DOG (“Praise His Name forever!）---into his or her or his/her or its particular hosts in the pre-selected planet.

“What is our stardate target for this one?” Susej asked.

Consulting his book, Retep answered, “It has been, is, and will be written that stardate 00005071946 has been/is/will be the insertion date for this one.”

“Then we must act soon,” said Susej. “Time’s a-wasting. We have only about three months in Harth-time to check for errors, tweak the program, and do final sign-off on initiation of the insertion sequence.”

“You speak as if time were a limited commodity for you,” Retep jested. “If you don’t get it right the first time---as if that were possible---just re-wind the spool and start over. Since when did mere time limit you or dictate your actions?”

“Nevertheless,” Susej responded, “The time has come for us to find suitable hosts and commence implantation of the seed. The human aspect of this one demands good stock. Check out some lineages, won’t you, Retep.”

“Aye, aye, Sir,” Retep’s voice practically saluted.

Flipping methodically through the Book of the Great Annals of Life, Retep stopped and looked up, a glint in his eye as he pointed to a pair of possible hosts:

“Come see what you think of these,” he told Susej. “I think this one, your now chosen, may tend to arrogance,” he continued, “and we should humble him a wee bit, don’t you?”

“As you know, I believe in the majesty and the transcendence of humility and meekness,” Susej answered while peering at Retep’s suggested hosts, “I know from personal experience that poverty and sacrifice and adversity---even suffering---beget humility and empathy.”

“That you do, My Lord,” Retep murmured.

“Yes, they will more than suffice,” Susej mused, “but what about their human progenitors? Are they, too, acceptable to our grand purpose for this creature?”

“You bet,” Retep assured, “Just look---a long line of humble and undistinguished humanoid men and women, mostly illiterate dirt farmers, what Harthlings would call the ‘salt of the harth,’ nothing remarkable if he should ever choose to seek out his human roots.”

“My kind of people!” Susej exclaimed. “And speaking of roots,” Susej mused, “I think we should instill in him an insatiable curiosity about his forebears so that he, in searching and finding his humanoid roots, will better understand and appreciate that part of him that is of human origin. Can we do that?”

“Your wish is my command,” Retep bowed, “but before we begin,” he continued, “I want you to see something strange.” He adjusted the horus-scope, fine-tuning the focus, hit “zoom,” and a holographic image appeared of an unpublished book, several hundred pages long. On the cover was a strange title, “Childhood’s Rend: Memories of the Dog Star.” The author’s name was Jack Clifford, and inside the front cover was a dedication to his daughters, Lenox and Weather, in which he stated that his primary purpose in writing the book was “that you might remember home.”

“Why are you showing this to me, Retep?” Susej asked. “What’s in it?”

“Two questions at once, my Lord?” Retep raised his eyebrow. “Okay, scanning the contents it seems to be an account written quite late in life after his children are grown and recounting mostly his childhood but with some flash-forwards. It appears that many rending things occurred there is this little community of Bug Tussle where, paradoxically, nothing ever seemed to occur perhaps because it was simply not acknowledged, and he is struggling with them and trying to find meaning from events that may be meaningless and then trying to relate what he discovers to his genetic memories of ‘home’.”

“Excellent,” interrupted Susej, “I see why this book is important. Instead of poring over his entire life with the horus-scope to see if this insertion was/is/will be successful or perhaps needs some major tweaking, we can simply focus in on the book. Do you think it’s auto-biographical?”

“From simply scanning it quite hurriedly,” responded Retep, “I’d say that it is a weird and zany and whimsical and satirical and sarcastic and farcical and hilarious and poignant and sometimes a heart-rending, gut-clinching mixture of historical fact and hyperbolic literary fiction blended and spiced with semi-autobiographical, pseudo-science fiction, quasi-philosophical, anti-Cristan, pro-Cristan, tangentially genealogical, unquestionably lyrical and even poetical, and sometimes disgustingly political and polemical materials, which, of course, reflects perfectly the weird program that you have chosen to install into this one.”

“Delightful! How fortunate!” exulted Susej, “We can scan the book and not have to waste time going through the numerous harth-time years and days and hours of this projected reality for this creature, which, as you know can become quite boring.”

“No doubt about it,” Retep chimed in, “By the time we have horus-scope this book, we will definitely know whether to insert, abort, or simply tweak the program some more.”

“That being said, my friend,” commanded Susej, “Let’s take a good gander at this tome.”

As the holograph glimmered and danced in front of them, Retep directed Susej’s attention to the beginning of the unpublished manuscript where a brief foreword appeared.

Foreword

Let me invite you if you dare---you, Weather and Lenox, the beloved children of my loins and you, my grandchildren yet unknown and my progeny afar off, and even you strangers who know nothing of me---to journey with me into a time and place, Bug Tussle, Arkansa, in this space-time continuum where I, an insignificant creature but nevertheless a chosen one, was inserted in humanoid form into this reality, a reality not unlike the universal, wherein occurs many adventures, events, and emotions conveying tragedy, sadness, hope, doubt, joy, sorrow, faith, disbelief, comedy, hypocrisy, authenticity, meaningful insight and thought and, yes, events with no discernible meaning or purpose at all.

I want to share with you, my descendants, and you, total strangers, what I learned during this insertion, and I hope to convey to you who I am or was, as the case may be, in all my multi-dimensional glory and shame, my humanity and inhumanity. I hope you intuit from my scribbling even more: not just the knowledge I gained and observations I made but also the love, the acceptance, the forgiveness, the understanding, and, yes, the grace that I, an unimportant and misplaced piece of jetsam and flotsam drifting aimlessly and yet purposely on the sea of time, came to experience and, hopefully, to emit for all God’s creatures.

Moreover, I want to lure you into my dreams so you can connect with what is undoubtedly within you as well: your vestigial genetic memories of *home*. If I succeed in engaging you, then both this book and my life are not in vain.

I must give you a warning, however: Before you begin reading this, please understand that I am likely to be maligned and criticized by Cristan fundamentalists and atheists/agnostics alike, since I fully occupy neither of their worlds and reject both of their belief systems, at least in part. You will find me, the real me, poised herein on a highwire, equidistant between what people, wrongfully I think, call the extremes of faith and doubt, and I hope you will come to understand that informed faith is not blind acceptance and that debilitating doubt is not intellectual honesty, that there is a place in our being where both the brain and the heart, both reason and emotion, both faith and doubt can reside (each having some essence of the other), each ebbing and flowing, first one and then the other, faith thriving and then flickering and doubt flaring and then fading in a repetitive and eternal counterpoised dance on the verge of knowing and not-

knowing, through all of which I survive and I flourish because hope resides here, to this I give testimony of myself, in the stillness between the two worlds, in that place that I describe to you herein, not just any hope *but that blessed hope* that stems from both faith and doubt but that is most linked to the Pennecostal experientialism of my youth.

And I know beyond the necessity of justifying it---as did my mother and my father and that long line of progenitors before them who rejected despair and clung to hope---that that which I feel *I know*, and that which I know is *real and genuine and authentic* because I sense it and accept it as a child, confident in my intuitive experience of truth, convinced beyond the need for argument that truth and happiness are not mutually exclusive, are not at polar extremes, but, arguing alternatively as a lawyer now, if they are, then the extremes are right next to one another, and I can hopefully reach across that narrow lightless void where one ends and embrace the other where it too ends, or perhaps begins, for who is to know in this life what is a beginning and what is an ending?

Further, I must warn you that I present a skewed picture of this time and place that I call my Bug Tussle. It is skewed in that I have chosen to write not so much about the noble and loving folks who abound there---and there are and were many---but about the outcasts, the oddballs, the idiots, the lame-brains, the slobs and other assorted characters who seem to depart from the norm. Or do they really? What is the norm anyway? And who are you, or I, to judge? They are different, true, but people with a difference are the norm in all societies, and it is by them, by the greater community's response or reaction to or its treatment of them, *the different ones, the misfits so-to-speak*, that a society or culture should be, must be I think, evaluated or perhaps even judged.

By this standard, as you shall see, the Bug Tussle of my youth is found wanting, falling short, as does your Bug Tussle and the Bug Tussle universal, but lest I sound too judgmental, too moralistic, I want you to understand this: I do not excuse myself from the judgments I make, the faults I find, the sins of omission and commission I rant against, for these faults and failures are universal inasmuch as there is no human being who has not failed in one way or the other and at one time or the other, and, truth be told, most of us fail every day in multiple ways, do we not? However, the faults and failings seem, to me at least, to be magnified when they are done to or practiced against those people to whom---whether due to poverty, lack of mental acuity, color, race, gender, age, sexual practices or orientation or the like---Jesus, whom we call the Crist, extended his compassion and love and mercy and, indeed, his grace, in a very special way.

So I choose to write about those Bug Tusslians whom He called "*the least of them*" and "*the little ones*" because in our treatment of them, for bad or for good, we find our humanity highlighted and/or our inhumanity exposed. I say "and/or" because in each of us, perhaps in varying degrees, reside both humanity and inhumanity, a great capacity for good and a great capacity for evil, a capacity to extend pleasure and a capacity to inflict pain. And the list could go on forever, for we are dual creatures, are we not, subject to the influences of both the light and the dark? Again, in no way do I intend to represent that the characters I have selected to write about are truly representative of Bug Tussle.

In one sense, they are; but in another sense they are not. They are, however, real, and they are genuine, and they are authentic, and they, as do you and I, hurt and bleed and feel pain and shame and degradation and remorse and joy and despair. And they, as do you and I, sometimes live and die unfulfilled and lonely lives.

So, come with me now as I share my multi-dimensional self with you. Suspend your doubts, harness your fears, and grab a box of tissues, for there is much sadness in the Bug Tussle of my memory, as indeed there is sadness in your own Bug Tussle which like mine is the universal Bug Tussle or at least what Wilhelm Falkner spoke of as "*my own postage stamp*" fraction of it, lying somewhere dormant and unexplored in, and certainly not excised from, the memories, the darkened recesses, of your mind where you have locked it away as an old maid aunt locks her wedding dress, the one she wore at the altar so many years ago, when her love jilted her and ended her life, at least that life that could never be and never was, of which she continues to dream when she gives herself permission to lower the trap door, climb up the stairs, insert the key, raise the trunk lid, and lift out that now-faded and dusty garment that symbolizes all that she has ever known of love and dreams and hope and happiness and life itself.

Yes, come with me back to that place in my/your mind, for we are one and the same, you and I, God's creation and not some cosmic happenstance, having within each of us the same emotions, the same thoughts, the same fears, the same hopes that we access only when we give ourselves over to the risk of looking inward to the places in our hearts where we really reside. I urge you to take that risk and to come with me---back to a time and a place called Bug Tussle. You can do this by coming with me into my mind. There's no need for an RSVP; the door is open to my/your Self; let the journey, the story, begin!

However, one final note: My story is indeed a strange one, a convoluted tale of how I came to ferret out, at first with utter disbelief and then with acceptance, my origins. I will share it all with you: how as I listened with dawning comprehension to the seemingly insane and incoherent ranting of that shriveled and ancient prune of a black man, Fred Counts, the last of Bug Tussle's Dogons, as he rocked back and forth (both in an old rocking chair and in time) in that depressingly Spartan and jail-like room at the Batton Insane Asylum, his words entrancing me with a yarn that I dared not believe and yet dared *not disbelieve* so graphic were the memories that it evoked and indeed released---until at last I came to accept what I had really known all along, and yet refused to acknowledge even to myself: *this world is not my home, and I am not of this world.*

And neither are you!

When you finish reading what I write here, then you, also, will know the truth about your origins. Let us begin our shared journey, shall we?

Susej saw that the foreword was followed by a chapter describing a curling tendril of smoke wafting heavenward from a copse of trees beyond the shimmering heat of a corn-filled field.

“This one named Annie,” Retep asked, “Don’t you see how she will fit in with your plan?”

The two overlords silently but intently contemplated the swirling, projected image as the horus-scope brought the tableau into perfect focus:

Chapter 2

Humanoid Female: A Collage Of The Harth-Mother’s World

“She’s just a soul in the shadows that life left behind; She’s somebody nobody knows.” “Somebody Nobody Knows,” by Crissie Cristofferson.

A pastiche of my Harth-mother before my birth comes to mind: shoulders hunched, she stoops over a rubbing board, her chapped, gnarled hands rhythmically kneading the wet clothes up and down, up and down, up and down over the rough, corrugated metal surface. The rubbing board is in a number ten washtub perched on a platform created by a rough-cut plank nailed between two trees, and beside the one is another number ten washtub filled with clear spring water for rinsing the clothes she is now washing. Cool and clear even in summer, the spring, located two hundred yards east of the house at the land’s eastern boundary, bubbles forth from the red-clay hill atop which the old Loseman house stands and where, in this Harth-time of 1945, old Dr. John Farr now resides and practices what he calls country “medicine” and where, years later, one of Bug Tussle’s idiots, Robert Eason, would freeze to death in an old school bus that sat where the abandoned, dilapidated house once stood. She, this little woman barely bigger than a girl, sings as she works, a wistful, plaintive, and yet incongruously joyful song that---in its simplicity and yet its majesty---transports her beyond and even outside all space and time and into a nirvana that she simply calls *“His presence.”* A look of radiant joy, “joy unspeakable and full of glory” as she would describe it---an ecstasy so incredibly pure and rapturous that if only distilled and bottled and provided to Harth’s groaning and suffering masses it would bring utter and everlasting peace and surcease of all sorrow and grief and pain---suffuses her upturned face.

The church hymn she sings now is one of her favorites among the many she knows, learned fifteen years before in Harth-time 1930 not one hundred feet from where she now toils, the refrain embedded forever in her spirit, implanted irrevocably there under the flickering firelight of the pine knots ablaze around the periphery of the scraggly brush arbor, a bucolic place where, so she claimed, the “Spirit fell” and her Pennecostal church was founded. The Harth name of this humanoid female, not yet my mother, is

Annie Jane Lenox Clifford, called “Annie” by one and all in this small community, and later “Granny Annie” by my children, Weather and Lenox.

Later in time she would tell me, her son---indeed she would tell anyone who would sit and listen---that it was at this brush arbor that she in abject abnegation and surrender---not her words or even words that she could utter much less understand but non-the-less accurate---left her soul at her Savior’s feet, relinquishing all that preceded this epiphany, at least all that might conflict with it, forsaking friends---indeed her best friend, the loss of which haunted her until her death---and even her family, all those who could not, would not, understand her encounter with the numinous here, all those such as her step-father, Grandpa William Dodge, Bug Tussle’s justice of the peace and constable, an upright, buttoned-up Baptist who until his death bed berated and snickered at that “emotional excess and tongue-babbling” at the Pennecostal church---before he, too, on the verge of eternity finally surrendered, so she said, his soul to the Spirit’s call and, even while dying, embraced what she had found at that old brush arbor years before and litlingly burst forth in the tongues of angels.

Yes, she would say that without regret she left the partying and the dancing of jigs to writhing fiddle music at weekend country hoe-downs and square dances where the little brown jugs or maybe fruit jars of home-made hooch, white lightning they called it, would pass from lip to lip and where the card-playing games of chance placed at risk that which these simple folks could ill afford to lose: measly nickels and dimes and quarters or even four-bit pieces or, for the high-rollers, bright shiny silver dollars torn and wrested and scratched with plows pulled through an unrelenting and stingy Harth by docile and compliant mules who, like the men who geed and hawed them, mutely accepted their fate without the fury or even the futility of protest or remorse or even complaint.

Or Annie would say that perhaps the money at risk was jerked and pulled from the prickly cotton bolls in the nearby rich Washita bottom-lands where old one-eyed Guy Clifford or Ray McMullan, an Old Colonel Morris descendant who still lived on the old Morris Plantation near Watermelon Island, and a host of other “better off” white folks farmed. I understood what she meant, for I, too, picked cotton a few times, and to me in my youthful ignorance it always seemed to take at least five million bolls of that cotton she talked about, each reluctantly giving up its snow-white fiber that in turn was swiftly thrust into the long, dew-wet and dirtied tarpaulin sacks dragged behind us---men and women and children alike, white and black alike, race and age being of absolutely no consequence in the cotton fields of cotton-pickers, the most equalizing of professions---from well before daylight to sometime after dark, the cockle-burrs tearing at clothing and hands alike, the still-green mayhaw vines laden with ripened, golden fruit dangling from the cotton plants like incongruously misplaced Christmas-tree decorations.

Yes, there is no doubt that my mother, Annie, knew precisely what was at risk for these impoverished folks in these week-end games of chance, “gambling” she called them, for she in this timeline worked as hard as a man alongside Elbert, her husband and my dad, and me, and even her last child, Roskus Lee (called “Rosk” in later life---whom I called “Rosky”) as cotton-pickers of all ages, colors, sexes, and sizes would crawl slowly

up and down, up and down, up and down as they dragged the trailing sacks through those mile-long rows that skittered off toward the hazy horizon, the wooded banks of the Morris Eddy, until finally the scales back at the wagon, peered at by lantern light with old Guy Clifford's one good eye, delivered their final verdict: proclaimed only a hundred or a hundred and fifty and for us kids maybe only seventy-five or fifty pounds, notwithstanding all the dew-wet cotton that had been crammed inside, for which adults were then paid one dollar or a dollar and six bits at most and, perhaps, if the farmer was generous that day, fifty cents for each kid, or, if he was not feeling generous, maybe a quarter for the day's work.

Or perhaps, Annie would tell, the dimes and the quarters so carelessly risked at these parties, though badly needed by the scraggly children waiting back home, had been paid for in blood by fingers or even hands neatly but not painlessly severed surgically by the wheezing and whining saw at Mr. Herriot's or Robert Sarter's or "Pop" Duncan's or John Hanning's or Lewis Eason's sawmill where---on a good day---a good man working hard could even make a dollar or even a dollar and two bits if he worked through the noon hour stacking the lumber and separating the slabs into stacks where neighborhood folks could come in their wagons or broken-down jalopies, if they had one, to load and take home where the slabs would be used to build chicken-houses, smoke-houses, fruit-houses for keeping the vegetables and fruit preserved in Mason jars, barns, or even shack-houses called "sawmill houses" where no windows were needed because the cracks from the uneven slabs let in enough light, even moonlight, to read by.

And so Annie forsook all that, at least in this reality and this timeline, and as she would later tell anyone who would listen, she abruptly relinquished all the partying and the dancing and the drinking and the gambling and more--- all the now-forbidden fruit, the pleasures and distractions and fun and "sins" (so she called them after the brush arbor encounter with the numinous). To anyone who would listen she would tell how she left all that behind at that old brush arbor, never once looking back, never regretting the price she paid but focused entirely ("standing on the promises" as she phrased it) on the price that her new Lord paid and looking forward to that day, so she claimed, when He in turn would either return to a groaning and crying creation or see fit to recall and redeem and re-claim her, as He had promised to do so long ago in a land so far away from these isolated and desolate DeCoq Hills, the promise stemming from His broken and bloodied body pinioned there for her and for all the world---"red, yellow, black, and white, all are precious in His sight," the children's ditty sung at the nearby church claimed---on that transplanted and uprooted tree on that storm-wracked and wind-swept hill under that darkened star called Sil that wafted about in space in an insignificant and obscure galaxy at the very edge of the cosmos, a hill, perhaps not too dissimilar from these God-forsaken DeCoq Hills, that even God Himself had deserted or at least had not the courage or even common decency to look down upon.

Not only to me but also to one and all who would listen, Annie would talk of looking forward, "yearning" she called it, to that time when He would reclaim and transport her back to that land that never knows night, that fabled country of no tears or sorrows or partings, that distant home that she, after her epiphany at that brush arbor,

never even once doubted existed and with no effort at all could see so clearly there, shimmering and hovering, a most beautiful city lying peaceful and placid and resplendent under an unclouded and storm-less sky. Yes, in her mind's eye, she said, she saw it ever after that encounter with the numinous at that 1930 Harth-time brush arbor, and I know that she continued to see it up until---and especially during---her departure in the next century: what she called "*home*," her sweet Beulah Land, tugging, waiting, calling--- if she would only faithfully keep on keeping on and not once, like Lot's disobedient wife, stop to look back, which she never did. This simple unadorned faith, I give testimony of her, was the core and the essence of this gentle woman.

Perhaps it was the memory of this sanctified time at this Spirit-infused brush arbor, the seminal event of her life, that transfixes her now as she scrubs away at the soiled clothes, the astringent lye soap---homemade from hog fat rendered out in the old cast iron wash-pot and separated from the crunchy brown cracklings that she used in her corn bread and then mixed with the lye that had been leached from wood ashes filtered with water through the "v" of an ash hopper--- staining and burning the skin on her hands even as it washes clean the filthy stains in the bedraggled clothes in the same way---she is no doubt thinking—that another emollient, claimed and appropriated by her at that brush arbor a few years before, so she believed, had washed away any and all of her own "guilty stains" and blemishes.

She feels, no, she *knows*, this beyond any need to argue or even to affirm, a person with an experience, so she would say, never being at the mercy of a person with an argument. She believes it to be so, and, lo and behold, so it is, at least for her, and as she scrubs here on this hot, sticky, summer day she vows to herself that this belief, this faith, is one that she will pass on to her offspring, should she ever have any, and to their offspring throughout all the long and desolate years to come, even to those afar off flowing from her womb, so many as the Lord her God should call. So she softly sings a hymn, content with her lot and her life and her final destiny, her eternal home:

*When the trumpet of the Lord shall sound and time shall be no more,
And the morning breaks eternal, bright, and fair:
When the saved of Harth shall gather over on the other shore,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

*When the roll-----is called up yon---der,
When the roll-----is called up yon---der,
When the roll -----is called up yon---der,
When the roll is called up yonder,
I'll be there.*

*On that bright and cloudless morning when the dead in Crist shall rise,
And the glory of His resurrection share,
When his Chosen ones shall gather to their home beyond the skies,
And the roll is called up yonder, I'll be there.*

*When the roll-----is called up yon---der,
 When the roll-----is called up yon---der,
 When the roll -----is called up yon---der;
 When the roll is called up yonder,
 I'll be there.*

*Let us labor for the Master from the dawn till setting sun,
 Let us tell of all his wondrous love and care.
 Then when all of life is over, and our work on Harth is done
 And the roll is called up yonder
 I'll be there.*

*When the roll-----is called up yon---der,
 When the roll-----is called up yon---der,
 When the roll -----is called up yon---der;
 When the roll is called up yonder,
 I'll be there.*

A short woman, she is barely five feet tall, her growth stunted by a debilitating childhood bout with polio that raised serious doubt about her ability to bear children (one child, a son, had died at birth two years before the present, further calling into doubt her child-bearing ability). The polio had also left one leg shorter than the other and one foot shriveled so that she always walks with an up-and-down, up-and-down, sideways, waddling gait. She had not known it at the time of the polio, a mere child then, but if she had known it she would not have accepted it: the doctors' claim, belief, firm conviction even that she would never be able to walk.

You see, polio was then an incurably paralyzing, crippling, even killing disease with no known vaccine or cure, and unknown to her the disease had left her with no hip sockets. She would find this out only in the winter of her life when a doctor, reviewing her x-rays noted with awe the false sockets created by raw femur crunching painfully against pelvic cartilage, painfully crunching over and over and over again as the indomitable spirit of this woman-child muttered repeatedly, "I will walk! I *will* walk! I will walk! I WILL walk! I WILL walk!"

And so, believing it, she made it happen, this unnatural thing that should not, at least in the opinion of all Harth's medical science, have been possible, but not only the walking but also the working---the undiluted joy of stooping, bending, lifting, canning, rubbing (as she now did), or hoeing in her beloved garden---the sweat of her brow made all the sweeter because each day she thanked her God for the miracle that made possible not only the walking but also the ceaseless, hard, grueling labor that she not only endured but actually enjoyed, enjoyed because the alternative of being a life-long cripple was unbearably more horrid than whatever labor, however hard and menial, that she would ever do.

By the time the thirty-four-year-old Annie married my father (who was ten years older, age 44, himself an old bachelor), she was almost an “old maid” particularly by Bug Tussle standards where young girls, some no more than age twelve or thirteen, routinely married older guys. For example, Annie’s sister, Francy, married at age 13 or so, maybe younger, and she was still playing with dolls, took them with her, no doubt, to her wedding bed. Thirty-four-year-old “Old Maid” Annie, however, had much experience with rearing and juggling children, for she was a surrogate mother (even as a child herself and then on until her marriage) for all of her younger siblings, the halves and steps alike, at least a baker’s dozen of them, boys and girls alike, who in later life revered and loved her not so much as their sister as their mother.

In fact, other than dedicating the first thirty-four years of her life to her younger siblings, Annie never held any job, public or private, nor ventured away from Bug Tussle at all except for a few years when Grandpa Dodge gave Grandma Dodge a respite, and for a couple of years or so another snot-nosed, whining brat did not appear. Perhaps this was after my Aunt Fern was born, and Grandpa Dodge took heed of the family’s reaction as voiced through my teenaged Aunt Lear, who vocalized to all who would listen:

“What! Another baby! We don’t need another one! Why I’m jest gonna take that baby to the chopping block and cut her head off!”

Taking advantage of the lapse in fecundity, Annie obtained a job at Maldoon, the first and only job she ever had, as a maid/housekeeper/nanny in the Jon and Hattie Derby household. Mr. Darby was a foreman at the textile mill there, called Interglobal Shoe Factory, and his wife worked as well, so young Ray Derby and Hattie Ruth Derby required attention. How long my mother worked in this job I do not know, but I know this: it was long enough for her to imprint herself upon the Darby children, who---like Annie’s own siblings---looked up to her almost as a mother. Ironically, when in the seventh grade I went to Maldoon High School one of my classmates was Belinda Sebring, Hattie Ruth’s daughter. How my mother got back and forth to Maldoon I do not know---she must have hitched rides, because neither then nor later did she, nor my father, own an automobile, and neither ever had a driver’s license or learned how to drive.

Even before going to work in the Derby household, however, my mother hooked another job out of Maldoon, although it is doubtful that she was ever compensated for it. From the early 1930’s until well into the 1950’s she wrote and submitted the Bug Tussle news to the *Maldoon Weekly Record*, and those columns, read today, are quaint and bucolic and pastoral---accounts of who visited whom, who preached at the churches, who attended singing conventions, when someone’s house was completed, who was sick, who died. There is no mention of the underworld of Bug Tussle society, because my mother adhered to the adage: *“If you can’t say something good about someone, then don’t say anything at all”*, this succinct philosophy (coined and practiced with the best of intentions and in the best of spirits) adorning the very door behind which lurked Bug Tussle’s dark little secrets and dirty laundry. While I understand my mother’s philosophy, it is not mine: some things, bad things, evil things, simply cannot be swept under the rug

and kept there: they cry out like the spilled blood of the innocent victim for disclosure, for release, for closure, for acknowledgment, for surcease of guilt.

Near Annie and the number ten washtub full of lye-soap-saturated water with its rough rubbing board jutting skyward, a coal-black iron wash pot squats with a fire blazing beneath and around it. The Harth around the wash-pot is worn bare of grass or weeds from the woman's feet trudging around it on the many wash days throughout the last five years of her marriage. Inside the pot are many other shirts and workpants and dresses and under-things placed there to boil in the lye-soaped water lifted with a bucket from the nearby spring, clothes to be punched around with her punching stick to dislodge the ground-in grime. These garments, too, had to be scrubbed and rinsed before she loaded them on the wheelbarrow for the one-quarter mile up-hill climb back to the house up the worn cow-trail through the bitter-weed choked pasture.

The pasture she traverses to and from the spring, like all their land, had little monetary value. Like all the hard-scrabble farms in these DeCoq Hills, it is merely a patch of rocky hills and brick-hard red clay interspersed with sections of crawfish-gumbo muck serving no purpose other than to hold the Harth together. It is land on which the poor whites and the freed slaves from the Morris Plantation on Watermelon Island at Saginaw squatted or share-cropped---after all the rich bottom-land had been taken by the rich white folks---until in a decade or two the sweat equity could be converted into a piece of paper, duly recorded in the county courthouse, saying that it was theirs, theirs, that is, if they could hold onto it by coaxing a pittance from it year in and year out—if they could only endure and persevere and triumph over no rain or too much rain or boll weevils or corn borers or crop failures or crop surpluses or the Great Depression and especially over the banks: those bloodless and heartless institutions with their 8% and 10% interest on \$50.00 or \$40.00 or even \$25.00 yearly crop loans, secured by mortgages duly recorded and filed at the Swamp Gas Courthouse, mortgages on the entire forty or eighty acres that did not, however, lie dormant but remained open there like a bear-trap waiting to be sprung for failure to pay. Whether the neck in the trap was white or black made no difference; money was green, and these folks had little or none of it.

Yes, I realized from a very early age that poverty and debt and borrowing and mortgages were a way of life with these simple humanoids of Bug Tussle because it was the only way they could afford seeds and plows and harness and chemical fertilizers to replace the natural nutrients that had long ago been leached out or blown away even, particularly during the Dust Bowl days of the early 1930's Harth-time and before the WPA or the CCC or perhaps it was some other Woostervelt program sought to teach conservation, terracing and land management practices, to folks who had less than nothing to conserve, the banks awaiting with foreclosure papers already drawn up by Coy McJoseph, the meanest and best lawyer in Maldoon against whom all the furious and impotent ranting and railing of Bug Tussle's farmers, white or black, would be of no effect. As everybody at Bug Tussle knew, there is simply no forbearance, no forgiveness, no mercy in a past-due crop loan for those with no money to pay even the accrued interest.

Lurking behind the Maldoon and Delphia banks and bankers---who though their fathers and grandfathers had perhaps been dirt farmers now pictured themselves clothed and inured in their three-piece Dillard's suits and watch fobs and Maldoon Country Club memberships as mere instruments and cogs of what the Bug Tussle farmers called the "moneyed interests" and who, therefore, had to excise from their collective consciences, if indeed banking institutions permitted bankers with consciences, the compassion and the forbearance that might have prevented the bear-trap mortgages lurking in the Swamp Gas Courthouse from snapping and foreclosing---were the huge timber conglomerates, and even the moneyed Doss Foundation at nearby Delphia, that knew what these ignorant hillbilly farmers, white and black alike, and even the not-so-smart Maldoon and Delphia bankers did not: that this thin, hard-packed upland dirt and rocks that would not just passively but actively fight the growth of cotton and corn and sugar cane was an excellent medium for growing another crop: trees.

So trees it was to be, not the ones now in place because they were of little or no value except environmental, the oaks and the hickories and the maples and the elms and the gums and the ironwood and an occasional bois d'arc (its "horse apples" or "Osage oranges" inedible and thus merely a nuisance) providing nothing more important than habitat, shelter, and food for the area wildlife and bird-life---creatures that like the trees themselves were expendable in the name if not of progress then of Ben Frank whose visage would adorn the millions of hundred dollar bills that these national and international lumber conglomerates could foresee flowing like a mighty river out of these DeCoq Hills if only the bear-traps could be sprung and the crop loans could be "called" and foreclosed and the land wrested---at ten cents or at the most a quarter an acre---legally mind you---out of the hands of those, white and black alike, who failed to use it for its highest purpose but who merely, like stupefied and dumb oxen being led to the slaughter house, squatted there, hunkered there, year in and year out, placid and content and acquiescent, seeking merely to survive, to endure, to subsist and asking nothing more and nothing less out of life than this.

Once purchased out of foreclosure by the timber monopolies---the locals, rednecks and blacks alike, said "stolen" not "purchased"---the land then would be clear-cut in a slash-and-burn rape and fury and prototype of progress and capitalism itself at work and in turn re-planted into fast-growing loblolly pine plantations so sterile and so devoid of life that even decent harthworms would shun them.

No, this pasture through which Annie trudges on her way home at noon after the morning's washing has no monetary value or so little value that it is next to nothing, the growing bitter-weeds its only sure crop, one harvested through the milk of the milk-cow, the bitter-weed taste tainting the milk and even the butter that she coaxed from it in the old crock churn with its up-and-down, up-and-down rhythmic paddling of the dash, the butter then molded into one-pound cubes that even if bitter she could nevertheless sell along with extra eggs from the chicken-house to obtain a few measly shekels with which to purchase things like sugar and coffee and salt and flour and perhaps overalls and brogans that the farm did not provide.

She would not have known the literary reference, but this was a pasture that would never, in whatever decaying and dissolute and putrefying South, make a golf course on which moneyed men and nattily hatted women would mindlessly pursue those little white balls, yelling “Caddy! Caddy!” while a neutered idiot bellowed and slobbered and moaned out his existential anguish and incomprehension along the fenced yard. While not formally educated much beyond the sixth grade, Annie and her husband Elbert both knew that even if the pasture and all their other fifty acres of cropland and timberland and crawfish-gumbo soil were sold they could never obtain enough cash to send a child to Harvard (*“We have sold Benjy’s pasture so that Quentin can go to Harvard.”*) or even to nearby Sanderson State Teachers College at Gum Springs. If she had any kids and they wanted a way out of here, it would have to be by their bootstraps, inching one rung at a time upward from what Jack London called this “social pit” of the bypassed place and time known as Bug Tussle. No, this miserable and unforgiving land would provide no succor whatsoever.

Realizing that noontime is approaching by the position of the sun---she has no watch and will not have one for nigh on thirty years---Annie hurries up the beaten cow path because her man, tired and sweaty and hungry, will be home for his dinner very shortly. Before eating and drinking himself, he will bring the mule and the horse, named Old Ned and Old Ball, respectively, down to the spring for water, rub soothing salve or ointment on any chafed spots caused by the stiff leather harness, and then hobble them in a patch of grass or perhaps let him munch on a handful or two of corn from his upturned hat, so that the mule and horse, too, can recuperate from the long morning’s gruel and prepare for the heat of the afternoon’s plowing.

Susej knew all this, and more, her present, yes, but also her past and her future that he had already ordained for her along this timeline in this reality of this universe, and he thought to himself that he had made a good choice in selecting this little woman.

“Life changes,” he mused to himself, “It begins and it ends before starting again, for such is the nature of what is ordained, but a mother’s love endures forever,” thinking this as he recalled his own mother: how she was wracked with inconsolable grief at his painful but necessary death.

Recalling how just two years before this little woman had wailed at the stillborn unfairness of her firstborn son’s death, he vowed:

“Not this time. I will not subject this good woman to that again, to another son dying before her eyes. We will do this insertion, and we will schedule his extraction for a time beyond hers. Yes, she will do nicely, I think. She will do as this creature’s Harth-mother.”

And with Susej’s “So be it!” so it was/is/will be.

Chapter 3

Humanoid Male: Collage of The Harth-Father's World

“Lord, help me, Jesus, I’m wasted in soul. Help me, Jesus. I know what I am.” “Why Me, Lord?” by Crissie Cristofferson.

Zooming in on the second chapter that began with a scene beyond the pasture and south of the sagging barn to the field of knee-high corn shining and swaying under a cumulous-clouded sky, Retep brought the horus-scope to focus on an unfolding tableau that might have been, but was not, right out of the so-called Middle Ages of this backwater planet:

A sway-backed mule labors down the furrows dragging a gee-whiz as it rakes and curries the dry, blood-red clumps of soil. The mule is laboring hard, frothy mucous dripping from his flaring nostrils and sweat darkening his already blackened coat. The sun known as Sil flares down from directly overhead, suggesting almost noon-time on this unenlightened planet orbiting this medium-sized star way out toward the fringes of this galaxy’s spiral arm.

Behind the mule and attached to a leather harness is a short and wiry, stoop-shouldered humanoid, almost emaciated, clad in frayed overalls and a tattered leather hat, its brim upturned and soiled by years of ground-in dirt and perspiration. On his feet are broken-down brogans laced to the top with the legs of the overalls cascading over them so as to keep out the loose dirt, or most of it anyway.

They, the man and the mule, move along in a linked and timeless and immobile tableau of supine and yet sublime inevitability, one step after the other, one row before and aft, through a field of knee-high corn swishing in a hot summer breeze, the man’s monotonous voice commanding the mule, geeing and hawing it right and left and “Git up, Ned”-ing it to the accompaniment of the tugged reins. The name of the man, who is to be my Harth-father in this particular space-time continuum, is John Elbert Clifford, and everyone in this little community simply called him “Elbert” or “Eb” for short.

Peering closely, an observer could see that the man’s face is browned and wrinkled and crevassed from countless hours in the blazing sun, and his sunken cheeks are grizzled with a day’s growth of unshaven whiskers, its cratered contours criss-crossed by rivulets of sweat cascading from beneath the broken brim of the floppy hat. His eyes are a deep brown, and there is a depth and a kindness and a mute acquiescence there, a sort of unassuming and immovable---even implacable---acceptance of whatever cards God or chance or fate or the gods had dealt and would deal him.

This man, an anachronism even if he had never heard the word and if having heard it would not have known its meaning, knows his place and understands beyond the need for speaking it that he is one of the last of a dying breed of hillbilly subsistence

farmers in a world gone berserk with technology and progress and modernity, simple people, humble people, vanishing holdovers from a less complicated and gentler time when “farmer” or “agrarian” (not that he used or even knew that term either) meant respect and honor and influence rather than ignorance and disdain and even dehumanization---all scornfully heaped upon them because of their failure, their stubborn refusal even, to change and to adapt to the times---pitiful relics that now included, in this isolated community of Bug Tussle, Arkansas, only himself, Daniel and Robert Eason, Ashley Oliver, Odus Clifford, Lurdevell Fitzgibbons, Ludy Oather, and a handful of others. Year by year and one by one after this time---the year 1945 with the bloody war just over and soldier-boys filtering home, young men like Elfred Clifford fresh from the Ardennes forest where a woman’s, my mother’s, rejection almost sent him careening into the German lines, or like Junior Clifford from the German prisoner-of-war camp where he stole bits of cheese and bread from the kitchen where he worked (a capital offense if caught), a POW camp that he never, in his mind at least and certainly not in this lifetime, would ever escape, or marines like Ray Davis from the fly-infested jungles of Guadalcanal and Tarawa where he relinquished not only his humanity but also every vestige of peace itself floating there amongst the bloated corpses in the palm-tree-lined lagoons---the community would be depleted of even these holdover oddities from a bygone era.

An astute observer could see that something else was ingrained in this humanoid male, this so-called Elbert, as well: the sing-song call of the land and the gabble of the breed of his long line of dirt-farmers resided in him so deeply entrenched that he could not, would not, do anything else but till the soil year in and year out and could not, would not, be anything else but what he was: a red-clay, hill-country, dirt farmer whose subsistence vocation spiraled back through his fathers and grandfathers and their fathers and grandfathers to a time immemorial on this primitive planet---to that forgotten but precise moment when his then shaggy forebear shambled from the smoke-filled cave and gazed in awe and wonder and a slow-dawning comprehension at the green shoots of grain poking their heads up from the blackened soil in the snow-speckled ground where, on one unremarkable autumn day a few months before, he had scratched a few seeds into the fallow Harth not expecting anything because he had no experience with which to expect or hope but simply consigning to chance or nature or whatever gods that be the future of these tiny objects that he didn’t even know to call seeds and that he didn’t even know that he had planted.

Yes, my children, I realized as a small child that the soil ran deep in my Harth-father’s veins, mingled so inextricably and sluggishly within his blood that his heart must have chugged and huffed mightily to pump it, and its removal might have, would have, resulted in his immediate demise because for my daddy to live was to farm and to farm was to live, and he like his ancestors knew no other way of life nor desired such, however much the cacophony of the loud, modern world might swirl around him. A simple man, he asked for nothing or at most not much, and he got precisely what he asked for and nothing more, but for such as he did receive he was grateful in a simple, child-like way that those who hoard to themselves great stores of wealth are utterly incapable of understanding.

Only one time in his entire life did he venture from Bug Tussle and his beloved DeCoq Hills farm. This was after he left the old, log dog-trot house of Grandpa Hart Clifford and purchased the adjacent fifty acres of rocky hills and crawfish gumbo Harth on which he tried, year in and year out, to eke out a living. It was during the Great Depression years, which coincided with the Dust Bowl days, of the 1930's when a sustained drought ruined the farming and left hill country farmers throughout Arkansa at the mercy of those bear-trap mortgages held by the bankers at Maldoon and Delphia and other rural towns and hamlets.

With the economy bottomed out and no jobs to be had in America, much less in backwards Arkansa or provincial Bug Tussle or, for that matter, the entire county of Swamp Gas, and with the bear-trap crop-loan mortgage of \$25.00 chomping at his rear due to a failed crop, Elbert set out to Texah with his friend, Ralph Castle, to look for work in the oil fields, which was one of the few places in that time where work was available, and so he ended up in Cross Plains, Texah, making more in a day than he made in a month or maybe even several months back in Bug Tussle.

Nevertheless, he missed that upcountry farm, the tug of the reins directing the old mule on his circuitous journey through the fields, the cool red Harth turning underfoot, and the bright green shoots of corn emerging from the winter-chilled soil, land and corn that he could pamper and coax and almost caress into bringing forth its bounty, so much unlike the sulfur-tinged soil and water of Cross Plains that even before the oil gushed forth and besmirched the land smelled like something unhealthy and dead.

So it was that even far away in Texah his land flowed sluggishly through his veins and called him back from the only "public" job that he ever held to the only vocation that he ever really knew or even wanted to know: subsistence farming.

Not only my Harth-mother, Annie, but also this man Elbert clung to the faith from which sprung whatever tendril, or was it just a chimera, of dreams and hope that ameliorated this harsh life in this hard place and trying time. It was a shared faith and optimism or hope for a better world tomorrow, a faith that he, too, appropriated at that brush arbor in 1930 Harth-time, faith that motivated and inspired him to donate what he could ill afford to give: his timber, so that rough sawmill lumber could be cut for the new church, sawed not at Sarter's Sawmill---it did not exist then---but at Herriott's Mill located between the spring where Annie washed and the sagging barn.

I can attest to something else about this simple humanoid male who was to be my father: even when all that he had hoped and dreamed and prayed for---not that his dream for harthly riches was much, but certainly more than he would ever have, more than the miserly poor existence that he had to come to accept---failed to materialize, he held on and he persevered and he endured, and with this single-minded commitment, he triumphed as well.

Even when life itself almost shriveled away completely as he, who had always been somewhat sickly, took to his death bed in the very year that I would be born along this timeline, he held on and he endured. Even when the many cars and wagons lined the driveway and the muddy dirt road, bringing almost the entire community to extend its blanket of mutual support against the enemy of impotent despair in what everyone, doctors included, thought was the final death watch, he held on and he endured. He held on, he endured, and he persevered, because my mother-to-be Annie held on and the neighbors held on, and a shared tapestry of faith giving birth to hope is exponentially stronger than a single strand, is it not?

Even when both the local medicine woman and midwife, Aunt Gert Clifford, a Donaghey who married Uncle Hillie Clifford, and old Dr. Thomas Dodge at Bisquick said that Elbert had “walking pneumonia” and would not recover, they held on. Indeed, there seemed to be no hope as he lay there night after night, week after week, wheezing and hacking and breathing with that death-rattle sound coming from his throat as he knock-knock-knocked on death’s door, floating hazily in the twilight zone between life and death, between now and eternity, on the very verge of orphaning the child who was not yet even born and, if he the father of this then fatherless boy were to succumb, make insertion of the unborn child’s younger brother, Roskus Lee, only a might-have-been and a never-was or perhaps a doppelganger in one of those infinite alternate or parallel universes.

Whatever the reason---faith, fate, destiny, divine intervention, or sheer determination of immutable will---he survived, and he finally got up from that death bed, but the sickness took its toll. He was too sick and too weak that year even to farm, so he had to sell several cattle and some timber to make ends meet. Although by the time Roskus Lee was born the next year he was strong enough to return to farming, he would ever thereafter---after finally getting up from that sweat-stained, puke-littered death bed---be ill and sickly much of the year, each and every year, to the very year and the very day he died.

As I write this, I can see him now just as I saw him all my life: constantly heaving and sweating and coughing and choking and vomiting out his innards, the dripped mucous and phlegm and puked half-digested foods from his damaged lungs and ulcerative stomach all intermingled and inter-changeable with and indistinguishable from a bitter taste of the failure and the regret and the impotence that his accepting and acquiescent mind (but not his hurting gnarled body) had embraced. Whatever the folk doctors or the medical doctors or the faith healers or even the exorcists might do, and my Harth-daddy tried it all, he would never be cured or healed or exorcised or in any respect relieved of his affliction. Like Job, he had to endure.

And so he did.

With her trusted folk medicine, Aunt Gert Clifford---who learned about both bodily ailments and the folk remedies from her mother, old Grandma Donaghey, who in turn had learned from her mother and so back along that long line of healers to that first

primordial herbalist Harth-mother and healer in that first smoke-filled cave---thought she could cure him, and she tried with all kinds of potions and concoctions, but she was wrong. Maybe she simply did not have the powers or proper potions of Grandma Donaghey, who lived way off down near Bonham, Texah and who, in the days before telephones, could not be consulted.

No, whatever worked its way within Elbert Clifford simply would not yield to folk remedies or herbalist lore.

Grandma Donaghey, I know for a fact, could even remove the ugly blemishes from wart-covered hands, remove them despite open disbelief and skepticism, as she did several years later when I was in grade school at Social Heil, where both the boys and the girls laughed and giggled and taunted me about the cauliflower-looking out-growths covering the backs of both hands, by simply rubbing a piece of salt-bacon over the hands, mumbling a few incomprehensible words of mumbo-jumbo, and telling me to bury the piece of salt-pork in some secret place that I could never disclose on pain of the warts coming back, which I did. I had no belief whatsoever in witchcraft or magic folk remedies, tending toward being a doubting George all my life, but this little bit of voodoo did amuse me a little, and I suppose that I did want to believe, thinking,

“It’s just a joke, a hoot, but surely it won’t do any harm, this witchcraft, will it?”

All the while I was firmly convinced that no old witch like Grandma Donaghey knew anything at all much less had access to a secret wart-removing potion or spell, only in amazement and wonder and, yes, sheer awe to watch in utter disbelief but inescapable acceptance a couple of weeks later as the ugly growths one by one loosened and sloughed off and disappeared much as the skin sloughs off a molting cottonmouth. Go figure! What’s incredible is that this shamanism occurred in a Godly home and within a stone’s throw of the Assembles of God Church, where no amount of praying had peeled off these cauliflower growths!

And I will *never* tell you where I buried that salt-pork!

Likewise, Bisquick’s old Dr. Tom Dodge (who unlike most rural doctors actually had some medical training and may have even continued studying recent advances in the time, if there was any, that he was not off digging Cotto Indian mounds or collecting artifacts from Jim and Ray Davis who, in the years when Indian, now “Native American,” graves were not sacred but were simply there, mysterious and untouched for centuries, treasures waiting for the taking, the looting, dug hundreds and hundreds of water jars and knapped flint points and other artifacts and brought them to Dr. Dodge so he could add them to his vast collection which is now showcased at Sanderson State University at Gum Springs and The University of Arkansa at Ureka Springs) had no cure. No, sir, all Dr. Dodge’s medical palliatives and elixirs could not cure Elbert, and even the more learned medical doctors at Maldoon and Big Rock in later years simply shrugged and finally gave up in total bafflement.

Medical science simply had no cure for what afflicted Elbert Clifford.

Moreover, all the prayers of the righteous---even the prayers of the tongue-talking faith healers such as Orel Rogers with his non-biblical “seed faith prosperity gospel” or the faith of the renowned William Burnham, who (it was said in hushed tones) was God’s last prophet of the end-times if not the returned Messiah Himself and who, followers believed, could even raise the dead and had, in fact, done so on more than one occasion---did not work. They shattered and splintered against this indomitable and enduring but debilitating sickness that was nothing more nor less than mute acceptance and impotent acquiescence so long clutched and enfolded within him that no amount of shouting or beseeching or laying on of hands or anointing with oil or tongue-talking much less mere doctoring could remove or even touch much less heal or cure.

After all, God himself cannot move mute immovable acceptance and impotent intractable acquiescence, however much He might be called upon to do so. There are limits, are there not, to all powers, including those of the Omnipotent?

One of my favorite faith-healers was Brother Comer Hotton, pastor at the little white Apostolic church on East Sullenberger Street in Maldoon who was renowned for another tact: speaking not only to God but also to Satan himself or at least to his demons and devils. But Brother Comer, despite his best efforts, would also fail; he simply could not coax or bring forth the affliction that dwelt and flourished in the body, if not the mind and soul, of Elbert Clifford, and Brother Comer was not shy or timid in the trying, either. He could weep and shout and jump with the best of them as he exhorted and exorcised the demons from tormented souls and cast forth devils from sickened bodies.

One such demon or devil (as a wide-eyed child I never knew which and never even understood the difference, if there is a difference, between the two) actually took a grotesque form when Brother Hotton bellowed as only Brother Comer could bellow during one particular revival service in that little white church: coaxing in that persuading yet commanding, stentorian voice, lungs belching air at full throttle as if the possessing spirit itself were stone deaf:

“Come forth! Come forth, I say! Out of her! Out! I say ‘Out’!”

And he would repeat this mantra over and over to whatever it was, demon or devil or Satan himself, that resided in, inhabited and occupied and undoubtedly controlled, the weakened body---or was it the troubled soul?---of Sister Mattie Clifford, Elbert’s cousin Giles Ellwood Clifford’s wife, who had the downright misfortune to marry Ellwood.

You see, Sister Mattie must have known that Ellwood had already been married once to my aunt, Nona Parter Dodge, a woman who even had an illegitimate son named Jamie and surnamed Crown after his biological father even while married to Ellwood or perhaps it was while married to Uncle Hale Dodge, actually step-Uncle Hale but no one in Annie’s family counted even the halves much less the steps, there being at least half a dozen steps and twice that of halves.

Yes, Sister Mattie should have known better, should have realized the consequences of violating Holy Scripture, should have understood the wages of adultery when she said "I do" to the divorced Ellwood, a man with a living wife even then living in sin as my Uncle Hale's lawfully but not Scripturely-wedded wife and an illegitimate son, saying "I do" when the Justice of the Peace paused for breath (no minister, of course, would marry them), and in the saying of it, those two words "I do", bringing down upon herself the very demon or devil oppression, occupation, or possession from which Brother Comer now sought to deliver her, giving a repeat command:

"Out! Come out of her, I say! You fiend from hell, OUT! In Jay---sus name!"

However, it was Brother Comer who was as surprised as, if not more than, the congregants and the scared round-eyed, wide-eyed boy (me) peeking out from the pallet under the front bench when the demon or devil or whatever it was actually materialized, hopped forth no less, just as Sister Mattie was stooped and moaning and groaning and choking over the altar, her back being pounded with each loud shouted command of "*Come out of her!*"

Wherever this slimy creature came from, he skipped audaciously around the altar and amongst the dancing feet and legs of even the anointed saints, who despite being saved to the uttermost and anointed and even sanctified could not, or would not, crush him, this spawn of Satan, under their heels and who shrank away from this filthy creature, this despicable abomination, this cold-blooded apparition from hell itself, shrieking and jumping and running about in fear and horror and loathing until the other-worldly creature, this toad-demon-devil, perhaps sensing that it was unwanted in this holy place or perhaps just wanting to get away from all the screeching hopped on across the sawdust floor and out the opened door, disappearing without even a parting croak---or whatever the sound that devils or demons make--- into the Stygian darkness from which it had no doubt come.

This demon's appearance, I must say, did not exactly imprint forever afterward on my mind---as I looked out from my pallet under the front row seat, clutching at my pillow and vigorously sucking my thumb for comfort and perhaps for protection on that exciting night—that there is, in fact, evil incarnate in the world. No, the holocaust of six million Jews, the genocide of Native American peoples in the name of God and gold and the Cross and manifest destiny, the pillaging of Europe by African imperialism, the yellow-on-yellow rape of Nanking by the militaristic Japanese, the enslavement of entire races of people of color, the atrocities of the Stalins, the Maos, and that Cambodian devil Pol Pot---and many more---would do that. In short, the unspeakable horror and evil that man visits upon man, many times at the ostensible behest of his gods or at least in utter violation of his God's commands, haunt me to this day with the unsolvable question of why evil incarnate seems all too often to prevail in this supposedly best of all possible worlds against a God who is supposedly not only omnipotent but also all-loving.

What this night did do, however, was convince me, for a while anyway, that evil might just take the form of a toad and not the visage of a goat of which others spoke, not a frog mind you, but a toad, a toad that if it wet on you would give you warts that not even Old Grandma Donaghey with all her voodoo spells could coax off the doomed and bedeviled hands, and it caused me to ask,

“If Satan himself---or at least his demons or devils--- chooses the form of a toad, well, then, who in hell is incarnated in all those bullfrogs croaking and fornicating across the road down at Glenn Hill’s pond?”

I never found a satisfactory answer to this question.

Nope, as God is my witness, not even Brother Comer’s thunderous exorcism could or ever would address or relieve or coax forth whatever ailed Elbert Clifford or whatever Brother Comer envisioned occupied him, all the man-made medicines and the folk potions and the fervent prayers and even exorcism itself being useless against something that they could not even touch much less assuage: a mute, implacable, intransigent acceptance of his condition, his “lot” he called it, in life, his dealt hand that could not be changed no matter the medicine administered or the prayers prayed or even wailed or the faith expended in expendable but futile hope and battered to smithereens against his hopeless and quiet and furious acquiescent acceptance of his condition, his lot, for which there was no remedy and from which there was no escape and only one exit: death.

“Oh, my” thought Susej, “This Elbert Clifford is not to his fellow man the pinnacle of my creation, and he is a mighty sickly sort, wasted in soul and body, but methinks he will do. He will do. He will suffice not only because he endures and perseveres but also because in the unquestioning enduring and persevering Elbert Clifford triumphs when others less attuned and less accepting than he would renounce the land, curse his existence, denounce his gods, and pray to die.”

Clearing his throat, Susej spoke aloud his thoughts to Retep, “Yes, I will make do with this scraggly humanoid just as he makes do with what little he has, and from his loins I will cause to spring forth my chosen one, this chosen one even now poised on the pinpoint of creation, whose life is special to me and whose future I now can see and in seeing call into being as I gaze down the long light-rays of Sil’s sun toward that last red dying sunset when I in my own time and wisdom elect to extract him and recall him back to his home, leaving behind the beloved seed of his loins even as his father before him and his father’s father and his grandfather’s grandfather back to that shambling, thick-browed progenitor in that first cave who lumbered forth into that first nascent morning and indeed all living and breathing and pulsing creation since time immemorial have been extracted from where and when on the twirling time-space axis I placed them back to the home whence they came.”

Even though he had heard Susej vocalize similar sentiments many times before, Retep was nevertheless profoundly moved by Susej’s description of the unchanging and

immutable creation/un-creation cycle and saga, so all he could mutter in response was a simple “Amen.”

“Yes,” Susej thought, not even speaking aloud now because there was no need for the speaking, the thought, the Word itself, in this mind of minds being entirely sufficient, “This good and simple man will do. He will do as the Harth-father of this creature.”

“So be it,” he thought.

And, behold, it was/is/will be!

Chapter 4

Tweaking the Program

“Release is what you crave, From yourself, From the suffocation in your narrow grave, From the program of computer-mother; Locked into your brain.” “Whirlpool of our Dreams,” by Jack Clifford.

Before initiating the pre-insertion sequence, however, Retep made a few last suggestions: some minor calibrations and tweakings of the pre-ordained program that would more closely align this creature with Susej’s grand but unknown and inscrutable purpose.

“My Lord,” Retep asked Susej, “Should we not perhaps deviate from our normal practice and leave this creature with some memories of his home world? Or would that simply be too cruel?”

Susej thought about it a moment before replying. “Cruel to remember home?” he asked, “Cruel to have him remember the twin suns floating over the golden city of Nevaeh?” He answered his own question: “Perhaps so, but I do want some of my creatures to remember home.”

“I have an idea,” interjected Retep, “Let’s make the memories vestigial, implanted genetically, and have them triggered only by a clue, perhaps one imbedded in the idiom of his religious expression.”

“What a grand idea!” Susej exclaimed. “I have the perfect person and vehicle in mind: a song by that blind songwriter, Fancy B. Crossly. *** You do recall, don’t you,

how we have inspired her? Well, how about the inspiration for a song something like this: (and Susej hummed a tune with these words):

*This world is not my home...I'm just 'a passing through,
My treasures are laid up...somewhere beyond the blue.
The angels beckon me from Heaven's open door,
And I can't feel at home in this world anymore."*

****(Cliff Note: Incidentally, Fancy B. Crossly did not really write the "This World Is Not My Home" song. A fellow named William Walker wrote it. You see, Retep is not infallible just as Jack Clifford is not disposed to arrogance, so he delegated the task of inspiring the song to some underling bureaucrat in the composition section of Creation Technologies Laboratory, Unlimited. Bureaucrats being bureaucrats whether on Harth or in Nevaeh, the jerk simply bungled it and screwed it up: the sub-space inspiration pulse was mis-directed to William Walker instead of Fancy B. Crossly, the one Susej himself had suggested.)*

"Superbly celestial," laughed Retep, "but it doesn't mention the twin suns."

"That's okay," Susej responded. "He'll remember. I guarantee you, and he'll also recall the five moons as well---and so will all his offspring if they will only believe and focus on their vestigial memories of here and of me."

"But will this ditty alone be sufficient?" inquired Retep. "Perhaps we oughta give him another nudge, another reminder? Whatcha think?"

"Okay, but what?" Susej asked. "Any ideas?"

"Well, I see on his time-line that he was/is/will be interested in poetry," Retep answered. "How about a poem encoded with a clue?"

"Super idea!" exclaimed Susej. "Now, let me see. We'll need to catch him at a particularly low point in his life when he needs to ventilate via poetic expression, and then we'll just insert this little inspiration."

And so it was.

At Susej's command, Retep delicately injected a small inspiration, leaving to the creature the precise wording and imagery that in the future would erupt forth from the nether regions of the creature's sub-conscious. Peering through the horus-scope, Retep could see that the creature titled it, "Through a Window Darkly," but---given its stark and surreal words and imagery, a word-painting of Daliesque dimensions---Retep thought that it really should have been entitled "In Search of the Dog Star."

"For Pete's sake," he asked Susej rhetorically, "Where did 'angel's hair and eagle's beak' come from? Did that come from us?"

“It’s our program,” Retep replied unnecessarily.

He and Susej read with interest:

Through the Window Darkly

On some distant, primordial beach, the sea-brine drying on neophyte wings,
 A fish-bird shuffled beyond the tidal reach
 Staring in wonder at new-found things.
 Still murky and groggy from the ocean depth, but having no power to help himself,
 Driven by forces I now can recall
 As I stare through the window darkly at all
 The corrugated corridors of time, shackled with chains to my tangled mind.

Staring through the window darkly I see
 A future the past has spun for me
 A present of harsh reality
 Decisions I cannot escape
 Decisions I haven’t the right to make.

Fluttering gossamer across the chasms,
 Wrenching, twisting, mind-boggling spasms,
 Staring unblinking in my face
 Trains of empty and vacant space.
 The twirling twirling of dust and matter drifting by only to shatter
 In a clinking merging of minuscule worlds
 Without end among the galaxy swirls.

Looking through the window darkly I am the Adam of Harth, the King of Siam,
 Fallen angel chained from a throne,
 Acknowledged by none, by all disowned.
 And in that moment of juxtaposition against the night-sky on that lonely hill
 Agent of hell at the crucifixion
 Of all I hold dear and cherish,
 Flung aside, disdained, to perish.

While circling that sun near that distant star, aware of myself, wondering where you are,
 Staring vainly through that window darkly
 At the shadows slithering by so starkly
 Outlined against that craggy peak of angel’s hair and eagle’s beak.
 Glaring down that different road, cringing, half-wishing you would never show
 That you could look through that window darkly
 And grasp the outlines of my strangled soul.

Staring through the window darkly I see
 A future the past has spun for me
 A present of harsh reality

Decisions I cannot escape
Decisions I haven't the right to make.

"He's definitely grappling with home," Retep commented, "And he does refer to the two-star system, however obliquely. I think the idea is implanted sufficiently, don't you Susej?"

"As I have always told you, Retep," praised Susej, "You're a marvelous and meticulous celestial engineer during these insertions. I don't know what I would do without you, my solid rock and my friend."

"Nor I you, My Lord," Retep bowed slightly.

"Let me show you how well, my friend, you implanted the memory" continued Susej, "so well indeed that even his daughter has a vestigial inherited memory of home, particularly of our spiral galaxy and of Nevaeh, although she disguises her memory by calling Nevaeh "Pythagoran." Just take a look at this."

And Susej showed Retep a little piece that the child of this creature's loin, Lenox, wrote as a freshman at Pomona College in Harth-time 2003:

The city of Pythagoran is a city that a traveler can neither stumble upon nor travel through by accident or by intention. The city is much like a chambered nautilus: With each pre-designated increment in population growth, the residents of the city pack their belongings, abandon their spiral-stair-cased houses, and pragmatically relocate. And so, upon arriving at the city of Pythagoran, the traveler first sees the city that is currently inhabited. And as the traveler continues on his way, he passes the city that the Pythagorish inhabited before the current city, the city before that city, the city before that city, and so on, spiraling backwards in time, drawing closer and closer to the city's ancient point of origin.

The people of Pythagoran know little about why they move from place to place in this manner. But it is said, in the low whispers and side-ways glances of coffee shops, that the city is constructed in the same form as the galaxy, and that building a city in the image of the heavens will lead to the place where nothing and everything can be attained. Except for the lone astronomer, the people of Pythagoran no longer look at the night sky; they make no effort to investigate the folklore.

The smiling faces of the sunflowers wrinkle and fall, returning to the Harth to feed their offspring, and the old women's bones grow brittle and creak. But the round-faced men-children with sparkling eyes continue the work of their ancestors, diligently consulting their prints of the city blueprint that was long ago lost in the shuffle of one move or the other. They check and recheck the holy plans to make certain their path is righteous. And they make many tedious calculations, ensuring that the perfect golden spiral continues on and on, forever extending toward the infinitely elusive destination of their forefathers.

And though the endings of once-optimistic beginnings fail to bring the people of Pythagoran to the place of eternal rest, they do not despair. They instead look onward toward the horizon, sure that the answer is in the next city, around the next turn, lurking in the shadows. And they never look back on the fingerprints they leave behind. They just keep spiraling and spiraling, falling farther and farther away from the eye of God.

“See, Retep,” glowed Susej, “She is weird just like her father, but as you know weird is wonderful because weird is rare and therefore, like fine diamonds, valuable in proportion to its scarcity.”

“So you keep telling me when I stray back toward the conventional,” Retep joked.

“She also remembers home” continued Susej, “although she is not quite as of this writing in touch with all her vestigial memories. Give her time, though, and she, too, will remember the twin suns and the five moons of the Dog Star System. Nevaeh calls to her as it calls to her father.”

“As indeed do all your creatures in time hear the call and remember home,” returned Retep.

“Well, that is my plan, after all,” responded Susej.

“But most take much longer than this, and some only remember when it is too late,” noted Retep.

“So true and so sad,” answered Susej, “but his child is indeed gifted with the implanted insight. There’s no doubt: she is not only this creature’s child but also a child of the Ruler DOG (“Praise His Name forever!”).”

And so she was/is/will be.

Chapter 5

Beulah Land: NOT!

*“On the mountain, underneath a cloudless sky (praise God)
I’m drinking from the fountain that never shall run dry (Oh, yes, I’m)
Feasting on the manna from a bountiful supply.
For I am dwelling--in Beulah Land.” “Dwelling in Beulah Land”*

“It was the best of times; it was the worst of times.” Carl Dickson’ Telling of Two Cities.

Come with me now into the world and the time and place into which I was inserted, detached from home and placed---in humanoid form no less--- into a strange place. Gaze upon the tableau I now paint for you: The cornfield and the copse of woods with its wisps of smoke expand now to encompass a ramshackle house with several outlying buildings and a sagging barn located between the spring and the field and nestled in its own grove of bright-green trees.

In front of the unpainted, rough-cut sawmill house stands a towering oak tree, its canopy reaching for the heavens, and across the driveway another tall tree, this one a tall gnarled sweet-gum, soars heavenward. Along the bank of the dusty gravel road running in front of the house a row of yucca plants spear their leaves skyward; interspersed with them are the bulbs and shoots of purple irises, yellow jonquils, and an intoxicatingly sweet purple lilac bush, and the dusty bank beyond the yuccas is covered with a creeping phlox that stains the ground purple, usually during the purple passion of Easter week.

To the east of the towering oak tree and the line of yucca plants is a pig pen, practically in the front yard, its fence comprised of wire and cast-off pieces of worthless lumber and cobbled together with staples ("steeples," country folks call them) or used nails hammered and bent so as to act as staples. Inside the pig pen the ground is scoured clean of any grass or greenery except for the questionably named pigweed that even pigs will not touch, and this weed covers the lot, rising to over six or seven feet in places. Two hogs wallow in the luxurious mud in the corner nearest the house, basking in the coolness, deriving pleasure that will---aside from the daily doses of slop ("shorts" and water and toward killing time a trough of corn to fatten them up)---be the only pleasure that they know in their short lives. They have previously been "marked" (castrated), their gonads roughly cut out without benefit of any anesthesia, their fierce squeals piercing the air in abject and furious pain, after which a black salve is applied daily to assist in the healing process.

These animals, though one of nature's more intelligent species, are not pets; they are meat, only even with their superior pig intelligence they do not know it yet, so they wallow here and sun themselves, grunting contentedly and imagining no fate worse than the horrible prospect of missing the next meal, and as they wallow and stir the mud the odor of pig and pig feces and pig urine permeates the air, something not to be forgotten even when around Thanksgiving the pig meat is salted and hung and hickory smoked to a golden brown color and mouth-watering scent.

There is, of course, no supermarket in Bug Tussle at this time (and none later, either) and none at Maldoon, and the poor folks here do not have the luxury of detachment from the violence and brutality of nature: their meat does not come in sterile and innocuous cellophane-wrapped packets that cushion and insulate the sensibilities, but it walks on the hoof, scratches and clucks in the yard, and moos in the barnyard, and it accepts its fate as do the people of Bug Tussle: with mute and compliant acquiescence to the demands, the survival needs, of the fittest, the good people who are so kind and compassionate to all people and all things, animals included, except when it comes time to put meat on the Sunday dinner table because the preacher is visiting, and a breast with its "pulley bone" must await him (the preacher always getting his pick, and of course he always chooses the breast), and that breast rose and ebbed with the breathing of that red fryer in the yard until such time as he (or she, for there was no distinction among the sexes when Sunday dinner is at stake) would be grabbed, its head placed on the chopping block where the axe would descend, or the head grasped and Ferris-wheeled about the air until the neck was "wrung", or the poor creature, legs tied and dangling downward from

the barbed wire fence, has its neck slit. Regardless of the method of execution, however, the body never accepted what the acquiescent mind dully accepted but instead insisted in flopping about the yard in a futile and pointless effort to escape the heat of the frying pan. Nothing would slake the appetite for Southern pan-fried chicken like seeing those poor creatures, still living but already dead but not yet knowing it, flopping and even running, headless and hopeless, around the yard, clinging to whatever wisp that remained of that state we call “life.”

The preacher, of course, never saw all this violence and pain, so he had no qualms and no hesitation whatsoever in digging in and grabbing the best piece for himself, for after all did not his God condone such and ordain it as the natural order of things? In fact, his God condoned and ordained much, I thought, that if I were God (a blasphemous thought if there ever was one) I would change. For example, I would have spared the heathen women and children whom the Israelites conquered, and I as God could have conceived of a much better use of 40,000 or so sheep and cattle than slaughtering them and leaving them for buzzard bait. As a kid while reading these Bible stories, I thought that there just had to be the fattest buzzards in the world over in the so-called purified and holy land where the god (small “g”) of these people set forth a virtual cornucopia of meats---from warriors to women to children to babies to cattle to oxen to asses---upon which to gorge, all in the name of keeping his chosen people holy and pure. “Holy and pure” from what, I thought? But of course this was heresy, and if I verbalized such thoughts in Sunday School, I---like my poor old Great-Uncle Andrew Clifford years before---would be banished, ostracized, and ex-communicated but not “turned into a reprobate mind” because to voice such thoughts was to indict oneself and to provide incontrovertible proof that the reprobate mind *already* existed within me.

The small, four-room shanty is surrounded by a wooden fence that separates it from the out-buildings. Near the front gate on the right beside the double rows of jonquils that march in parallel from the front door to the fence stands the wooden frame covering of a dug well, and sitting on it is a zinc-covered well-bucket attached to a rusty chain that is in turn attached to a creaky pulley hanging from a sagging cross-beam. Strung across the wooden fence, both to the right and the left of the well, are hand-stitched patchwork quilts sunning in the steaming June sunshine. In front of the well stands a goose plum tree, and beyond it to the east is a circular swatch of jonquils, and all along the perimeter of the wooden fence---on both the east and west as well as north sides--- the thick row of jonquils and daffodils bracket the yard.

At the east fence in front of the house is a large yellow-bell (forsythia) bush adjacent to another flowering shrub that has large, dogwood-like white flowers. Further south along the eastern portion of the fence stands another goose plum tree and two tall apple trees, their branches sagging with fruit. Across the fence and in the pasture behind a ramshackle chicken house are more goose plum trees and several peach trees. In the southeastern corner of the yard is a spreading japonica (called a “fire-bush” after its bright red flowers) still dotted with the last of the spring blossoms.

At both the northeast and northwest corners of the house itself are evergreens curling up toward the roofline from which a tin stovepipe emerges through the hand-carved wooden shingles that Elbert had hand-carved, using a primitive adze and fro in the manner of his father and his grandfathers and their fathers, from pine trees laboriously felled with the old crosscut saw or perhaps the billet saw pulled back and forth, back and forth, back and forth in a practiced rhythmic cadence, the kerosene-greased blade glinting in the sunlight, sweat dripping, no, pouring, from the faces of the hunch-backed and stooped sawyers.

Along the east side of the house, positioned so that they would get the moisture from the rainfall on the roof, are several well-tended rosebushes and another large forsythia ("yellow-bell") at the southeast corner. In the back yard on the west side is a crepe myrtle tree even now putting forth buds in anticipation of mid-summer bloom, and there is a peach tree inside the yard (and two more outside the fence) in the southwest corner. On the west side of the house are three trees located along the fence from the south to the north: an old apple tree, bent and stooped and ravaged by the ice and snow of too many winters; a Chinaberry tree whose green canopy provides a perfect shade; and then a purple plum tree, laden with a plethora of small purple fruit, its wine-colored foliage and fruit a distinct and pleasing contrast among all the greenery.

North from the purple plum tree are a snowflake bush and another purple lilac bush that no doubt were there from the time long ago when the first Loseman settler to homestead this place put up the first simple cabin that, undoubtedly, was not much different than the present dwelling, and in the extreme northwest corner of the yard soars a forked, multi-branched mulberry tree ripe with numerous purple berries where numerous birds would in later years be shushed away by my brother, Roskus, and me as we rushed off the old school bus and clambered up in those forked branches to munch on that most delicious of all berries: the mulberry.

The house itself has no electrical lines marring its profile because electricity has not yet been extended to this isolated community and will not be for several years until I have had the opportunity (should I even say "pleasure"?) to read and study by the dim but warm flickering light of the kerosene ("coal oil," we called them) lamps, and of course there are no telephone lines etching the landscape either because it would not be until I was in college that such a supposed convenience or necessity or nuisance (or perhaps all of these) came to be, that telephone poles would be strung and eight-party lines hung between them, lines on which if there happened to be a dial tone or from which a distinctive ring emitted the neighbor next door or perhaps another around the loop (or maybe even both of them if it was an especially boring day, and there were many boring days in Bug Tussle in those days) with nothing better to do than to eavesdrop on other people's lives also picked up and hung on to every exciting word, exciting not because of any intrinsic excitement in the words themselves (because nothing very exciting ever happened in Bug Tussle, at least that folks acknowledged much less admitted, the only "news" being when someone was born or died), but because he or she or they (as the case might be) were clandestinely doing something that they were not supposed to do, and this very fact itself simply vibrated with excitement in a culture where nobody ever did

anything wrong because everybody knew everybody else's business as well as or perhaps even better than their own and because to transgress was to risk being called down by (or even thrown out of) the local Assemblies of God or Missionary Baptist or maybe the Plains Bayou Church of Crist.

In similar manner, I recall hearing how a half century before along this time axis, around 1905 or so, my Great Uncle Andrew Clifford had been "dis-fellowshipped" for "drunkenness" from the then flourishing but now defunct Methodist Episcopal Church (its members dwindling to zero when the last survivor, the ever righteous Sister Melcher, saw fit to dis-fellowship herself for the sin of wanting to dance) after having imbibed one too many swigs of white lightning from a fruit jar that he stashed in his barn crib and having the misfortune to have Sister Melcher come by and catch a whiff before he could find a sassafras stick to chew.

And Sister Melcher, so I was told, wasted nary a second in going to the elders and the preacher of the Methodist Episcopal Church and to every church member and other church's members as well and even the heathen non-church-goers (both of them) in the community and, as was her righteous duty to bear witness and to testify (that she believed to be distinctly different from *gossiping*, which, of course, she would never do because *gossiping* is a sin, mind you) against all unrighteousness, telling everything she knew and thought she knew and even embellishing it a tad bit so that everybody thought that poor old Uncle Andrew was "staggering" drunk when in truth he was only wobbling a wee bit--- not that such fine distinctions would have made any difference in the verdict of the holy Methodist Episcopal Church---so now with that episode and others firmly in mind everybody in Bug Tussle knew what such transgressions led to: the ostracism and shame of dis-fellowshipping.

The real problem, though, was not just the dis-fellowshipping that merely risked the eternal soul but the real prospect of bodily retribution: the retribution even being visited upon the offender's loved ones such as had happened to Uncle Andrew's wife, Aunt Lucia, an upstanding Donaghey who had the misfortune to marry a Clifford, who like Lot's wife paid for the sin not only of her own disobedience but also of others' sins (in particular her husband's) by not simply "going" but "being struck" blind (as all the old biddies described it—"struck!!") with all the holy retribution that "struck!!" implied, and thus was banished from community fellowship and relegated to spending the last miserable quarter century or more of her life flat of her back in bed---all due to Uncle Andrew's one-too-many swigs of home-brewed corn liquor.

And this retribution struck Aunt Lucia even though Uncle Andrew himself paid a severe price for his unquenchable thirst for the thrill of white lightning, going out of his mind on several occasions and having to be institutionalized ("put away!!," the old biddies claimed, and a sign from God if ever there was one!) at the Arkansa State Hospital at Batton that everybody knew was the insane asylum for loonies who imbibed too much of the demon liquor or for any one of a number other transgressions such as "loping the mule" (masturbating) a little too much ("too much" being "any")---the laundry list of sins simply being much too numerous to list, starting with card-playing,

bobbing the hair, wearing shorts, wearing make-up, going to the movies, imbibing anything other than milk and Kool-Aid, all on parity with such crimes as axe-murdering one's grandma---had been "turned over to a reprobate mind," a "reprobate" being the worst kind of mind that anyone at Bug Tussle could envision or conceive, something perhaps akin to or maybe even worse than that of a lawyer like old Coy McJoseph at Maldoon, a lawyer whose mind slithers back and forth between truth and untruth until the two become blurred and indistinguishable and he (no "she" lawyers in those days) has no respect for himself, no respect for anyone else, and certainly no respect for the truth.

Yep, telephones could be a downright nuisance in this place, and eight-party lines---well, they were an outright danger what with everybody listening and then repeating while others listened *ad infinitum* until when it finally came back to the original source, who was in his or her turn again listening, the final version---final at least for now---bore no resemblance whatsoever to the original, appearing to be a completely new bit of gossip, which of course the originator could start all over again. Yep, folks at Bug Tussle shore liked to talk, the favorite subject being each other, because there was not much else to do or even talk about in the days before television, that other monstrous evil, had invaded and polluted the community and lured and seduced even the upstandingly righteous---all except for one lone soul, my Aunt Lear Hollison who never embraced the "devil's box" (she *does* have a point, does she not? *Think* about it!) even up to her death in 2002, refusing even to watch the Right Reverend Jimmy Swiggert strut his magical and masterful stuff or the faith-healing Orel Rogers demand that she touch the devil's box as a "point of contact" as he commanded with God-given authority and force:

"Be healed! Be healed! Be healed! From the crown of your head to the soles of your feet, be healed!"

No, Aunt Lear was smarter than the other folks, and she never fell for the devil's trickery or chicanery, however sanctified and holy it might appear to be.

Before television, of course, many of the people would sit around the battery-powered radios, if the batteries were not run down or some tube shot, from which wire aerials snaked up to the rooftops (such as the one on our house) where the slender metal threads pulled in such faraway sounds as Knoxville's Grand Old Opry every Saturday night or perhaps The Long Ranger or Andy & Amos (a most popular show because it proved the superiority of Bug Tussle's blue-bloods) or radio's Gunstrike (in the days before every adult and child in Bug Tussle, Aunt Lear being the sole exception, all God-fearing folks no less and including the preachers of both the Baptist and Pentecostal churches, sat around each and every Saturday night---a death in the family being the only possible exception, and then only sometimes---enraptured with Marshall Ditton's swilling down those tall mugs of beer at the Short Branch (shudder!) SALOON and gazing down the oh-so-revealing bodice of Miss Catty's calico dance-hall dress at her pride and joy (or maybe the left one was the joy and the right one the pride, whatever) thrusting upward and barely concealed (at which, of course, none of the males dared to look or, if they did, ever deigned to acknowledge).

The truly adventuresome (and those were few) in the days before the devil's box captured the souls of Bug Tussle's devout might tune in the puzzling sounds of chattering "Mexican" spoken on the high-frequency radio channels such as XERF or XEG from Juarez, Ciudad, Mehico via Del Rio, Texah when those channels were not being totally pre-empted by Gringo radio preachers trying to save souls or heal the sick or raise the dead or raise money and not necessarily in that order ("Give as unto the Lord! His, er; I mean, my address is post office box so-and-so, Del Rio, Texah!"), and the pennies and nickels and dimes would flow like a rigged slot machine from Bug Tussle and Old DeLoche and Saginau and Partway and even Possum Trot, of which Bug Tussle is but a suburb, to the Lord's bank account in Del Rio or El Peso or even in exotic Juarez, perhaps in exchange for a bottle of water from the Jurdan River or an "anointed" (by the preacher) handkerchief that, when properly placed on the body, had healing qualities for whatever ailed you, yes, sir, believe you him, the radio preacher, and, by the way, to "seed your "faith," keep those nickels and dimes and quarters coming, do you hear?

No, sir, there was nothing dull about Bug Tussle in the pre-television 1940's Harth-time when those radio sidewinders were wound up and hollering. I would never be bored to death in this place, even though the entertainment of the traveling medicine shows and the "health professionals" in their medicine wagons ("Step right up, ladies and gentlemen, this here tonic and elixir, I guarantee you, made only of the finest and most exquisite, I said EX—QUISITE, ingredients, imported from the ORIENT, will cure WHATEVER ails you!") had by the mid-1940's even in rural Arkansa largely been replaced by traveling salesmen, such as old Ky Shane, peddling Watkuns liniment (an even swap for which was one fat hen carted off in the chicken coop that bounced and clanged against the side of Ky Shane's 1941 jalopy) and other potions and the radio evangelists/faith healers and rural "doctors" who might or might not have a medical degree or a veterinary degree or even any medical training much less a medical license but who peddled the same tinctured snake-oil, only packaged in different bottles and with somewhat more sophisticated delivery methods.

While modern conveniences were not a distraction for a few decades yet, what people did not know, had never known or had, they could not possibly miss, and thus stood the tilted outhouse behind the chicken-house or at a later time on the other side of the lane that traversed the west side of the house, shielded by a stand of persimmon trees from the prying eyes--- even of Miss Maude Loseman who several years before had come upon "Dr." (so everyone called him) John Farr squatting and doing his business in what then but not now was the barnyard across the dusty road, Miss Maude not even having the decency or foresight to warn poor old Dr. Farr of her coming by humming a hymn or whistling a tune or talking or yelling to herself the way Bug Tussle's resident idiot, Robert Eason, always did as he came across the DeCoq Creek from his home-place in the DeCoq Hills, whooping and hollering his nonsensical and, some said, simply crazy and idiotic stuff:

"Come out of that brush-pile, you polecats. Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Scat, you wampus kittens! Whoop! Whoop! Whoop! Watch out, you tomcats! Polecats, Wampus

cats, bobcats! Come out of that brush-pile! You hear me, bearcats? Whoop! Whoop! Whoop!

Yes, Miss Maude stealthily sneaked up on the learned doctor who calmly stood up, wiped himself with some leaves, and addressed the surprised lady:

“Why, good morning, Miss Maude! What a lovely day!”

And Dr. Farr smiled broadly at her as he dragged up the bib and fastened the suspenders of his overalls.

Neither then nor later was the outhouse itself a cause for concern, but instead it could and would become a citadel of learning for me as I would devour more books than food, and if truth be told, many of them sitting in the lowly outhouse for hours on end (no pun intended), its odors wafting upwards un-smelled or at least unacknowledged so engrossed was I in whatever far-off adventure I was reading at the time. To this day I encourage kids to read books: read even trashy books (if you must) and even read in the outhouse because with the worst of books a kid picks up facts (information), concepts, ideas, principles, vocabulary, sentence structure, and books have a way of expanding the mind, life’s horizons, in ways that the aptly named “boob tube” does not. Only a boob sits in front of the boob tube, passively inhaling and ingesting whatever is spewed forth, when the excitement of an entire universe (or multiple universes) is awaiting between the front and back covers of a good book.

Outside a gate built into the eastern fence stands a smokehouse, its insides darkened and stained with years of hickory smoke and the odor of hickory and ham and bacon and salt omnipresent even after---as happened every year---the family has consumed the hog or hogs killed and smoked the last fall, probably around Thanksgiving, a communal event where all the neighbors assisted in exchange for a free meal of fresh pork or perhaps a bit of ground sausage or out of sheer neighborliness, my father curing and smoking the hams and shoulders and pork-belly bacon (“middlings,” we called them) as he had been taught by his father, Grandpa Hart, and as modified (adding a little sassafras or even apple) in the same manner as Bug Tussle’s premier meat curer, old Fred Counts, a black man, the last black man, a Dogon in fact, to remain in Bug Tussle, who lived unmarried and alone in a one-room log cabin in the woods a half mile or so removed from the Walton Stainbridge place where he allowed his huge, feral hog herd to run wild and feed on the acorns and hickory nuts before rounding them up sometime after the first frost and penning them up so he could fatten them on corn raised, at least in the non-drought years, on his crushingly poor forty-acre farm, the same one that he (or perhaps it was his father) had been given in the late 1860’s, along with one mule, by the Freedman’s Bureau.

To the east of the smokehouse is a chicken house in which sawmill cutoffs, the same lumber rejects used to construct all the outbuildings and even parts of the house, has been nailed into roosts and on the walls of which were grapefruit boxes or orange crates---though I would never see, except perhaps an apple or an orange at Christmas, and

so could only imagine the exotic fruit that came in them---nailed up as nesting places with perhaps an egg gourd or plastic egg in place to fool the foolish hens into using these nests instead of scratching out a place under some hedgerow or far-flung bush where the ‘possums (I would not realize that there was an “o” before ‘possums until high school) or fox or mink or other wild varmints could get at them, the only danger in the chicken-house nests being the occasional black snake (called “chicken” snakes) who would slither in for what he thought was a free meal only to find upon swallowing the fatal indigestible plastic egg that it was usually his last meal.

Fifty yards south of these two outbuildings is the sagging barn in its own copse of trees just west of the “new ground” down toward Mr. Herriot’s sawmill site, a several acre parcel where logs and lumber had been stacked and where stooped sawmill workers and their mules and log wagons had trudged over the ground so much that all the topsoil loosened and washed away so that the “new ground” that was intended for crops could not be used because it would grow nothing except saw briars, not even a decent tree. Long gone were the slapdash shanties where the sawmill workers resided; no evidence of them remained, not even foundation stones or jonquils or garlic or a snowflake or a firebush (all of which one normally finds at old homesteads, however long abandoned, a persistent but mute witness to the lives and the loves that once resided there where the homeplace once stood, the rippling laughter and the wailing anguish, both, the joy and the pain, both, the drudgery and the endurance, both---all stilled and forgotten and silenced by the river of time, remembered no more and heard only by the ear or the heart attuned to such: to the shifting of the breeze and the tilt of the sunlight sparkling in those slanted angles off the ghosts that, invisible though they might be, still manage to make themselves felt, known, to the discerning mind that will only open up to their omnipresence in these sad and desolate and abandoned homesteads.

Beyond the old barn was at least twenty acres of cleared lands with their field crops of corn, purple hull peas, sugar cane, watermelons, cantaloupes, and fall pumpkins and the large vegetable garden with all kinds of vegetables in their seasons, a garden that my mother hoed and weeded by herself as had her mother and her mother’s mother and all that long line of dirt farmers from which she descended, hoeing and weeding and coaxing the food from the stingy harth, praying for rain (*“Just enough, dear Lord, but, please, my God, not too much!”*) so that enough foodstuff would be grown to preserve by shelling and shucking and dicing and slicing and boiling and preserving into Mason jars so that when the cold winter winds howled around the shanty at least there would be some food to provide sustenance and calories for warmth to ward off the chills and the fevers and the winter blains.

The house itself, the centerpiece of this tableau, is nondescript as only country houses of that era can be, worse than most that surrounded it in Bug Tussle and the other communities but not by much, having only the sawmill, rough-cut planks overlapping on the outside and “unfinished” on the inside with bare two-by-fours showing and with two narrow windows to admit the light in each of the four rooms. The light from the windows is augmented by sunshine streaming in from the cracks between the overlapping side-boards or from moonshine (not the drinking kind) and starlight beaming down where

we, Roskus and I, would lay awake in bed at night watching the stars or searching for the first sputnik to orbit the Harth.

Sometimes we would peer out the cracks through which a dusting of snow would on occasion fall on winter nights, driven by the fierce north winds, and come to rest upon the piled up quilts under which Roskus and I huddled, nestled warmly more or less, on the goose-and-duck-feathered mattress, perhaps with an iron or a brick that my mama heated on the wood stove and wrapped in a towel and placed at our feet. This sagging bed, along with an old mirrored dresser, was the only furniture in this ceiling-less room (though later there would be a cardboard ceiling), and so the snow that sneaked in would not even melt by morning so frigid was that room. Roskus and I, spooned and cocooned together in that bed, would watch at night as the fireflies flickered about outside in the darkened yard or listen to the sound of the whippoorwills calling plaintively back and forth, back and forth, down toward Uncle Ray Dodge's field and to the croaking of the tree frogs praying to the tree frog god for rain and the singing of the cicadas praying to their cicada god for the same and to the wild mating of the bull-frogs, those suspected demons, down at Glenn Hill's pond, and when rain or sleet would fall on that tin roof and the wind would lash about the eaves, the soothing, rhythmic, peaceful, pelting cadence of these sounds soothed and coaxed us into a restful and dreamless sleep. There is simply no peace that compares with that of going to sleep under a tin roof, the rain pattering overhead.

In the living room is a battered couch, a rocking chair, a tattered lounge chair, and a hand-made cedar table on which sits a coal oil lamp and the old battery radio, the table and a cedar chest and another table being made by old Mr. Kowalski and Mr. Zalewski, Polish fellows, who for some strange and mysterious reason moved down to Bug Tussle, Arkansa from Shicargo in the late 1930's, perhaps to escape the Polish Mafia (if there is such) or debt collectors or whoever, who lived together, alone and unmarried, in an old house on the next hill to the east toward the church. I would never understand why these two left Shicargo for Bug Tussle, Arkansa, where they engaged in no trade other than the hobby of wood-working. In the center of the room is a cast iron stove blackened by much usage and a rusting tin pipe going up through the non-existent ceiling to the wood-shingled roof and beyond and behind the stove is a wood-box full of seasoned oak and hickory and elm firewood.

In the kitchen is a hand-made wooden table, not yet covered with a checkered plastic table cloth, with a bench and four chairs whose seats are covered with interwoven "cane" bottoms and backs (the "cane" really being strips of white oak carefully cut into swatches and dried), an ancient wood cook-stove with another wood-box full of "stove wood" (smaller pieces, mostly pine and oak, cut and split for the smaller furnace of the cook-stove). Beside the wood-box stands an equally ancient ice-box, not a refrigerator because there is no electricity yet anywhere in Bug Tussle, but a real icebox where 50-pound blocks of ice would be brought by the "iceman" on his weekly rounds from the icehouse in Maldoon and deposited into the insulated compartment (whenever, that is, the family had the extra quarter that it took to buy the ice), and when we did not have the money, which was most of the time, the milk and butter and other food needing to be

chilled during the muggy, heated summers would be lowered via the chain and bucket down fifty feet into the frigid waters of the hand-dug well just as in pioneer days of yore.

However, I could never understand why the icebox was placed next to the hot cook-stove because even with the best insulation a fifty-pound block of ice could not survive that heat, heat that I absorbed while sitting atop that old ice box, legs dangling down by the toasty furnace, on those cold winter nights when my mother was cooking, the cook-stove blazing, while I sat and looked on hungrily as the perch or the catfish caught at the Eason Eddy or perhaps the Mary Bell Eddy sizzled in the cast-iron skillet, or perhaps it was an eel or two for which my father had a particular fondness but which I could never bring myself even to taste because they looked too much like snakes and, besides, they squirmed around in the frying pan as they cooked (the muscles contracted, I learned later, but as a child they seemed to be still alive even though cut into six inch pieces) and then if not eaten hot would ooze what for all the world looked like blood when re-heated.

While I eschewed the eel I thought nothing of eating fried squirrel or rabbit (caught in the half dozen or so rabbit gums that Roskus and I maintained) or boiled squirrel and dumplings (my father having first rights to the head, which he would pound open until the succulent brains could be had) or sometime even the rare raccoon and many times the ‘possums that, to taste right, had to be penned and fed a diet of corn for about a month so that the odor of the decayed cow, a possum’s favorite meal, could dissipate, but when fed right and cooked right (my mother baked them with black pepper and sage and sweet potatoes) possum was quite palatable.

Also in the kitchen is a hand-made “safe” painted green for some reason or other, not the kind of safe for storing money and jewels and other valuables because that would not have required a safe bigger than one’s hand, if that big, but a safe for the pies and cakes and homemade buttermilk biscuits and cured ham and bacon and other items that mostly did not require any refrigeration but only safety (hence “safe”) from the hordes of black flies that streamed in even when the house ultimately had screen doors on both the front and the back with sticky fly traps dangling from them to intercept these monsters before they alighted on the food and a plastic fly swatter in each room which, if used assiduously, would splatter and zap these pests to fly heaven or beyond only to be replaced by hordes of other flies too dumb to know their fate or by a line of ants a mile long going back and forth with bits of whatever food they could snatch clutched in their greedy mandibles.

The only other piece of furniture or furnishing in the kitchen is a spindly platform on which a wash basin sits and beside which is a bucket of water for ‘washing up’ prior to meals. Fastened to the wall above this wash pan is a an old green-colored “medicine cabinet” containing shaving equipment---a straight razor and a mug and brush---and various salves, oils, liniments, iodine, and maybe aspirin and turpentine, the latter to be mixed with a spoon of sugar each spring to kill “the worms.” Yes, and there is also every kid’s favorite scourge: castor oil which, when given generously, cures any ill or ailment, including complaining and whining, present and future, because having received one

dose of this nauseous goo no intelligent child with a half-right mind would ever again for several lifetimes repeat the complaint that had brought on the first dose or, for that matter, *any complaint* that might *conceivably* persuade his mother that he needed another dose of this putrid stuff.

In the fourth room, my parents' bedroom, are two beds, one a double and the other a single. Roskus and I slept in the single bed when others, such as my Aunt Woo-Woo or Nolten Runnels (my father's cousin) or Elton Bowling (my mother's cousin fresh out of the Batton State Hospital) lodged with us and utilized the front bedroom. This room is separated from the kitchen not by a door but by a curtain of feed-sack cloth that my mother had sewn together. Likewise, she used the same feed-cloth sacks to make the "closet" on the eastern wall of the room where her dresses and my father's clothing hangs. Between the two beds, beneath the western window, is an old wooden trunk, rounded and belted with tin bands in which my mother stores the more valuable pillowcases or other items, including the better homemade quilts, that are not stored in the "quilt box" located on the right by the door as one enters the room.

None of the floors in any of the four rooms has a rug or carpet (what is "carpet" anyway?), but the kitchen first and then the living room would in a few years have linoleum, and this modern addition would preclude one of my favorite pastimes as a small child: lying on the floor and looking through the cracks at the chickens scratching and screeching underneath in the dry dirt, no doubt catching any termites or bugs before they had any chance to enter the house, and occasionally even laying a pretty, white egg in the dry, brown dust.

The house is in this community, Bug Tussle, that is bordered on the south by the muddy, sluggish DeCoq Creek and the DeCoq Hills that undulate several miles south until dropping off into the flatlands of the Washita River floodplain at Friendsburgh on what today is U.S. Highway 67 but that, during the Civil War, was the old Military Road. "DeCoq" is a French name, and for years I thought it was the name of an early French explorer, but it is not. Literally, "DeCoq" "the cock" or "the rooster," and so it is, a creek that wanders through the foothills of the Washitas before spilling into the Washita River at a place where the early explorers reportedly saw a rooster.. Hence the name.

To the north and east Bug Tussle is bordered by the Plains Bayou creek that flows out of the foothills of the Jack Mountain, a glacial leftover way over toward Mott Springs. The Plains Bayou meanders east and south through New DeLoche and then Bug Tussle and finally on into Saginau until it, too, eventually empties into the Washita River north of the Saginau Eddy on the east banks of which stood, circa 1900-1915, the Saginau Sawmill. North of the Plains Bayou creek and thus north of Bug Tussle, the land is comprised of a thin layer of sandy loam interspersed with and overlapping vast shale beds, but south of the Plains Bayou the soil is red clay and sandy loam, more bountiful than the shale, but still not nearly the richness of the alluvial Washita River bottom land.

These geologically disparate soils erode and slough off into the two creeks that, in turn, mirror the soil through which they meander: the DeCoq, called a *creek*, a muddy,

warm, sluggish creek similar to what one thinks of as a bayou and the Plains Bayou, more like a *creek*, a clear, cold, and enticingly inviting stream that, in summer, provided much-needed respite from the wilting summer heat and humidity. In fact, each summer Roskus and I and other kids from the community would go as often as possible to the local swimming hole, called the Rob Ball eddy, where we would swim (or given the maximum four-foot depth more appropriately “mudcrawl”) until cool and refreshed, and this same swimming hole was used each summer as a baptismal site for the two churches of the community and the Plains Bayou Church of Crist when after the perennial revival the beer-drinking sinners and watermelon-stealing penitents, particularly cousins Ken Clifford and Dane Clifford, would go forward time and time again, besieged by guilt, to be saved, or at the Missionary Baptist Church to “re-dedicate” (because Baptists once saved are *never* lost just “undedicated”) and to find, once again, absolution at the old-fashioned altar---at least until the next Saturday night’s temptations at someone’s watermelon patch or occasionally the Bug Tussle Grocery and Service Station (where cigarettes were the big lure to burglary/sinning) or the siren call of the demon rum or maybe even the multi-colored houses of pleasure, perhaps in a railway car down on a railroad siding, over in Sin City overwhelmed their precious salvation one more time. Sin and repent, sin and repent, sin and repent---God must be an awfully patient and understanding fellow, don’t you think, but come to think of it, maybe “sin and repent” (however many times) is---if only by a whisker---better than “sin and sin,” if for no other reason than the sheer ecstasy, the spiritual high, the narcotizing state of euphoria, at being “washed clean as snow” is completely unknown to those fools who merely “sin and sin.”

Once virgin forests covered Bug Tussle in a mixture of towering oak, sweet gums, elm, hickory, pine, ash, black gums, and other varieties of upland trees, but those are long gone by the 1940’s, clear-cut by the mercenary loggers to be shaped and sawed into lumber at the Saginaw Mill on the far side of the Washita River’s Saginaw Eddy. All that remains now of the virgin forests is an occasional tree on a hill too steep to log or in a gully too remote to have been found. There also remains, as mute reminders of the 1900-1915 rape of the land, the railroad berms that wander up and down every creek and branch valley of these hills, berms where once the steam engines hauled away for human consumption what nature had taken centuries to grow: lumber that made its way via rail to Shicargo and Daytroit and New Yorke and other Yankee cities about which good Southerners gave not a damn except for the filthy lucre that they deigned to accept in exchange for the desolation of their forests and their lands.

And there remained, also, some names and other reminders of Bug Tussle’s railway system, particularly Longhorn Curve on the DeCoq Creek where the locomotives had been able to turn around. Further south on the DeCoq Creek down toward Saginaw beyond the Nalen Hill remain huge steel bolts that were used a half century before to anchor the trestle cables for the temporary railroad track that snaked its way up the hollows of these pristine hills, these bolts imbedded in huge boulders in what, during my youth, was called the Powerline Hole, a “hole” being a colloquial term for “eddy,” so named in the mid 1930’s when electrical transmission lines from the new power plant at Bleakly Dam entered and exited Bug Tussle’s eastern boundary, not stopping but barely grazing it so-to-speak, rushing by to silence the clamoring for this modern energy miracle

by the city folks on down the Old Military Road at such bustling towns and hamlets as Delphia, Gum Springs, Mascot, and No Hope, folks who, unlike at least some Bug Tusslians, were progressive enough to desire new-fangled stuff that they had not yet enjoyed.

Earlier still had been the people who first populated this land, the Native Americans, the Cotto and even people before that who had left their imprints in the mounds along the DeCoq Creek and Plains Bayou Creek and, in particular, on and around Watermelon Island ("Isle de Watermelon" the French called it) and near the Friendsburgh Mounds where vast number of graves were plundered and looted by generations of grave robbers before any archaeologist ever had the chance to properly examine much less preserve the treasure. Often, even in the Bug Tussle fields I trod as a child, where my father plowed up the red Harth, I would find, generally after a rain exposed them, arrowheads and other pieces of Native American artifacts, and I wondered about these peoples so long gone, how they had lived, who they had been, what they had thought, and how they had died. What must it have been like in this land before European settlers brought civilization in the form of smallpox and other forms of genocide to these simple people who could not co-exist and would not assimilate and, therefore in the name of Manifest Destiny and gold and the Cross, had to die? And if it took more than smallpox and the rifle, so be it; the carrot worked as well as the stick, particularly if a treaty meant nothing more to The Great White Father than so many lies and broken promises.

Still earlier yet, before any people and even before the dinosaurs, a vast salt sea covered this land, in the Jurassic era it was, with its sea animals and creatures swimming around over the same soil that I walked, barefoot, as a lad, not knowing then that I walked where sharks and other pre-historic amphibians and fishes once swam. Only years later when the interstate (Interstate 32) was built through these DeCoq Hills did I discover shark teeth in the disturbed soil and realize that I stood then where millions of years before fish and turtles and sharks had lived and died. Numerous "salt licks", including one near the barn of my Grandpa Hart's place, evidenced this ancient ocean, the clear signs of which even Noah's Flood of fairly recent vintage, only 5,000 or so years ago, had failed to erase.

Through and underneath it all, however, even this ancient ocean, there was the land: it waited; it abided; it endured; it prevailed, even triumphed, over whatever nature or the gods dished out, insentient and uncaring and not even complacent, just being, continuing, existing, as planet Harth circled the sun not yet then called Sil which in turn swam at the remote edge of a galaxy not yet called The Silky Way---and as it, the Harth, our life-giving blue-green planet, the seventh out from Sil, would continue to be, to wait, to endure even in dissolution as Sil's furnace millions of years hence flares and goes thermonuclear in its death throes and fire once again ravages the land.

And beyond the fire lurks the ice, the freeze, the Big Freeze, in that stupefyingly mind-boggling distant micro-second when not one sun, one star, not even one, in the Silky Way---or any of the other illimitable galaxies---continues to shine and emit life-giving heat and light but have collapsed in upon themselves followed by the galaxies

themselves and ultimately this universe contracted and compacted back, once again, to that indescribably finite micro-particle or singularity from which the Big Bang emitted.

And beyond this? Another Big Bang? Another Big Freeze? An infinitude of recurring Big Bangs and Big Freezes in this, the best (since it is all we know) of all possible universes, while beyond our own incalculable Big Bangs and Big Freezes create and uncreate the numberless other universes in *our* multiverse which, itself, may be only one of an unending number of multiverses marching off into the mind of God?

So, Beulah Land? No, it was not, but it was home, and if home is where the heart is, then it is still home in that part of me, perhaps even most of me, that will always be in those DeCoq hills, will always be that lad who tromps and explores and fishes along both those creeks and who follows my dog, old Shep, through the hickory and oak groves in search of squirrels and sometimes even raccoons, although those were rare. Even rarer still was the armadillo, a Texah critter back then, and I did not even know what I had by the tail when in about the tenth grade old Shep treed one in a rotten, hollow stump, and so I brought it home to show to my dad. Since he had worked in Texah a while in the oil fields, he knew that this ugly creature was an armadillo, and he advised me in no uncertain terms to kill the critter. Being tender-hearted even then, I refused and released him back down the lane behind our house, and this great-great-great-grandfather of all the armadillos at Bug Tussle took his release as a cue to be fruitful and multiply, and so when my mother in later life complained incessantly about the armadillos that were rooting up her yard I knew that she was still blaming me. What could I say? I was, am, guilty as charged!

Home: the word is laden with unexpressed longing, with sentiment, with nostalgia. *Home*: this shack that I described to you, a photo of which---along with pictures of the old outhouse, the barn, and the pig pen---adorns my law office, this is the place where, if I could pick my time and place when I will be extracted and returned to my original home, it would be in that old house, a patterning of rain on the tin roof, the wind whistling around the eaves, huddled safe and warm, encapsulated not so much again within the warmth and the smell of the feather mattress and my mother's quilts as encased within the bosom of the love and the memories that, despite the hardship, I experienced there from these good people I call my parents and the people, with all their faults and shortcomings, of the Bug Tussle community, because in them I reside and with them I abide and to them and their Harth, which I affirm as mine as well, I shall return as I, in my turn---like all those before me and those of you after me---take my place, my head pointing eastward toward the rising sun, cocooned in the cool, red mother Harth, awaiting the trumpet that will signal the reconnection of my body with my Self beside that crystal sea in that place I call "home."

Chapter 6

Bug Tussle's Doggone Dogons

The old man was blue-black as slate, and his tiny, ancient body was shriveled and wizened, a husk of skin and bones holding together what I sensed, intuited, was a remarkable mind. His hair was thick and kinky and snow-white, gleaming brightly in the darkness of his cell, and his face reminded me of a prune baked for the summer in the hot Arkansa sun, shrunken and wrinkled and emaciated, a face from which I could not now turn after glimpsing the indomitable soul of him still shining forth through those sunken, burning, black eyes that now pierced me to the core. He rocked back and forth, back and forth, back and forth in a tattered rocking chair that, no doubt, had gone thousands of miles with him, an inmate (a “patient” he was called, but this belied his status; he was indeed an inmate) here for the last thirty years, and perhaps even with his predecessors that society or medical science or the all-knowing judiciary controlled by those shyster lawyers proclaimed not to be “competent” to live in normal society and so, with proper medical testimony and the grinding of the legal system, it locked them away forever in this place, the Batton State Insane Asylum, where they would not be an affront, an embarrassment, a burden, or perhaps even a challenge or a threat to the comfortable and staid existence of the so-called “normal” folks in society. Yep, in those days this institution was a prison of lost souls, the bars on the windows being as thick and imprisoning as any confining the criminals at Pucker Penitentiary.

I had not meant to stop. I had not wanted to talk to him. After all, he was crazy, was he not? I was there with my cousin, Henry “Huh Bubba Huh” Clifford, grandson of my great-uncle, Andrew Clifford, who as a punishment for imbibing too much white lightning years ago, to the moral outrage of Sister Melcher and the Methodist Episcopal Church, had been turned over to a “reprobate” mind. Henry had driven up to visit his grandfather, and he had asked me if I wanted to go along. Never having been to this place and being the curious kind (even at age 13 in 1959), I agreed to go along for the ride.

It was a visit that would change my life, one of those moments in time when all that is real becomes unreal, when that which is unreal becomes suddenly real, when all that is certain goes up into a puff of uncertainty, when the very foundations of the Self are rocked and even splintered.

As Henry visited with Uncle Andrew, I shuffled and wandered up and down the dark corridors peering curiously and with pity upon the huddled creatures behind the iron bars, some quiet and withdrawn, staring into a space and time not of this world, others whining and slobbering and moaning and whimpering and drooling, rocking back and forth or beating their heads senselessly against the padded walls of their cells. Each was somebody’s father or mother or grandfather or grandmother or son or daughter, but almost nobody came to visit them in this place. They were, for the most part I surmised, abandoned, forgotten, left to live (except this existence would be an injustice to “live”) and die in this place with its gloomy and forlorn and dreary and lonely atmosphere, a place from which all hope had long ago fled if there had ever been any hope here at all.

As I walked past his cell, he whispered to me---not loud but sibilant, insistent, demanding, a voice too resonant and deep and commanding of attention to emanate from the pitiful rag doll mummy in front of me:

“Hey youse, youse boy, I’se knows you. Youse knows it, too! I knows youse, boy.”

I halted, shocked, incredulous, uncertain. I did not know this man. Why, this was 1959, and Orvel Fortis had only two years before closed Big Rock Central High School, standing in the school house door in defiance of the Federal courts and even the Federal troops to prevent what he called “race-mixing,” and so I knew no black person in this segregated society. I knew *of them*, of course, for I had listened to my father talk of Old Man Nalen, after whom the Nalen Hill was named, and I had heard Ludy Oather tell of how his neighbor, this same Sank Nalen, came to his gate in the cold, snow-bitten days of December, 1915, when Ludy’s father, Wilton Oather, was dying, hailed the house, and came in to sit up with the dying man, sitting there night after night faithfully as any good neighbor would, and to hear Ludy’s account of it, “*This was a right neighborly thing to do.*” Moreover, my dad had told me stories of the black folks who no longer lived at Bug Tussle but with whom, in his younger years, he had paled around, fishing and hunting together as country boys are wont to do.

At the annual Christmas parade in Maldoon I had often watched, fascinated and transfixed, as the Hilson (“Colored”) High School band and the majorettes, with polished and glintingly burnished uniforms and instruments, strutted and sashayed and jitter-bugged down the street in stark contrast to the sedate Maldoon band and pale-legged majorettes, and I had been in the Swamp Gas County Courthouse and the Maldoon City Hall and had witnessed firsthand the “White” and “Colored” water fountains, open symbols of the legally imposed color barriers, and these people were fascinating to me as are all people and all things unknown, but it was more than this: it was not so much that they were unknown to me as that they were unknowable for a white, country kid imbued with the culture of the 1950’s.

Yes, I knew about Nalen Hill on the Bug Tussle-Saginaw Road where---just a few short yards down the other side---Hank Jayner was buried. I had seen his grave and had heard the story, a story that happened even before Old Man Nalen or any other black came to Bug Tussle and squatted on the forty acres of paper-thin, dirt-poor land of these impoverished DeCoq Hills, accompanied only by a Freedman Bureau mule and new hope that, with freedom, things would be different from those days on the Morris Plantation when they were property of Old Colonel Daniel and his young wife, Belle, who, though treating them kindly by all reports, still kept them in bondage, chattelized as mere property.

After all, it was little consolation to folks devoid of freedom and thus forlorn of hope that at Christmas Old Colonel Morris once promised his slaves that they could have a vacation from work so long as the fire that they built on Christmas day burned and put forth visible smoke from the chimney and that they, the slaves, outsmarted and outwitted

their master by cutting a swamp sweetgum tree, sawing off a huge butt cut, burying it in the mud of the slough for well over a month so that it could soak up tons of moisture, and then placing it as the back log in the Colonel's vast fireplace where it simmered and smoked for nigh onto a month, a month of respite from slave chores if not slavery itself.

No, there was no hope in this, only a sense of triumph perhaps, a fleeting and insignificant but nevertheless rewarding victory for folks too long denied victory, of any kind, but they *did* have hope as the Civil War loomed in 1859---they called it "New Hope," the church they established when Peter Whitlow and his fellow slaves, in defiance of laws prohibiting such assemblies, convened in secrecy on the banks of the Washita River to praise and to worship the very God whose white subjects, Cristans no less, had come in the slave ships to faraway Africa to traffic in human flesh with the infidel Harab Muslin slave-traders and then carted their fathers and grandfathers and mothers and grandmothers away, shackled like animals in filthy ship holds, to this new and strange land. This religion of the white man, the Cristan religion of the buyers not the Muslin religion of the sellers, Peter Whitlow saw, offers hope for it promises a tomorrow where the pain and the suffering and the tears of the present world would all be assuaged and voided and made of no effect, so New Hope Baptist Church it was and Greater New Hope Baptist Church, in Maldoon, it still is.

All this naturally flashed through my mind as the old man spoke, but it is so strange, most strange, that at this very moment when the old man accosted me and began to render asunder everything that I had ever known and believed and accepted as reality and reduce ("transduce" is maybe the better word) it into one minute and fragile and meaningless piece of infinity no bigger than the end of a needle that I would recall both the black folks of Bug Tussle and this Confederate soldier buried on Nalen Hill. It is strange because I did not until a few minutes later know that this old black man, Fred Counts, had lived near Nalen Hill years ago. Maybe some sense of him emanated from his soul directly to mine, or I absorbed some ethereal wisp like osmosis across the distance between us in the still and hushed and hospital-fragranced air. Or maybe I knew instinctively already, even before he told me his story, knew perhaps with some primordial, vestigial memory the truth of which he would soon speak, knowing it already but nevertheless listening with rapt attention, transported outside and beyond myself as he told me the story: as he shared with me his past---and mine.

Whatever the case, and I cannot explain it, Hank Clay Jayner's sad story came to mind at that exact moment, and I saw as if there that mounded grave under the hickory tree with pine knots as both headstone and footstone, and as I remained immobile, tongue-tied, before this old black man, I recalled how this Confederate soldier, son of old Dr. Thomas Jayner at Saginaw, had deserted his unit, Co. B, Captain Stark's Company (Clarkson County Volunteers), 1st Regiment (Fagan's) Arkansa Infantry, in which he had enlisted with great fanfare on May 8, 1861 at Big Rock, and tried to go home, leaving a war that at first had been heroic and glorious and patriotic, but that soon became a swirl of death and dying men and horses and wounded creatures with legs and arms and other body parts severed, perhaps with a cannon ball or with the bone saw of the regiment "surgeon," all without any anesthesia except the excruciating pain.

Yes, Hank Jayner, missing and wounded at Shiloh, "about 2 p.m." on April 6th or 7th, 1862, at least so said the "Report of Killed, Wounded & Missing at Shiloh," and then hurting and wounded in the hospital in Tunnell Hill and Atlanta, Mississippi for much of 1863, had seen too much to maintain any illusions whatsoever about the glory of the war, and he had long ago given up his enthusiasm for fighting much less for the sacrifice of dying for a South that he knew, whether its people knew it or not, was already in 1864 gone, doomed, passé, history, and so to continue fighting, so he thought, was futile and worse than useless, and besides all he wanted to do was to go home.

Yes, all Hank wanted was to go home. So one dark night, September 10, 1864 it was, the day he drew his last monies (\$66.00), when the clouds obscured the crescent moon, he slipped away from his unit and commenced his travels back across time and space to a place he called home, a place soon to be transmogrified into something new and strange and bereft of human chattlery in the post-war era, a place called Saginau where all that he had ever known and loved in his short life resided: his family, his fiancée, his church, his land. It was the dog days of late summer and early fall in Bug Tussle as he trudged down the dusty Bug Tussle-Saginau road toward home, having just a few hundred yards before left the Upper Murfreesboro road that winded its way through Bug Tussle and on to points south and west, coming by the Methodist Church with its cemetery where later the ramshackle one-room Bug Tussle School would stand, hungry and tired and defeated not so much by the withering and smothering heat of this searing August afternoon here in September as by the dishonor that he, a deserter to the sacred Southern cause, carried in his breast.

A few hundred yards past the cemetery on the left side of the road was the old Stainbridge place, where several decades later my grandmother, Allie (who would die of the flu in 1921), Grandpa Hart Clifford's wife, would be born. The cabin was logs, and an unpainted picket fence ran alongside the road, enclosing a yard full of holly-hocks, and rooster combs, hydrangeas, and other flowers in carefully tended beds, flowers that now wilted and browned under the scorching September sun. A barn, old and sagging even in this time, was across the road on the right.

In the yard was an old woman, perhaps the first Stainbridge bride or maybe another surnamed bride, whose name is now lost in time, to come across via Georgia from the Virginia mountains, a captive to a husband who could not, simply would not, be content until he moved to the very ends of the Earth and a passel, even then, of snarling and fussing and sometimes snot-nosed Stainbridge younguns crying out for her attention. She wore a patched but clean bonnet to shade her head from the sun, and she knelt as she pulled grass from the flowerbeds, absorbed totally in bringing some beauty to this beauty-less place. She did not even hear the man, Hank, as he walked up, shuffled really, wisps of dry dust kicking up behind him with every step, and she was startled when he called out:

“Hello, ma’am, do you think I might have a dipper of water and maybe a biscuit to eat? It’s been days I’ve been travellin’ now, and I reckin I’m jest about beat. I’m jest about plumb wore down to a nubbin’!”

She looked up, her searching eyes taking in his visage---pale and drawn and sickly and chalkish despite the underlying tan---and his clothes, dusty and woolen and hot and homespun no less, but discernible as what passed as a Confederate soldier’s uniform. He was but a lad of twenty-two or so, she saw, but his shadowed face was haggard, much too old for his age, and his eyes, oh, his eyes, they seemed lifeless, devoid of hope or caring or even living, dead things glaring out from his bony skull. But for the rhythmic moving of his chest he could have been a walking dead man, she thought, and she involuntarily shuddered at the idea.

“Why, I reckin I can spare you some water and a bite to eat,” she answered.
“Come on inside the gate, and I’ll fetch them.”

As she shambled up the makeshift steps onto the front porch and on down the dogtrot hall toward the bucket of cool water on the back porch, Hank sat down wearily on an upturned block of firewood beside the large pile, only some of which had been split and stacked in preparation for winter. His shoulders sagged, and he fanned himself in the dead and breeze-less air with his gritty cap, shooing away the flies that tried to alight on his face. Only a few more miles now, and he would be home, he thought, and he wondered what his fiancée, Jennie, would think as he slunk back home from a war to which he had departed with such hoopla and hoorays and farewells, his precious Jennie and, yes, his mother and his father and lads and lassies from Bug Tussle and Saginaw who followed him, whooping and hollering and reveling, all the way to the ford on the Washita River at Rockport as he rode away to Big Rock to enlist back in May, 1861, no, not, *slunk*, he thought, *slithered* back on his yellow belly like the coward that he was, only dismissing that thought immediately because he, if no one else, knew that it was not cowardice that drove him to desert but the despair and hopelessness that infused him from the blood and the guts spilled for what noble cause he no longer knew not.

“I am not a coward,” he thought, *“but Jennie will think that I am, and my father---that stern and unloving Methodist physician to whom honor and duty and loyalty mean everything---he will think so, too. Maybe it would have been better if I had been shot dead on the killing fields of Corinth or Shiloh and left as foodstuff for the hogs who feasted and gorged themselves there on the Confederate bodies.”*

Old Lady Stainbridge re-appeared, shuffling arthritically down the sagging steps, and she spoke kindly to Hank as she approached, the first words of acceptance, of non-approbation, that he had heard in days:

“Here you are, son. It’s all I got cooked up right now, but I reckin’ ye welcome to whut I got.”

And she handed him a large dipper gourd chock full of water along with two biscuits from which poked slices of salt-cured and hickory-smoked ham.

“Thank ye, kindly, ma’am,” he spoke, “It’s right neighborly of ye.”

As he gulped down the cool water and wolfed down the ham biscuits, she tried to engage him in conversation, for she did not have many neighbors, and few strangers wandered down this dusty, winding path that called itself a road outside her gates, but the boy seemed evasive, even afraid, and she ceased her questioning. He did, however, tell her that his name was Hank Jayner, son of Dr. Tom Jayner at Saginau, but even this scant information she had to pull out of him. She was not a prying woman, so although she was curious and would have loved to know more, she did not ask him what he was doing on this sultry, humid September afternoon trudging down this Godforsaken road without his unit. He could be, she supposed, on furlough, but then that was not likely, given the state of the war right then---or so the folks said at Rockport, Swamp Gas County seat---folks who may have heard from the captain or crew of one of the longboats that plied, even in wartime and at great peril, the muddy waters of the Washita River down to the Red River and on under cover of darkness past the Mississippi River Union blockades to the blackmarket cotton merchants in N’Orleans who had never paid a fair price for cotton but who now, given the difficulty of smuggling the bales offshore and onto blockade-runners bound for England, offered a pittance indeed.

Yes, he could be on furlough, but she doubted it, and that left only one alternative as far as she could see, but she was a charitable woman, was she not, who had bemoaned her own two sons going off to the war to fight for a system of slavery and cotton in which her family, upland hill farmers, had no stake whatsoever.

“It’s just like all wars,” she thought, “The rich folks get us in them, and then they send the poor folks to fight and to die for their mistakes.”

Hank finished his meal and asked if he might fetch another dipper of water, and she told him to go ahead and help himself, that the bucket was on the back porch, or if he wanted some cooler water to go ahead and draw a bucket from the dug well in the back yard. He thanked her and went to the well, lowered the wooden bucket down into the damp darkness, the pulley screeching a little even on the frayed rope, and he pulled it up then, its weight heavy and promising, and drank thirstily from the bucket, dipped his hands into the coolness and splashed water over his face, hair, and neck, drank again, and then came back to the gate, pausing, thinking about the kindness he had received here, saying as he opened the gate and commenced on down the road toward Saginau and home:

“Mizz. Stainbridge”----for he knew her name by now, she had told him---“I don’t rightly know how to thank ye for yer hospitality, so I’ll jest say ‘God bless ye’ and leave it at that. I rekkin I best be on my way, what with dark coming on so soon and everything.”

She said nothing, nothing at all, merely nodded her acceptance of his words, and bent down, again on her knees, her long skirt pulled up around her ankles, and began to pull more grass from amongst her precious flowers. Only when Hank had been gone long enough to just about round the nearest bend did she glance through the wooden pale fence and see him round the curve, dust swirling about him, shuffling on toward home. She turned back to her flowers, and it must have been thirty minutes or, maybe less, that she heard the thunder of hoofs storming down the road past the Methodist Church and the cemetery, but she stood up only when a contingent of six horsemen, all outfitted with guns and sabers and gray mixed-and-matched and mismatched uniforms, reigned their sweaty and panting and frothing horses to a halt before her gate.

“Hey, lady,” the man in charge yelled, “You ain’t seen a Confederate deserter hereabouts, have you?”

She looked at him a few minutes before answering, trying to judge his intentions, read his face as she was wont to do, but she saw nothing there, only a mask that she could not penetrate, and she at first started not to answer at all or if she did answer say to this man and his fellow-soldiers:

“Why don’t you jest take yourselves and your bloody war away from my gate? I want nothing of it. Isn’t it enough that I have given, sacrificed, two sons of my body to your glorious and vain endeavor? Is that not enough for you? Isn’t it? Isn’t it?”

That’s what she wanted to say, but she did not, could not, speak those words, could not, would not, speak any words because whatever she might try to say would choke in her throat and refuse to pass her lips, for she knew what would happen to that young man, Hank, knew it as if it had already happened and she had already been there on the far side of what later would be called Nalen Hill, shovel in hand, a patched sheet to wrap his body, she and old Sabre Eason doing what no one else dared to do for this deserter, this “coward” they called him: give Hank a decent burial if not a Cristan one.

No, she spoke no words, only nodded and pointed down the winding road to the curve and beyond, mutely, knowing and accepting that even in the nodding and the pointing that she, a Cristan lady, had already become complicit in that which, in her mind at least, had already happened, and so she did not even look up as they galloped off, and she did not even wince when she heard the shots, six of them, a few minutes later, but she simply traipsed into the house, pulled a sheet from a stack in the corner---not her best sheet, mind you, but a serviceable sheet---got her shovel, opened the gate, and waltzed down the road toward Saginaw to do what she and Sabre had to do and in her mind had already done.

At least this was the version of the Hank Jayner story that was told at Bug Tussle, but an alternate storyline was also passed down in Bug Tussle and the next community west, New DeLoche, whose history Lawrence Marsons wrote in the 1940’s to 1960’s. According to Marsons, Hank Jayner may have been a deserter from the regular Confederate army but, if so, when he got back to Arkansa he joined a local Confederate

“bushwhacker” gang that captured “Old Man Bell,” a Yankee sympathizer, and prepared to shoot him. When Old Man Bell asked for and received permission to pray before he was shot, he took the opportunity to pray for each one of the gang members. Thereupon, none of the gang would follow the captain’s orders to shoot him, so the captain allegedly turned to young Hank Jayner and said, *“Hank, you never failed us yet.”* With this praise, Hank, in this version, shot the old man, after which a Yankee contingent rounded him up, “ran him around a tree until he was tired, and then shot him.”

Why Hank Jayner’s story flitted through my mind in the seconds after the old black man spoke I knew not then and I know not today, but the old man would not leave me there---trapped back in 1864---for long, for he was insistent that I acknowledge him in the present, asking:

“Aintcha gonna ask how I knows you, boy? Or does youse knows already?”

So I answered him, vehemently denying what I did, in fact, at least in part, already know, denying it a second time when he persisted, and then even a third time until somewhere out on the asylum grounds a rooster crowed as if to punctuate my heated and final denial, my betrayal of what and who I was:

“I don’t know you, old man! I don’t!

Almost begging now, pleading, my heart racing furiously, my mind dashing darting about for any way to avoid hearing that which I could not admit to myself I already knew, at least in part, that which I knew in some corrugated corridor of my being, implanted in some vestigial synapse or dislocated neuron of my mutated brain, my voice taking on a whining tone, obsequious, servile:

“You’ve got me confused with someone else. You must have! I’ve never been here before, so how can you possibly know me?”

He did not answer. No, he didn’t respond at all, only pinioned me with that penetrating stare until I flinched and looked away and shifted from foot to foot, uncomfortable yet intrigued by the words of this ancient husk of a black man, silent now, my thoughts jumbled but now acquiescent, abnegant, compliant, passing over the reins of my life to him without even knowing that I was doing so, thinking:

“He’s gonna tell me anyway, so I might as well listen. But I shorely hope he ain’t about to tell me what I think he’s about to tell me.”

Then he spoke again:

“I’s been here for nigh on thirty years,” he mumbled, *“And youse right, I ain’t never laid these old eyes on youse before. But I’se knows you, boy. I do. Youse from my home. Youse got the mark! I can see it, now cain’t I? Cain’t I, now?”*

He squinted at me, seeing whatever imaginary mark that, so I told myself, crazy people locked up in the loony bin see, but I could not help myself from asking, my curiosity getting the best of me:

“What you talking about, old man?” I asked.

“I’se talking about you, boy, the mark, and your home. You see, I used to know your daddy, went coon and possum hunting with him when I lived at Bug Tussle. Yessir, we did, manya night! Dat’s a fact! And I knew then that he, just like you, had the mark.”

“How could he know I was from Bug Tussle? Or know my father? And especially know me? And what was this “mark” that he kept talking about? Why, this man is crazy, a loony, a cuckoo-bird, or he wouldn’t be locked up here, would he?” I thought.

“What’s yer name, boy?” he asked.

“Jackson Clifford,” I answered.

“A good name,” he muttered his approval. “You have your daddy’s close-set Stainbridge eyes. My name is Fred Counts. I s’pose you’ve heard yer daddy speak of me, aintcha?”

I thought back in time a few years. Yes, my dad had talked about Fred Counts and the other blacks who once lived at Bug Tussle when he was a young man, and I now recalled my daddy’s stories of how he went hunting and fishing with some of them, how he watched and learned as Fred cured and smoked his large herd of hogs, how he went to the black church, New Hope Baptist Church, to a revival meeting one time, he and Ludy Oather and other white folks driving in wagons down to the church built on the road that used to cut off from the Nalen Hill and wind its way through to the Saginaw Road right by the old Morris Plantation house and on to the Saginaw Eddy on whose eastern bank stood, at the turn of the last century, a huge sawmill that sawed and processed the virgin timber brought on steam locomotives from the hills and the hollers of Bug Tussle, Saginaw, Partway, DeLoche, Possum Trot, and other communities both in the DeCoq Hills and all the way to the Jack Mountain toward far-off Mott Springs, the sawmill at which the black women, although not still enslaved, nevertheless slaved away as washerwomen for the sawmill workers, white and black alike, eking out a pittance of a living for their families.

Yep, I now recalled, Bug Tussle society had not been so fractured in those days before the departure of all the black folks from Bug Tussle, Fred Counts being the last to leave around 1928 I recalled, when there was a common bond of community, faith, and poverty in those DeCoq Hills, which is not to say that there was integration or acceptance or equality or tolerance, for there was not for the most part anyway, in most quarters anyway, as exemplified by one of my father’s visits to New Hope Baptist Church. The church was beyond the black schoolhouse and almost down to the Saginaw Road, sitting right by where James Oather, Ludy’s son, now has his house, and as the white folks knew in these pre-Pennecostal days, the black church *rocked*, throbbed with tempo and emotion

that some of the predominant white sect, the Missionary Baptist, found appalling, even if one turned a blinded eye to the race-mixing that went on down there. There was, of course, a black side and a white side, and the black minister treated the whites with what could only be described as undue obsequious respect, but when the music started and the singing rang from the rafters shadowed by the hanging coal oil lanterns, the black worshippers forgot their white guests and worshipped the God of their liberation, who freed and redeemed them from sin and oppression and the dreary drudgery of their daily lives, the God of their blessed new hope, with their customary gusto, raw emotion, and utter abandon.

My daddy told me how in those pre-Pennecostal days he had never seen anyone “get happy” or “dance in the Spirit,” but he witnessed it all at that little black church called New Hope between Bug Tussle and Saginaw, saw Della Nalen shriek and run around and around the church, overcome with emotion and the need for sweet surrender and release in the Spirit, until she rushed from the church and smack dab into Ludy Oather’s wagon wheel outside, over which she plopped, exhausted and delirious with happiness, enthralled in the nether regions of her soul with the freedom in and the communion with her Lord.

That night would be marred, however, by the actions of some of the white Missionary Baptists who sneaked up to the black church and loosened the wheel nuts from all the white folks’ wagons so that the wheels dropped off when they started to leave around midnight after the long service was completed. Perhaps it was these same narrow-minded Cristans who, a few years later around 1930, when the Pennecostal movement swept like wildfire out of control into Bug Tussle and Saginaw, came to the brush arbors where the people were whooping and hollering, to use their words, “*like niggers*,” and again removed the wagon nuts, at least on the wagons belonging to all the visiting Baptist heretics.

When this tactic failed to deter the straying Baptists who were ignorantly dabbling with the Pennecostal fire, these other Cristans then coined the epithet that, in religious circles, is the equivalent of “*nigger*” “*holy rollers*.” Yes, “*holy rollers*” is what these former Baptists were mockingly called and, like the word “*queer*” that the gay community has adopted as its own, despite the history of the word appropriating it to themselves not in disdain but in pride, *gay pride*, the new Pennecostal sect adopted and appropriated the moniker “*holy rollers*” as they, from a beginning as humble as that of the slaves themselves, rolled, no, “*steamrolled*” is a better word from the United States across Africa and South America and Asia until their numbers now rival those of Catholicism worldwide, knowing all this and waiting for him to continue, thinking about intolerance, about dogmatism, about refusal to change:

“Now ain’t knowing the truth but not just knowing it, but knowing that you know it and that no others know it, ain’t that just great?”

Also, I recalled how all the blacks fled Bug Tussle, defeated by the hardscrabble life in these lifeless hills and lured to Maldoon by the prospect of a better life at the

Hackme Brick Plant and other brick yards, living there for decades in what most white folks called “Nigger Town” located (where else?) on the other side of the railroad tracks. Finally, only Fred Counts was left at Bug Tussle, alone among all these white folks, until that day before Christmas, in 1928 it was (so I learned years later from Mrs. Splendora Males, daughter of old Clark Williams and the last black to be born at Bug Tussle) when Fred showed up in Maldoon specifically in the front yard of the Williams house. It was cold that Christmas, and a heavy snow had fallen the night before, blanketing the ground with almost a foot of white. Against this cotton background the black man, naked as a jaybird in the front yard snow, made an indelible impression on the young Splendora, the black man whom her father told her was Fred Counts wallowing there in the snow, naked and freezing but unconcerned, mumbling to himself and to anyone else who would listen crazy stuff about the Dog Star and a people called “Dogons” and bursting into weird songs about the sweet chariot that was coming, “swinging low” he crooned, to take him home, cursing when approached, reproaching his kinsmen and former neighbors alike, yelling at them in a mad voice that Mrs. Males claims to hear to this day:

“Youse doggone Dogons! Why did youse leave me? Bug Tussle is not my home, damn it, and some of youse knows it! I knows youse knows it! Surely some of youse recall, don’t you? Don’t you? Don’t you? Home! Home! Home! Home! Home!”

One crazy old man, for he was old even then, Fred was raving and ranting about being an alien in a humanoid body---not his words but that is what he meant---and how he had heard from “home” and how he could not understand why the others simply would not open their ears and their minds to hear and to see what he knew to be truth. Yes, he slobbered and moaned and wallowed about in the snow in that yard, and even when the white sheriff came to get him they could hear him talking his crazy stuff as the high sheriff handcuffed him and loaded him into the back of the vehicle that was most assuredly not the chariot about which he ranted to be carted off to the insane asylum in Batton, the black folks section of it of course, which was all that folks could do in those days for crazy people, the black community agreeing that Fred Counts was “one sick nigger.” They understood, however, or so they claimed what had happened to Fred: he had simply gone crazy (been “driven” crazy, to use their precise words) by living out there, the only black soul amongst all those white folks, because every black knew that blacks needed their own kind, and exposure to too many whites is dangerous indeed.

Shaken out of my reverie by the old man’s voice, I tried to orient myself back to this time and place, this *insane asylum*, where a crazy old dried up prune of a black man was persisting in telling me things that I did not want to hear, but I listened anyway, unable to walk away, remembering his raving and ranting all those years ago in that snow bank over in Maldoon, fearing what the intuitive part of me knew, if only vaguely, that he had to tell me.

“Youse wanna hear it, dontcha?” he asked, “Whats I gotta tell youse? I’m not crazy, youse know, even though I knows you thinks I is.”

“Just tell me,” I said resignedly, “Just tell me whatever it is you have to say.”

And so he did.

While I don't expect you to believe it, this is Fred Count's fantastic story as best I recall, and I think I recall all of it, but I am putting what he told me in my own words for clarity because I had to pull a lot of it out of him. Believe it if you will, but I did come to believe it, and I believe it still.

Have you ever heard of the Cliffs of Bandiagara, he asked, not pausing for an answer, where my people, the Dogons, live? It's in West Africa in a country south of the Sahara called Mali, and we have lived there for too many generations to count. My ancestors lived there among those sandstone cliffs along the Niger River almost as long as human beings lived on Harth. The Cliff of Bandiagara are in the Homburi Mountains near Timbuktu. You've hear of Timbuktu, haven't you? Our villages look out from the cliffs and hills onto the Bongo plains. When ancient Egypt and Sumer were flourishing, our peoples worked alongside, but we had to flee west to this miserable land where we eked out a miserly existence.

It is here that my grandfather was captured by Harab slave traders and taken west to a seaport to be sold into slavery. And it was here that he, as a mere lad then, learned of his Sirian origins, and I'm not talking about the Middle Eastern county of Syria, either. I am talking about Sirius, the Dog Star, the brightest, the most brilliant, star in Harth's southern sky. My people believe that, although it is not discovered yet, that Sirius has a companion star, a small, intensely heavy star, and they say that this star moves in a fifty year elliptical journey around Sirius, and we base our calendar on this cycle. My people also speak of the five moons on the home planet there, but again no one has seen the planet yet, much less the moons. We call the heavy substance that comprises Sirius companion star sagala, and it is said to be heavier than anything on Harth, even iron or gold. Our priests say that this companion star rotates on its own axis as it circles the Dog Star Sirius.

And our legends speak of the Nommos, an awfully frightful creature from the Dog Star System, who landed here centuries ago on a mission to help mankind. Our stories say that he and his fellow Nommos arrived in a vessel with much fire and thunder, and all who saw it descend were driven to the ground before it. The Nommos are human-like only not human, living in the water and having scales like fish, or maybe their scales are something else, a "spacesuit" I think it is called, like that Russian guy, Yuri or whatever his name, the man in that sputnik, you know who I mean, was wearing in the picture I saw this month in a magazine. This special Nommos, our stories say, was crucified and resurrected just like Crist---maybe he was Crist, but our legends are not so clear on this point---and he promised just like Crist to come again and to rule the world. That's why my people, the Dogons, accepted Cristianity so readily when we were brought to America. My people, of course, were primitive, and we had no education, no telescopes, no astronomical knowledge of any kind. All we know about the Dog Star is what the Nommos told us.

At some point the Nommos inter-married with humanoid Harthlings, and a mutated form of Dogons and other humanoids came into being, the result being a strange kind of human who spread out across the entire Harth. They were inquisitive people, strangers in what they insisted was a strange land, and they flailed against their limitations, trying vainly to find “home,” but only the Dogon branch of the Sirian progeny remembers home: the home of twin suns and the five moons in the Dog Star System.

He paused, but I knew that he was not finished with me, that he had told me all this merely to set me up for what was to come, the real punch, the left hook out of nowhere and yet everywhere, what I knew without his saying it that he was about to tell me, not wanting to hear but needing to hear what I already knew, accepting it before my ears heard the spoken words:

“I believes, no, I knows, that youse is a descendant of the Nommos. Youse, my young friend, have the mark: youse are from the Dog Star system.”

Only years later did astronomers discover that the crazy old loony, Fred Counts, and his Dogon tribe were right about the Dog Star System. There is a second sun, and it is a white dwarf, and its density is unequalled on Harth. Moreover, the white dwarf does circle its primary, the Dog Star Sirius A, and it is an elliptical orbit that takes about fifty years, and the second sun, the white dwarf, does rotate on its own axis as it ellipses around the system.

Although Fred did not tell me that day, I found out later that the Dogons had also claimed to know the precise distance from Harth to the Dog Star, about eight light years, and astronomers also later confirmed this measurement. To date as I write this, modern science has not confirmed the existence of the Dogon home planet or the presence of the five moons about which Fred spoke.

In time, they will.

Chapter 7

Saintly Sinners And Sinning Saints: Churches And Their Doppelgangers

“You can take some people and hang ‘em over hell until they’re suntanned, and they will still sin.” Rev. Thomas Hollohan.

“The only shame is to have none.” Blase Pascal

There is no steeple to designate it a church, but everybody in the community knows what it is: a house of worship, an unpainted building like others in the community with outhouses (one for the men and another for the women) and, like our house, no ceiling, only rough two-by-four rafters jutting down and across under the tin roof with a huge wood-burning stove made from a steel barrel donated by Mr. Klimm of Klimm’s

Mill & Gin at Maldoon and painted bright silver occupying the front-to-mid part of the building, fired up red-hot in the winter so that the preacher could stay hot and “fired up” when he gave his sermon---unlike the “frozen chosen” Baptist preacher down the road.

Before the coming of electricity coal oil lanterns dangled at various places from the bare rafters. Wooden benches of rough-cut lumber were nailed together with no padding and used as seats, and in the mid-and-late-1940’s sawdust adorned the floor that would, however, soon be replaced by sawmill lumber but in which (the sawdust that is) I would lay as an infant and then a toddler under the front bench on a pallet as my mother and father listened raptly to the country preacher proclaim his simple message.

A little further in time when the church nearly closed, Grandpa Hart Clifford would trudge up the long lane, his lantern bobbing and swinging with each stride, from his old dogtrot log house to which he and his family moved from the Possum Trot hills in the late 1890’s and in which his youngest son, Odus, would live alone, an unmarried hermit, until his death in 1984. Grandpa Hart would join mom and dad and a handful of others in trying to keep the doors open when, as is often the case in Pennecostal churches, the “Spirit” departs for a season before “fresh fire” descends with a vengeance.

Too intrigued to sleep, I recall reclining there on my pallet in the sawdust as Grandpa Clifford would rise to speak, no preacher on hand because none can be afforded, and reads from his Bible even as his father, Lemuel Turner Clifford, an old, one-eyed Kelleyite Church of Crist preacher who before becoming a preacher or even while being such was a dirt-poor hardscrabble farmer in those poor-dirt Possum Trot hills before which he had been a private in Company F of the 29th Mississippi Infantry in that war almost a half century past where Southerners took up their muskets and swords, if they had any, and fought not so much for a way of life, because the ways of the big planters with their bound slaves was alien to them and they were, if anything, more akin to the enslaved than to the slave-holders, but for the right to be free from a Lincoln-imposed union and for pride and honor and glory, at least so they thought in the early days of the war, before all that and more got leached away with the mud and the disease and the blood of Corinth and Shiloh and Gettysborough and a dozen other battles and cemented finally for all eternity in the final humiliation of the defeat at Appomattox Courthouse.

Grandpa Hart Clifford was the latest in a long line of Grandpa Cliffords, one of whom was Grandpa Hart’s Great Grandfather Benjamin Clifford who served in the Revolutionary War from Halifax County, North Carolina and who moved to Chester County, South Carolina around 1798 with his family and a large number of slaves. No one knew or recalled or perhaps they did recall, but by the 1940’s simply did not want to admit it: that our Clifford ancestors (Benjamin was the last) had been participants in that evil system that kidnapped Africans away from their own land and families and brought them to America in the putrid holds of stinking ship, chained and in bondage, before putting them on the auction block and selling them like animals to the owners of the vast cotton plantations.

Maybe even Fred Counts and Sank Nalen and the Williams families and other Bug Tussle blacks, who were members of the Dogon tribe and who told stories passed down through the centuries of their people's particular affinity for the Dog Star (Sirius), were at one time the property of my Grandfather Benjamin. That part of my heritage surprised and shamed me when I first discovered it, and it shames me still, because it is alien to everything I believe about the dignity of man and contrary to my family's identification, its very *identity*, at least since Grandpa Benjamin's time, as compatriots with and members of the poor and down-trodden, so that to learn that my family, my Clifford family, had owned a huge plantation on the Catawba River in Chester County, South Carolina where the proud Dogons and other African tribes were exploited was quite disconcerting, and it was only after I researched the history of my mother's family, the Lenox clan, and found out about the antics of my mother's Civil War grandfather, Thomas G. Lenox, "The Old Goat" I came to call him, particularly his four wives, including two at the same time in different counties, and his desertion of his Confederate unit and his service with the 21st Ohio, Company F, did I find some balance, some amelioration, for my Clifford ancestors' hideous practices, but even the presence of a damn-Yankee in the family tree could not quite counter-balance the shaming stench of slavery in my family background.

In any case, upon his death the plantation and all the slaves Grandpa Benjamin willed to the youngest male, Turner Clifford, whose grandson would be the first physician in the fledgling village of Miami, Florida. Turner's family---Grandpa Hart said half-jokingly---"got the goldmine, and we (his grandfather, Jacob) got the shaft"). The progeny along the Grandpa Hart line, including his father, Lemuel Turner Clifford, the old one-eyed Confederate war veteran Kelleyite preacher whose raucous voice rang out in the Possum Trot hills ("*Sarch the Scriptures! Sarch the Scriptures!*") degenerated into the poverty-stricken subsistence farmers that, even though they fought for the South, must have felt a little bit of satisfaction at the Union victory because Turner and his family finally got their comeuppance when they lost most of their wealth with the freeing of the Clifford family slaves.

Anyway, I recall Grandpa Clifford, Hart or Hartwell, rising at the front of this unpainted country church, and I am wide-eyed and un-asleep on the pallet under the bench because I know what is to come, rising with tears already rolling down his old man's withered sunken cheeks, "testifying" about how he himself had been saved and sustained through all kinds of troubles and adversity so horrifying and graphic that I would wonder in later years as I read the Book of Job if perhaps Grandpa Hart's middle name had not been Job, and then concluding each testimony, each story different and replete with details of some other events from some distant past in his life, so remote that I could not even understand all of it, but listening anyway, knowing what was to come, for my grandpa always said it---he always said it, over and over and over, punctuated between and within the various stories and an exclamation point at the end of each telling:

"Praise the Lord forever! Praise the Lord forever!"

And I, a mere boy, maybe two or three years old now and barely sentient, was perplexed and would wonder:

“Is this Lord he is praising forever the same one who visited upon him the horrors of which he speaks or at least permitted them to happen to this good man?”

And I was troubled even at this early age---would always be troubled---by these questions of good and evil until the day that I, in utter abnegation, could relinquish all and in a Kierkegaardian leap of existential faith leave what I call my “soul” at my Savior’s feet---for only in that time and in that way could I move beyond---even outside--- myself, transcend the mortal plane so to speak, and catch a whiff of home.

Susej was touched by the story and he repeated Grandpa Hart’s refrain, “Praise the Lord, forever!”

And Retep, misunderstanding, muttered as he genuflected, “Thou great Ruler DOG, may Your Name be praised forever!”

And then Susej shared with Retep what he foresaw this humanoid, then a man, would one day write as he grappled with questions to which he lacked answers, at least then and perhaps forever; or at least satisfactory answers, and it made Susej very sad so that had he been on Harth it would have been written:

“Susej wept.”

Perhaps in some alternative universe he had/did/would.

The poem read:

Guarded By The Coiled Serpent

*The empty taste of what might’ve been
Is pregnant with the stench of regret
A universe of verboten sins
Edens that could happen yet
If only the gateway to that firmament
Weren’t guarded by the coiled serpent!*

*Innocence flung into the pungent world
Dazzling ripples of laughing girls
Amidst the swirling eons of space
A moment’s peace on a lacquered face
If only the gateway to that firmament
Weren’t guarded by the coiled serpent!*

If only, the key to that door

*If only to venture in time once more
 Back to the egg on the sandy beach
 Wiggling worm beyond the tidal reach
 If only the gateway to that firmament
 Weren't guarded by the coiled serpent!*

*I've slain the dragon and I've speared the beast
 But nothing's as hard as the humble feat
 Of proclaiming victory in the face of defeat
 Of laying my soul at my Savior's feet
 If only the gateway to that firmament
 Weren't guarded by the coiled serpent!*

"Why is it," pondered Susej, then putting the question to Retep, "that of all my implanted creatures with a smidgen of intelligence these humanoids, or at least a few of them, ponder the question 'why' and even more audaciously 'why not' instead of simply accepting the boundaries of their limited perspective and the confines of the space-time axis? Why must they continually confront and challenge and seek to go beyond the program we have installed and seek to find some escape from linear time?"

"Perhaps it is because the intuitive ones, and this one I see from his 100% score on the Myers-Briggs Personality Profile is intuitive indeed, sense that there is something more, something just beyond their grasp or sight or the time-line and spatial coordinates in which they live, which of course there is, and they simply cannot not wonder about it and simply must rail against what they perceive as their imprisonment," Retep ventured.

"Yes, you're right," Susej agreed. "These sensitive ones are never content in the now; they always think "if only" this or "if only" that, not realizing that each "if only" is, in fact, a key to a door beyond which is an alternate reality not existing on the current time-space continuum of their particular universe."

"Furthermore," continued Susej, "to enter that door would be to occupy two universes simultaneously, and this simply cannot be permitted because the program would overload and short out in a nano-second, and yet they still try, still strive with everything in their beings to think their way or feel their way through the maze, hoping that just one more step or one more thought will push them beyond the veil that they intuit imprisons them."

"They have your nature, my Lord," rejoined Retep, "that something which you value and expect of all your intelligent creatures: an insatiable quest for knowledge, so are you really surprised that they, at least the intuitive ones, sometimes refuse to halt at the boundaries that you impose?"

"I suppose not," sighed Susej, "but we cannot have programs running amuck, now can we? A little free will, freedom so-to-speak, within the confines of the program is

sufficient, don't you think? However, enough of these ramblings! Is there more to be considered prior to initiation of the insertion?"

"Much more," High One," Retep answered. "Consider what I am placing before you right now, but first, Your Highness, may I offer one more digression on the topic we have been discussing?"

Susej frowned, a little irked at Retep's inability to let a subject go, but he asked as patiently as he could, "What do you have, Retep?"

"Well," Retep answered, "I have a writing that this particular intuitive one wrote while he studied at Oxford, and it offers quite an insight into the matters that we have been discussing as well as into the functioning of the program that we installed. I warn you, however, it is quite disturbingly clear even in its opaqueness that this one is trying to find his way, a way, to re-program the software package we gave him."

"Let me see it, then," Susej sighed. So the two of them read:

Signifying Nothing

Vaguely now out of the unintelligible garble of events
 A pattern is emerging,
 An explanation of what must happen---and why.
 It's startling what I see, frightening in a sense,
 But gratifying in that I now know
 What I have always known
 But always refused to admit---
 Even to myself---
 That even in the midst of chaos and dissolution
 Stand hope and compassion and meaning
 Waiting on the lonely beaches of one's mind
 Waiting for the outstretched hand
 Reached out toward salvation in the last, gasping moaning
 Of the desiring and eagerly trembling soul.

It stands clearly and unshakably in my mind,
 The inevitability of the possession and the loss,
 Not so much a sad reality as an accepted one---
 As if I myself unable to comprehend clearly
 Grasped intuitively at a straw of hope floating serenely
 On the placid waters of life,
 On the unruffled lagoon of time,
 Transfixed eternally under the crisp, azure autumn sky
 With the unblinking sun overhead,
 Floating languidly there forever and ever---
 Until the surging waves dislocate the serenity

And their roar shatters the calm of the sunshiny day.

It could be all I hope and long and seek for,
 But it is not what I am made for.
 It is a contradiction in terms, a paradox of peace,
 Drawn across the thread of my life,
 Drawn so tautly that its keenness decrees
 The inevitability of the severing of that slender tie---
 Regrettable in a sense but a necessary regret
 Above and beyond my finite power
 Either to produce or to destroy.

For the turbulent waves flow ever onward
 Past the turgid, shadowed harbors of my soul
 Where I would slink away
 To find rest and peace and security---
 All of which are artificial and unreal
 And hence transient---
 Because produced, created, by the excessive exaggeration
 Of my own needs and desires
 Which matter nothing in the maelstrom of life.

Only empty silence echoes from the heavens
 Telling me that---but not why---this must be so!

“Whew!” whispered Retep, “I can see right now that perhaps we should not turn this one loose on the world.”

“Why not?” countered Susej, “After all, we are gonna turn the world---and much more---loose on him, are we not?”

So Susej and Retep, old friends caught up in the mystery of the shared moment, pondered a while in companionable silence and contemplated, each in his own mind, whether it might perhaps be best to abort the insertion of this one, this chosen one, after all.

But then Susej sighed and directed Retep to show him more of the unpublished manuscript chapter on the churches and sainted sinners and sinful saints of Bug Tussle.

And so he did.

Much of my early life centered around this church, and although I do not regularly attend church now and have not for years, I remember with fondness the love and acceptance and forgiveness and grace that I found there, and I recall the good people who, though none was faultless, strove valiantly to live up to the Cristan ideal. There was kindness in this church and in these people, and there was a raw and unvarnished quality

in their connectedness to the numinous, to their Lord, a simple and childlike faith that bypassed the mind and affirmed the heart and played out in their daily lives and in their relationships with other people. So many of these people had the proverbial hearts of gold---they would give away the shirts on their backs to those in greater need.

One of these, one of the best of the best, was my Uncle Gabe Hollison, who married my mother's half-sister, Lear Dodge. Uncle Gabe (as he was called) was a little man, no more than five feet and few, if any, inches tall, but despite his physical stature he was one of the giants of Bug Tussle because in his smiling countenance and jubilant personality and unmatched kindness Crist himself dwelled. As far as I recall, I never saw him frown and never saw him without a smile on his face and without a song on his lips that he would hum or sing or even whistle as he worked, content and uncomplicated in a way that I have often envied despite his poor but happy subsistence at Hackme Brick Company in Maldoon where he toiled for years for the minimum wage.

Uncle Gabe was particularly fond of children, and for years he taught a Sunday School class and also headed the Children's Church. Although he had little or no money, what he did have he gave away to bring pleasure to those he loved: the wee children that he would call forward to sing the songs that affirmed his faith, if not ours, in the rightness of things, the centrality of evil in the world, the unconditional love of God for all peoples, and the inevitability of the triumph of good. His allure to the kids was not only his radiant smile and his childish enthusiasm but also the bag of candy that he brought every Sunday to pass out to the kids who came forward to sing the little children's songs, and, incidentally every Christmas he would see that the church passed out little paper bags containing an apple, an orange, some nuts, and some hard candy to every person present for the Christmas service, not just the children.

In those days I was not the only child who eagerly looked forward every Sunday to the peppermint stick, the Tootsie Roll, or (my favorite) Circus Peanuts, but even if he had not spent his hard-earned money on candy for us kids, we would have gone forward to sing anyway because Uncle Gabe made it *fun*. After all, kids are quite perceptive, and they can distinguish in a micro-second those adults who *really* love them from those who are just going through the motions. In short, Uncle Gabe exuded love for children and, indeed, for all people, and no doubt he, too, would say that he was just passing on the love and grace that he and his wife, my Aunt Lear, received at that brush arbor in 1930.

Regardless of its source, however, there was simply no disguising his *joie de vivre*, for whatever "bad" might be happening to him (with one exception that I will get to later) nothing ever succeeded in getting him down. The sky might be blackened, but in his mind the sun was always shining, and there was no adversity that he ever encountered (except the one) where he was unable to transform it into something good, and it was this perspective that he brought to his relationships with people. Accepting and non-judgmental, he saw people as they were and loved them despite their faults and shortcomings. It is no wonder, then, that when my Uncle Gabe told us that Jesus himself had said to suffer the little children to come unto Him and that, in saying that, he meant what he said, that:

*“Jesus loves the little children,
 All the little children of the world,
 Red, yellow, black, and white,
 All are precious in his sight.
 Jesus loves the little children of the world.”*

Moreover, Uncle Gabe would tell us in his Sunday School class, all people, however adult and outwardly confident and swaggering they might be, are somewhere inside those same “little children” that Jesus loves and that it does not matter how far we run or where we might hide or how wealthy we might become or how famous or to whatever depths we might sink or whatever horrendous sins that we might commit, that this same God who loved *all*—red, yellow, black, and white—the little children of the world, loves us, too: that we could never escape from the love of God that is unconditional and everlasting and without beginning and without end and enormous beyond human measure, and that this love is extended, free for the taking, to all the peoples of the world, regardless of race or color or class or other artificial barriers.

Of course, being poor himself (as were we all in Bug Tussle at that time), he also emphasized that Jesus has a special affinity for the poor and the downtrodden and the misfits, and, further, if we were to emulate Him that we should extend the same love and acceptance to these people. The message was underscored by a crocheted Bible verse, red letters on pure white, on the wall of the Sunday School class:

“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul---?”

Whew! Think about what I have just written! This is a revolutionary Gospel! It is a philosophy that, if implemented, would transform this sickened planet Harth and break the chains of bondage in which most people spend their lives. Think about it! Only with unconditional love is forgiveness possible, and only with forgiveness of others are we freed of our own anger and hurts and wounds that fester and metastasize and eat at our souls and spirits like cancer. However, until we have a source of that unconditional love and know that it is boundless, we are not free to give away whatever little love that we have; instead we clutch it to ourselves, not realizing that only in setting it free to succor the hurts and pains of others and the ills of society do we free ourselves to receive a new supply that, in turn, we can give away.

Other than from his faith, Uncle Gabe’s joy stemmed from his relationship with other people and with my Aunt Lear. Those of you, and I suspect there are many, who despair that a relationship can be both lasting and loving did not know my Uncle Gabe and Aunt Lear. If they ever said a cross word to one another, I never heard it. They had fun together, joking with each other and laughing at simple pleasures. They lived to love and loved to live, and their purpose in life was to be of service to each other and to others. It was impossible to visit their home, as it was my Aunt Woo-Woo’s home or my Aunt Fern’s or Uncle Fess’s, without taking something with you: a jar of jelly, some fresh vegetables, or whatever gift that they might have at the moment. Giving was their way of

passing on love, and they dispensed literally untold thousands of such gifts during their lifetimes, many to the downtrodden, the poorer people, the sick, and the elderly. They did it not for acclaim or approval or out of a guilty “liberal conscience,” but they did it because they just could not *not* do it: their joy and their love for God and man and for each other was so unspeakable and full of glory that they simply could not contain it within themselves; it just *had* to be given away!

An aspect of their love that I always suspected was confirmed only when Uncle Gabe developed prostate cancer and then had a stroke that left him unable to walk. He lingered on in this sedentary state for several years, and for an energetic man who never ceased working (and enjoying the working) it was hell itself to be immobilized on the couch in that house. Worse, however, was that he could no longer---at age 83 or so---have sex with his wife, and this brought him great pain. It was perhaps this, more than anything else, that he could not transform into good, and it was this impotence---not just the physical or sexual but the mental inability to rise above his fate---that caused him to shed the only tears that I ever saw, except those profuse tears of joy while singing or banging out some old out-of-tune hymn on his guitar at the church. He talked with me about it, his feelings, his inability to change things which squelched his hope and his joy, and I know that like Job he cried out to what must have seemed a remote and uncaring God to relieve him of his burden and his lot, by death if necessary, but it was several years before his telephone call to heaven was answered and Uncle Gabe was called home, and during that time my old questions arose and haunted me:

“How can a merciful and a loving and an ostensibly just God who is, by definition, omnipotent impose (or permit to be imposed, one and the same really, are they not?) such a tragedy upon this good and righteous man?”

It was a question that my childhood faith would not and perhaps could not answer and that no amount of book learning at Lyon College or St. John’s College, Oxford or Michigan Law School, where justice itself is taught as the bedrock, the foundation, of man’s law if not God’s, could illuminate in the least. It’s a question as old as time, and the answer is perhaps not in time, at least in the lineal time in which we appear to live and subsist. Perhaps it was questions like these that seemed to imply a schizoid duality of this God that caused me to become aware of the doppelganger church and people of Bug Tussle.

While there was the church of my mother and father, my Grandpa Hart, my Uncle Gabe and Aunt Lear, and others, there was also the *other* church as well, co-existing and thriving alongside the first, invisible and incomprehensibly hypocritical if not evil, the one that no one acknowledged or even noticed because things like this, *evil things*, simply did not, *could not* (at least consistent with the people’s image of themselves), exist in Bug Tussle among God-fearing people who deluded themselves into believing that they actually and always practiced what they preached: love and acceptance and forgiveness and peace and grace.

One such incident occurred in 1934, about sundown it was, on a sultry Sunday August afternoon not more than fifty yards or so from the Assemblies of God Church down the lane toward Grandpa Hart's place. Jacob B. "Bud" Servatt, brother to Trixie Hill and the father of Hattie, who later married Elfred Clifford after my mother jilted him, and Robina, who married my mother's half-brother, Ray Dodge, was a timber-cutter in the community. So was Huey Fancy, husband of Ethel Willingham, sister of my Aunt Cordella, who married my father's younger brother, Karl Clifford, both of whom were founders of the Bug Tussle Assemblies of God Church. Both Huey Fancy and Bud Servatt attended the Assemblies of God Church, although Huey less frequently than Bud, who was an upstanding member. A dispute arose between them about some timber. It seems that Bud had contracted with Mike Rowland, a Maldoon banker, to cut a 40 acre swatch of timber back toward the DeCoq Creek, but when he went to check it out he found that it had already been cut.

Someone told Bud that Huey Fancy had come onto the property and cut the timber, in effect stealing it. Then someone---Bud Servatt denied to his dying day that he was the one---told the sheriff about the timber theft, and charges were preferred against Huey Fancy. Huey began to inquire around as to who had "turned me in." Some community wag told him that "Bud done it," and he immediately assumed that it was Bud Servatt because he was, after all, a timber-cutter and it was he who had the contract to log the 40 acres. Bud Servatt maintained, however, that it was actually Bud Melcher who reported the theft.

Nevertheless, Huey Fancy, who denied that he had stolen the timber, was quite incensed, and so on this searing August afternoon he, just about the time Sunday evening church was starting, "invited" Bud outside to discuss the matter. J. K. Treadwell and John Tom Fancy accompanied the two men as they went, arguing and fussing, from the church yard down the Hart Clifford lane. The argument escalated when Huey asked Bud point blank:

Huey: "*I hear that you've been alyin' on me. Have ye?*"

And Bud: "*No, I ain't been alyin' on you. I just went over to look at some timber, and it was already cut. Someone told me that you had already cut it.*"

And Huey: "*You're a damn liar. I know that you turned me in.*"

And Bud: "*No, Dewey, I didn't turn you in even though I did hear that you're the one who done it.*"

And Huey, more livid and belligerent: "*You're a damn liar, Bud Servatt, cause I was told that you turned me in. The man said 'Bud turned you in, Huey,' and you tell me, Bud, what other Bud do you think would have turned me in?*"

And Bud, trying for peace, to deflect the anger: "*Maybe it was Bud Melcher done it, Huey. You know how he always likes to meddle and gossip.*"

And Huey: “*Bud Melcher, my ass!*”

And with this last comment Huey whipped out a butcher knife and stabbed Bud in the chest, puncturing his left lung after which he fled, leaving Bud lying on the ground. My uncle, Lammy Clifford, loaded Bud up in his old Model T automobile and took him to a doctor at Maldoon, but Bud never recovered, although he lingered on for exactly one year and a day, dying on the very same day that his first wife, Maggie, had died. For some reason Huey flung the butcher knife into Malvin Hill’s yard, where his wife Trixie found it, and their son, Glenn Hill, exhibited it for years to anyone who was interested.

Eventually captured, Huey Fancy first appeared in the Constable’s Court, that is to say, before my Grandfather William Dodge, Bug Tussle’s Justice of the Peace. Grandpa Dodge found him guilty of assault and battery and fined him \$100. What perplexed people, however, and caused tongues to wag was that Bud Servatt’s brother, Mel, actually paid Huey Fancy’s fine.

This, of course, in a community where everyone knew everyone else’s business better than the other person knew it himself led to an alternate, more “juicy” version of events, and since it was more juicy naturally it was given more credence than the first version, a mere dispute over timber. The second version said that Huey used the timber incident as an excuse: that Mel never married, lusted after Bud’s young wife, Annie, and that he actually paid, perhaps in conspiracy with Trixie Servatt Hill, who squabbled continuously---like “cats and dogs,” people said---with brother Bud, the adjacent property owner to the west about the property line, to have Bud killed. In fact, the Justice of the Peace Criminal Docket Book for Bug Tussle Township reflects that in 1925 Trixie was charged, on the complaint of Bud Servatt and his wife, Annie, with assault with intent to kill for waving a pistol at them and threatening to pull the trigger. Not knowing the woman, the Prosecuting Attorney who tried the case reduced the charge to disturbing the peace, for which Trixie was fined \$1.00, all of which may have convinced her that she could point her pistol at folks without any serious legal consequences.

In any case the property line dispute motive for Trixie’s alleged involvement in the conspiracy was given further credence years later, in the early 1950’s, when Trixie carried on a running battle for years with my Uncle Clete Malley, my Aunt Woo-Woo’s husband, over her eastern boundary line. She would continuously block his driveway (which was on a section line and thus a legal right-of-way) and the culvert with rocks and debris, and Clete’s would have to get out of his car upon returning home from work, for days on end, and toss everything in the ditch so he could drive in to his house. Trixie even became incensed when Arkansa Power and Light Company erected an electric pole on the right-of-way and constantly threatened to “chop it down.” When she persisted in complaining about the light pole, eventually Clete told her:

“*Why, Trixie, just go ahead and chop it down. It doesn’t belong to me, but I’d imagine that AP &L will be sending the sheriff after you.*”

On one occasion, Trixie even met the postman, Hubert Falling, with a 45 pistol in her hand, raving and ranting about how she was going to shoot Clete's and Pate Servatt, Bud's son, who by that time, so she claimed, infringed on her western boundary line just as his father, her brother, had done. Hubert, a genial and decent fellow, was somehow able to calm Trixie down and talk her out of using the pistol that day, but he must have had some trepidation dealing with this woman since he undoubtedly knew of the earlier incident involving yet another rural mail carrier, Lutus "Chuck" Dash. Chuck, who was an itinerant cattle buyer as well as a substitute postman, somehow got on Trixie's bad side perhaps by delivering her a \$5.00 light bill, which, so she thought, was \$4.00 too high, or maybe even a summons to one of her various court appearances, or maybe he triggered her kill-the-messenger mentality by *not* delivering Mal's welfare check (for the blind and infirm) on the first day of the month, but whatever riled her, she came after Chuck with a pistol in one hand and a butcher knife in the other. Chuck, an amiable character, who was regularly berated by other postal patrons when their government checks happened to be late, fortunately saw Trixie coming, and he was able to speed off out of harm's way.

Anyway, in this juicier version of the Bud Servatt killing, Huey left the butcher knife in Trixie's yard, with Bud's blood still warm on it, to show her that he had carried out his part of the bargain. This story was given even more credence a year later when Bud died and Mel, the old bachelor, started hanging out over at Bud's house to "console" Annie, Bud's grieving widow.

Justice was not, however, satisfied with my Grandpa Dodge' \$100 fine. With Bud's wound refusing to close and his lung collapsed and his lingering near death, pressure mounted for the law to do something. So the prosecuting attorney, John L. McClullan (later a U.S. Senator), brought charges of attempted murder against Huey, and somehow Huey was able to afford the services of D. M. Malbert, one of Maldoon's premier attorneys---folks claimed that Mel Servatt paid Attorney Malbert's fees, too. If, in fact, such was true Mel must have coughed up a veritable fortune, in 1934 dollars, since there were not only two full trials but also two appeals to the Arkansa Supreme Court. In addition to legal fees, the initial trial bond was \$3,000, and each appeal bond was \$1,500, so *somebody*, so the community wags said, just *had* to be behind Huey Fancy, and, well, if the payments were not "hush money" to keep Huey from implicating his alleged co-conspirators, then what in the world could they be? What motive could Mel possibly have for fronting the legal costs of the man who killed his brother?

With all these payments for Huey Fancy, it is a wonder that Mel Servatt had all that money left when he died, the money, the *gold*, so folks told, that he had buried in his cellar and that his sister, Trixie, and her son, Glenn Hill, found and took. After all, they *speculated* but of course never *gossiped*, gossiping being a sin and all, as to where else Glenn Hill, a poor farmer and a Baptist preacher and itinerant peddler, could have possibly come up with the large sums of money with which to build much less stock the country grocery store and gas station that he put in shortly after Mel Servatt's death, everybody knowing of course, or so they said they knew, that Glenn received very little money from his peddling business, what with him being more than willing to "swap out" with the women-folks and all.

It seems, however, that a three-year prison stint in the penitentiary did not entirely persuade Huey Fancy to relinquish pursuit of criminal enterprises because in 1937, only a short time after being paroled, Swamp Gas County Prosecuting Attorney, W. T. Govar, brought felony charges of grand larceny against Huey and a future Bug Tussle Assembles of God pastor, Tanner Waldenham, but like another pastor, Snake Natwood, the erstwhile or future, whichever it was (maybe both), preacher was delivered by his lord and master, whichever one it was, when in November, 1938 Prosecutor Govar nolle prossed the charges.

However, another future Bug Tussle minister, Harland Yondell, was not so favored by his lord. You see, with Prohibition in full swing, Bug Tussle's farmers found another way to turn their principal crop, corn, into cash by setting up illegal stills all over the DeCoq Hills. Caught by Sheriff Tom Fincher transporting and selling several barrels of his batch, Harland Yondell had no recourse in October, 1926 but to plead guilty and pay his \$100 fine, which was only a mite bigger deterrent than today. This crackdown on the incipient preacher did not even faze the rest of the white lightning industry, and even when Sheriff Fincher and his deputies tracked down and arrested two still operators at Bug Tussle in the mid-to-late 1920's, one run by Willis Dunham and the other by Francis Heller, the industry continued to flourish. Of course, the flagging spirits of the moonshiners may have been raised when Governor Martinau extended an "indefinite furlough" to Francis Heller, meaning he did not have to serve the one-year prison sentence that the jury had meted out.

Thus encouraged, the Autwell clan launched an aggressive drive to monopolize the market by flooding it with a surplus of white lightning and, thereby, driving the smaller operators out of business when prices inevitably dropped precipitously. The leader of the clan, old Wallace Autwell, who lived at the time on what would later be the Jim Fitzgibbons place, was the chief executive officer of this Bug Tussle whiskey monopoly, and sons Clade and Ray operated as consigliores, with another son, Abner, managing---at least as far as the public record---to keep well within the background. Years later, however, when Abner's son, my high school buddy Barry Autwell, seemed, at least to me, to accumulate too much wealth too fast from his insurance business I accused him of having inherited Bug Tussle moonshine money, which Barry never admitted or denied unless his response, "*I'll drink to that!*" be deemed an admission.

In any case, murder or at least murder charges or assault with intent to kill charges, of course, was big news and, truth be told, entertainment at Bug Tussle in the days before newcomers, interlopers, and even some old-timers' children succumbed to chemical addiction and thus brought down the drug pandemic and pestilence, and accompanying assorted crimes, upon the community, and among Bug Tussle's sinners, if not its saints, not even a quaff or twenty of the readily available white lightning was required to work up a murderous rage as the Huey Fancy episode so graphically illustrated. Of course, Huey Fancy probably thought that, in using the knife on Bud Servatt, that he was justified in the same manner that Bill Hollison, my Uncle Gabe's brother, was justified. The year was 1929, five or six years before Huey used his butcher

knife, and it was in the remote DeCoq Hills at the old Roy Alford place where John Hanning was operating a timber-buying business and sawmill financed by Billy Tuller, who owned a drygoods and hardware store at nearby Donnellson, which was a thriving town in those days.

In turn, John Hanning contracted with Bill Hollison to use his mules to haul the logs to the sawmill. As the summer progressed, however, the Roy Alford well began to run dry, there not being enough water both to run the sawmill and to water the mule teams, so John Hanning and Bill Hollison hired a man to dig out the well for \$15.00 (each was to pay \$7.50), but when it came time to pay, John Hanning refused to pay his share and, when Bill Hollison objected, even began to "short" Bill on his log-toting contract charges.

A simmering feud ensued, and even though Bill Hollison adhered to the new Pennecostal sect and John Hanning held himself out as a God-fearing Baptist, the two Cristans were unable to resolve their differences. Finally, Bill decided to quit and to go to work for his father-in-law, "Pop" Duncan, who had recently set up another (competing) peckerwood sawmill on the Bug Tussle Creek behind what, in later years, would be the Bug Tussle Grocery and Service Station. John Hanning somehow learned of Bill's plans, and his anger boiled over one afternoon when Bill told Uncle Gabe to water his mules from the well.

Bill: "*Gabe, water the mules, and we'll be off, and after today John can have all the precious water in that there well.*"

Gabe: "*You betcha. It'll be good to be working for Pop tomorrow.*"

John, overhearing: "*No, Gabe, don't you dare do it. You two have sucked all the water and money you're gonna get out of me!*"

Gabe, placating: "*Now, John, there's no need for this. Just let us have a little of this here water, and we'll be on our way.*"

John: "*I told you 'no', Gabe, and when I say 'no' I mean 'no'!*"

Bill, stepping into the conversation: "*Go on, Gabe, water the mules like I told you. I paid more than him for this here water, so jest do it.*"

When Uncle Gabe began to water the mules, John Hanning picked up a stacking stick (a baseball bat sized piece of wood used between the layers of lumber) and told Gabe:

"You better git out of the way, or I'm a-gonna knock your brains out!"

When Uncle Gabe refused to move, John swung the stacking stick, but Gabe ducked and darted out of the way, leaving the way clear between John and Bill. Seizing

Bill by the throat, John dragged him twenty-six steps, choking him all the way, and then flung him to the ground, maintaining his choke-hold. Somehow, Bill got his hands into his pants pocket, removed his pocket knife, managed to open it, and in desperation stabbed John above the knee, and when John still refused to relax his death-grip Bill ripped him from his knee up toward his chest, severing several main arteries, and John Hanning collapsed and died shortly.

Knowing that he was in big trouble, Bill that very afternoon went to Maldoon and turned himself in to Tom Fincher, Swamp Gas County Sheriff, and a few days later not-yet U.S. Senator John McClellan, then the Prosecuting Attorney for Swamp Gas County, decided to charge Bill with the murder of John Hanning. Bill and Uncle Gabe mortgaged their mules to raise the bail money from the Mouse boys, Joe and Jep, at Saginaw and to pay the legal fees of Maldoon's best and meanest (in the days before Coy McJoseph) lawyer, Henry B. Creens. At the trial in January, 1930, Henry Creens persuaded the jury that it was indeed self-defense, and Bill was acquitted. Later, Bill stopped by Billy Tuller's store at Donnellson, and Mr. Tuller visited with him, a Bible opened on his desk. When Bill told Mr. Tuller that he was sorry for what had happened, Mr. Tuller replied, pointing to the Bible:

If he'd lived by this, it would never have happened. I have counseled him repeatedly about his over-bearing and unforgiving attitude."

So whether saints or sinners or some combination of the same---some duality of the light and the dark in folks who perhaps wanted *so bad* to be good but just could not help being bad, at least at times---some Bug Tussle folks insisted on sinning, even transgressing the law, even though the preachers, the Pennecostal and Baptist alike, and the Plains Church Christ preachers were not pikers, either, draped them over hell's fires every Sunday, morning and night alike, plus several weeks of revival several times a year, until they blistered well beyond suntanned to the roasted and even blackened hotdog stage. Perhaps the hellfire-and-brimstone preaching did, however, have some effect because by the time I came along in 1946 at least murder had been banished from Bug Tussle's sins, leaving only the comparatively innocuous sins, sexual and otherwise, to talk (but not "*gossip*") about.

Other than this couple of stabbings and the various corn liquor crimes, Bug Tussle's criminal element was limited to the Hill family and a few others, Baptist minister Glenn Hill pleading guilty just a couple of years after marrying Eulah of assault and battery, for which he was fined \$5.00, which hurt in that time probably as much as the KKK assault on his backside years later when, the \$5.00 fine for wife-beating forgotten, he started again whipping up on his wife Eula. Of course, the \$5.00 fine probably came as quite a surprise to Glenn because his mother, Trixie, arrested in 1925 for the much more serious crime of assault with intent to kill (her brother, Bud Servatt and his young wife, Annie) received only a \$1.00 fine. There were, of course, always the childish pranks that escalated out of hand as, for example, when in 1938 my Uncle Ray Dodge, along with five other Bug Tussle lads, was charged with disturbing religious worship when they tripped several of the faithful with a wire strung eight inches high across the road (folks

walked to church in those days) down by the Assemblies of God church. The Court did not treat the matter all that seriously, it being reduced to disturbing the peace with a \$1.00 fine each assessed, but what hurt worse was that the Court ordered each of the boys to pay their lawyer \$5.00 for his services of having pleaded each of them guilty, which, Bug Tussle boys or not, they should have known they could have done on their own without the need for a Maldoon shyster.

Sexual crimes were deemed a wee bit more serious than the charge against Dale Pence, possessing “o’possum” hides out of season, a charge never resolved and, therefore, still on the books today if any Maldoon mayberry wishes to summons poor old Dale from the Lower Bug Tussle Cemetery, where he has resided for some time. While carnal abuse charges against Charles Roberts resulted in a guilty plea and one year suspended sentence in 1939, Joe Partridge managed to escape entirely the charge of incest that same year when the jury, with Bug Tussle resident H. C. Malley as foreman, found that---despite whatever evidence was submitted and in disregard, as the jury instruction required, of H. C.’s personal knowledge about such goings-on at Bug Tussle, found the charged Joe Partridge “not guilty” and permitted him to return to the community as a free man. And the crime of “concubinage,” a substitute offense for that revered and hallowed Southern crime, miscegenation, which remained on the books well into the 20th Century in the South until replaced by such vague crimes as “concubinage” (that applied only if it involved the detested race-mixing) (specifics of which I will discuss in a later chapter) was non unknown in Bug Tussle either, particularly when the alleged concubine spawned a half-Black baby with her lover, and the State of Arkansas in all its magisterial legal splendor saw fit to deprive this baby of his mother (she spent five years in the women’s unit at Pucker Penitentiary).

Since there was so little crime, however, Bug Tussle folks had to find some acceptable way to pass the time, and everyone knew that gossiping is not gossiping if what one is telling is the truth, or some semblance of the same anyway, so not-gossiping became a favorite pastime. For example, some of these folks, this same doppelganger church, gossiped about Lucy Spence and her allegedly illegitimate child, Dione, whom the old biddy busybodies, although saved themselves, sanctified, and filled with the Holy Ghost---so they testified---knew, just *knew*, so they said, not to be a Spence at all but, alas, a Horton, gossiped with the whole Spence family faithfully attending the Assemblies of God church, each and every one of them washed in the Blood of the Lamb, Dione unknowing and unsuspecting what was whispered about her shuffling down the aisle to the podium at the front to sing in her lilting voice the praises of Jesus, her Savior and her Lord and her Redeemer, until the time that the Spence family heard of the ugly mutterings and shook off the dust of their feet against this evil place and promptly rejected Jesus and His followers and joined the throngs of the Jovah’s Witnesses.

After all, at least via a tortured and totally illogical reading of the Bible the Jovah’s Witnesses promised them the absence of hell itself, which sounded pretty good to the Spences at this moment of weakness given the sheer hell to which they had just been subjected by the good born-again believers, and so they renounced their evangelical born-again faith and forsook Jesus Himself and embraced Jovah with a vengeance, with

righteous fury and utter abandon. Yes, they---the Spences and others, including to my mother's chagrin her own Lenox brother and sister-in-law, Boyd and Murtha, and even good Baptists like Ashley Oliver and some of his clan---were easy prey for one of the Jovah's Witnesses very "elect" (one of the "chosen," one of the blessed 144,000 spoken of in *Revelation*), Silly Braser, who obsessively traveled the community searching for disaffected Baptists and Pennectostals alike, coming around so often with her free *Watchtower* tracts and her portable battery-powered gramophone with its *Watchtower Society* 33 rpm records that she became known as a downright nuisance in the community except by the Jovah's Witnesses, all of whom revered her.

Yes, they, the Spences, embraced Jovah at least until, and some of them even after, the time that my childhood best friend, Ryan Spence, was raped (so he said) at a Houston motel while doing Jovah's work at a Jovah's Witness convention and consequently contracted AIDS that emaciated his body and consumed his soul and worm-holed his certainty of Jovah and His Witnesses after they excommunicated and shunned him for the one Jovah-forbidden act, an "abomination" they said, that, even if not voluntary, showcased Jovah's disapproval and wrath in the disease that even still eats away at Ryan's emaciated body and being.

So Ryan renounced once again another evil church that had denounced him and became an AIDS activist, an ardent member of RAIN, an effective spokesperson at schools and social clubs and a compelling advocate to any other group or person who will listen to his story, thinking all the while:

"Where is the love they talk about? Where is the forgiveness? Where is the acceptance? And how can they who dare to deny grace to me, to others like me, have any grace whatsoever themselves?"

And it troubles me to think, to ask, but I must anyway: if my Spence friends, as Jovah Witnesses, are going to the hell that they do not believe exists because they rejected Jesus and embraced Jovah, as most evangelicals think they surely shall, then on whose heads, at whose feet, on whose *tongues*, is *their* blood to be placed?

But faith they had, or so they claimed, and it was Faith that Uncle Wilt Melcher named one of his daughters, my mother's first cousin, an irrepressibly happy and joyous woman whose startlingly beautiful face simply oozed grace, non-judgmental, accepting, loving, her genuine smile second---and only by a hair---to that of Mrs. Ellie Fitzgibbons, a girl-child of only thirteen winters who took unto herself Francis Heller, perhaps to escape the Melcher household itself where her mother, my mother's Aunt Etta, chose to endure her miserable life prostrate in bed in a darkened room, withdrawn from life, rejecting life and love that was not extended to her anyway, responding not at all to the prayer cloths sent via the U.S. Mails from the radio preachers in Del Rio, Texah and even from U. V. Grande, that famous Dallas faith healer, who was sorta a relative since another of Aunt Etta's girls, Dot, had married Rastil Grande, U.V's brother, himself a preacher but later an embarrassed one: embarrassed by U. V's progeny when U. V., Jr., himself a successful televangelist---if his Mercedes and Dallas mansion were any indication of

“success”---was caught red-handed by some snooping television reporter, whose exposé highlighted U. V. Jr.’s faking the “miraculous” lengthening of a leg and, worse yet, engaging in financial improprieties for which he was sent to prison in Texah for mail fraud.

So perhaps there was a reason the prayer cloths did not work on Aunt Etta aside from her husband, Uncle Wilt, showing entirely too much interest, so she thought and so opined the sainted gossips of the community, in Aunt Precious Eason’s cancer-ravaged face, what with the Eason daughters, Maudie and Honey, nubile young “thangs” or rather “hussies,” the righteous in the community called them, always lurking about in the background and flaunting their charms in the face of any man who would look and, well, Uncle Wilt, so everyone thought, had a roving eye anyway. In fact, the wags said---and some of them very close in the family who actually transported him ought to know, shouldn’t they?---that Uncle Wilt on many Saturdays, sometimes brazenly in daylight even, on the very day before the Sunday when he would unfailingly raise his hands in worship (even speaking in tongues sometimes or, at least, uttering unintelligible syllables that he passed off as tongues) at both the morning and evening services would be “dropped off” at a certain residence in Maldoon on West 2nd Street which, so folks believed, served as a Black whorehouse, and no one contested his assertion that he was simply doing “missionary” work because everyone in Bug Tussle certainly knew about the missionary position and so understood that, there being no question in the segregated 1950’s, however, as to which aspect of these escapades (his “missionary” work or that it was *Black*) was most offensive to Bug Tussle’s stalwart defenders of the Aryan bloodlines, so when (the gossips contended) at least one Melcher-looking dark-complexioned child appeared in Maldoon it came as no surprise, especially to Aunt Etta, who knew without a doubt that her children had not been safe from this sex-demon and that even some of the young female grandchildren, Lillith Melcher for instance, even locked their doors to keep their Grandpappy away.

In any case, Francis Heller, whose first wife, Olive, had died, was an old man by Faith Melcher’s standards, about two and one-half times her age, but he was a good frugal Frenchman with a stern work ethic who would never permit her or her children to go hungry or improperly clothed, who would toil day in and night out on his farm of undulating hills to scratch out a better than average living. He was, however, by nature, reticent and uncommunicative and shy about expressing emotions or feelings, something that every girl---and she was a mere girl then on her wedding night and for years to come even after having two quick children---and every woman needs, must have, to flourish and to live.

Of course the community busybodies knew all this, as they knew everything that happened and did not happen in Bug Tussle so the tongues really wagged when Faith appeared at the Assemblies of God Church (she was one of the founders, her salvation assured, so she would testify, at that same 1930 brush arbor revival near our spring where both my mother and my father accepted without any questioning whatsoever the same grace that Grace latched onto) riding with Phaeton Pence, Old Bill Pence’s son and a distant “cousin,” himself a dashing, handsome and worldly man what with him having

fled Bug Tussle years ago, perhaps after Faith married Francis, to enroll in the U. S. Navy where for years he saw sights and visited exotic and no doubt sinful places and engaged in all sorts of things, such as drinking and womanizing---him being so good looking and all, the women just *had* to be a part of it---that the good consciences of the good Bug Tussle folks simply could not condone.

Yes, sir, Faith, one of the church's pillars, one of its founders, herself a married woman, brazenly rode *alone* with Phaeton Pence and waltzed with him into the Sunday morning and the (shudder) after-dark evening service, riding in a vehicle where Phaeton made no attempt whatsoever to disguise or hide the plastic figure, not of Jesus, but of a hand---not like Orel Rogert's hundred foot high praying hands on the ORU campus---but a hand with other fingers folded and the *middle finger* extended above verbiage that said plainly "FUCK YOU" that he prominently displayed on the dashboard of his car.

Consequently, a dilemma faced the good brethren and the sisters: whether as in earlier times to shun and dis-fellowship Sister Faith, as had another church in an earlier era done to poor old Uncle Andrew Clifford, or merely to pretend that they did not see what they saw and think what they thought while they, simultaneously, behind closed doors spoke to each other about what they publicly would deny seeing or thinking or knowing ("knowing," they said, because there was no other *possible* logical explanation), so if this cannot be said to be acceptance, the turning of the blinded eye or the other cheek out of Cristan charity, what be it? Gossiping? Surely not!

However, I wondered to myself at the time and even to this day if perhaps everybody in Bug Tussle simply misunderstood the situation, projected their own sinful and forbidden and deeply repressed desires and lusts onto Sister Faith who was perhaps, as her open face and radiant smile and relaxed and loving demeanor suggested, committing no sin whatsoever, even if she were tempted to do such (and we are all tempted at times, are we not?), and I wondered if what really was going on was that Faith and Phaeton needed closure to something that happened years ago when, two young children then, her beautiful and vivacious and sexual with those over-sexed Melcher genes (so people whispered) and him handsome and dashing and exciting even before the Navy, a spark flared into flame only to be extinguished by some tragic event that separated them, perhaps Francis' courting and his appeal to security and stability and French steadfastness that a poor girl of thirteen in a dysfunctional household could ill afford to ignore, whatever the event, if there in fact was an event, leaving an open sore, a cancerous lesion of unresolved feelings and unaddressed emotions, that cried out not so much for consummation as for ending, for closure, and this is what Faith and Phaeton talked about in the darkened night in that car with the middle finger wagging at their discourse and "FUCK YOU" glaring at them in the moonlit darkness.

Perhaps I thought this because I had special insight, not from my 100% intuitive self that my daughter Lenox in later years would dis with the comment:

"Dad, just because you are 100% intuitive does not mean you are 100% right!"

No, I thought this because my mother shared with me the loss of her true love, her soulmate, Elfred Clifford, my dad's first cousin, whom my mother loved despite loving my father until the day she died, telling me with tears in her eyes and infinite sadness on her face how she and Elfred planned to marry, and then he was drafted in 1941 and went off to Europe to fight the Nazis, the communication then via letters and them sparse, focusing in on the night, re-living it as she told me, that she was writing Elfred a letter and her father, really step-father, Grandpa Dodge came into the room and asked:

“Girl, what are you doing? Who are you writing?”

And she answered, *“I’m writing Elfred.”*

And he said, contemptuously, *“Why are you doing that? He’s no good just like his father, Andrew Clifford, who practically lives in the insane asylum.”*

And then the death knell sounded as he spoke, angrily and without room for nuance or mistake, *“I forbid you to continue with that boy!”*

And telling now, holding back the tears at the memory, how this “just flew all over me,” how she despite her feelings or perhaps because of them, because of wanting to spare Elfred, her love, the contempt felt by her step-father or perhaps because in that day and time a dutiful daughter obeyed her father even in matters of the heart, she tore up the letter, the scrawled words of love and hope and dreams rendered asunder with the torn paper and the aching heart and, instead, wrote Elfred another letter that he must have received in Europe, perhaps at the front under enemy fire, telling him that she could not marry him and perhaps even lying to him, if my mother was capable of lying, by telling him that she did not love him anymore

Or maybe she said none of this and only told him that it was over, and this is probably closer to the truth because she did tell me that she offered him no explanation, no explanation to a man, a boy really, who upon receiving it must have cried out in grief and despair and harnessed with difficulty a sudden wild impulse to run pell-mell into the German lines. No, she gave Elfred no explanation until that time when she was eighty-two or so and Elfred was ill and, not known to either of them then, within a few months of death, and she and he were sitting alone on Elfred’s and Hattie’s front porch, and she summoned up her courage and explained, her voice cracking and crackling with repressed emotion:

“Elfred, there’s something that I need to tell you. It’s something that I should have told you a long time ago.”

And he: *“What is it, Annie?”*

And she: *“Do you remember that last letter I sent you so long ago?”*

And he, shocked, suppressing his own emotions, cautious, trying to remain in control, speaking softly, gently, "*Of course I remember I, Annie! How could I not?*"

And she: "*I never told you---*" stopping, chest heaving, unable to continue.

And he, choked up with emotion himself, knowing without knowing what she was about to tell him: "*Told me what, Annie?*"

And she, pulling herself together and speaking rapidly now, wanting to get it all out in one burst, to spill that bitter ball of regret that had gnawed at her innards all these many years: "*I never told you why I ended it, did I? Why I broke up with you?*"

He nodded mutely, no words necessary between them, because they were both back in a vanished time and place that existed now, if at all, only in their shared memories and unrequited regrets.

So she continued, rushing now, speaking in a faltering old-woman voice though in her mind at the moment she was that girl again at that table, the obedient daughter writing her love in the flickering kerosene lamplight, her step-father coming into the room, speaking, shouting really, the words that forbade:

"I forbid you to continue with that man!"

And so my mother summoned up her courage and tried to proceed:

"It was my father, Elfred, Mr. Dodge, he, he, he, he---"

She chokes on the words, the bitterness of the memory of that event now being relived, regurgitated, ruminated, choking back words that demanded exit, words swirling in her brain that she had long wished to speak, and then blurting out the most anguished words she had ever spoken:

"He forbade me, Elfred," she whispered quietly now, *"forbade me to have anything at all to do with you, and I was writing you a letter at the time telling you how much I loved you, and I ripped it up and wrote you instead the one I sent."*

And he, somewhat dumfounded: *"Now I understand, Annie, but why did you not tell me before? I thought, I thought, I thought---"*

He could not continue, and his voice trailed off as he pondered the long years of thinking what he thought: that she broke his heart because she did not love him anymore, sad now, struggling with it all, not the understanding of it, because he understood perfectly now but the injustice, the depravity, the unfairness of what was, what even maybe had to be, when he, and she as well, knew what might have been.

And she: “*I just couldn’t, Elfred, I just couldn’t!*” Furiously now, “*I hope you understand. I am so sorry! Please forgive me!*”

And he, gently: “*There’s nothing to forgive, Annie. It’s okay. Really.*”

But it wasn’t okay, and they both knew it, and if they had both not been simple folks who not for lack of intelligence but for lack of curiosity about such matters they might have envisioned an alternate or flip universe or even another timeline in which things did not end as they did but proceeded apace toward the future that they once, and perhaps even still, in some deep recesses of each of their souls still longed for and missed and wanted.

Thinking these thoughts, I imagined Elfred once again, as I had before, receiving that fateful letter that rent asunder his life and his soul, and I imagined how he must have wrestled with both his unrequited love for Annie and the demons of despair that were unleashed with my mother’s rejection, and I could see how he would then, and perhaps always, long to grasp peace with the nirvanas---or are they mere chimera panaceas?---of “if only” and “what-might-have-been.” And I could visualize how he must have railed with impotent and raging fury at his God or his Devil---for we all possess devils, do we not, even if they do not possess us?--- thinking maybe,

“*They are one and the same. They are one and the same, God and the Devil, but I will address them separately, anyway, just in case I’m wrong.*”

So I created that person I imagined, Elfred, The Apostle, more educated and introspective and philosophical than the real Elfred Clifford, and I put his thoughts to paper. Somehow I believe that the real Elfred Clifford, if he could but know the meaning of the words and concepts I used, would identify with what I wrote. The piece is entitled simply:

Prayer Of The Apostle, Alone

*Feeling alone, The Apostle spoke first to his Devil, saying, “How do I control the uncontrollable
And bottle up this torrent that threatens to sweep me away into your yawning abyss?
When now the locked doors behind which once we both huddled have been shattered,
And the dams breached, the floodgates opened, cascading our souls toward eternity?”*

*And when the millions of light years that once separated us while circling those flickering stars
Isolated in the dark chasms and lightless voids of our lonely and empty and sterile days,
Have been reduced to mere light-seconds, to minute micro-wisps of fleeting time and space
By the sheer urgency and consuming hunger of un-satiated needs, blending us together
Swifter than a hyper-space drive, joining us into each other at Mr. Sulu’s warp speed times two?”*

*His Devil answered The Apostle, saying, “I’m sorry. I cannot tell you how to quench and to quell
The quivering in your heart, nor can I advise you how to still the baffling butterflies
Fluttering in your innards, nor tell you how to vise-clamp your soul’s all-engulfing fear.”*

So The Apostle, alone and in despair, turned to his God, pleading, “Oh, God, help me, for I am

*Hopelessly and utterly lost in her, and if she is not as hopelessly and utterly lost in me
 Then all that is now beautifully and vibrantly alive within me
 Shall surely shrivel
 And wither
 And die
 As the fragile, precious flower of a long-lost soul-joined love.”*

*And The Apostle, so alone, prayed to his God for her too, begging, “Oh, God, help her, for she is
 Hopelessly lost and utterly alone and achingly lonely within herself and outside me,
 And if she does not lose herself so as to find herself outside herself and within me,
 Then all that is now dead within her shall remain dead and never, ever blossom
 And shine
 And sparkle
 And truly live
 As the fragile, precious flower of a new-found soul-joined love.”*

*And The Apostle, alone and besieged by guilt, prayed to his God for forgiveness and absolution:
 “Oh, my Lord and my God, please forgive me, for I cannot stifle this seething passion
 That simmers and bubbles and explodes deep within me.
 And, my God, forgive her (as do I)---whatever she decides—if in fear choosing to remain dead,
 All alone within herself, rejecting and casting me out and down into abyssal darkness,
 Or if she somehow finds the courage to bind her fear; choosing a love of life and a life of love
 That---whether yet she knows it or not---can only be consummated in me.”*

*But The Apostle’s God/Devil is silent, the cold heavens empty, neither resounding reverberations
 Nor thunderous answer ringing forth from the dank and desolate and deserted skies
 To assuage the twin worms
 Of fear
 And hope,
 (Both one and the same, are they not?)
 Gnawing at The Apostle’s worm-riddled soul.*

Yes, even after Elfred, rejected and devastated, married Hattie Servatt and Annie married my father, Elfred’s first cousin, and even after Carl was born to Elfred and Hattie and Roskus and I were born to Elbert and Annie, the two families were inseparable, closer than any others on the Clifford side, even my father’s siblings and their children (except our childhood buddy, Larry Eason, with whom Roskus and I were inseparable), all parties, Hattie included, knowing the score, Elbert knowing that he was Annie’s second choice and Hattie knowing that she was Elfred’s number two love (Elfred’s “rebound” marriage, of only a few short months’ duration, to Eunice Hameshaw---all parties knew---simply did not count.).

Yet, amazingly, all involved accepted this, even joking about it, my father gleefully telling how my mother was walking with Elfred across a wooden bridge when she accidentally farted (“pooted,” he called it or sometimes “passed wind”) and laughing mischievously at the telling of her response, barely able to contain himself, saying how she, embarrassed, covered up the matter by saying,

“*Oh, Elfred, did you hear my shoe squeak?*”

And he would be belly-laughing now because to laugh was better than crying about what he could not change: the fact that he was her second choice.

Yep, my father relished the reaction of my mother who would retaliate in kind, only her story unlike his was not apocryphal, was not a creation out of whole cloth as was my father's, telling how one time Elbert was out walking with Pearlie Ball, who later married Festus Clifford, Elbert's first cousin and Elfred's brother, calling her not "Pearlie" but, not derogatorily but descriptively, "Big Pearlie" not because of her physical stature--- she was not that large---but because of the size of her boobs, telling it for the truth so that we kids, Roskus and I believe it to be gospel and believe it to this day, how when Elbert went to kiss Big Pearlie he put his arms around her and squeezed her so tight, the bigness of Pearlie all squashed up against him, erotic and inviting (she did not say the latter, of course, but I'm no fool; I have no illusions about my parents or their natural instincts), squeezed her so hard, so ardently, that her bra broke, whereupon my father commenced once again to tell the shoe squeaking story, determined not to be outdone, embellishing it a little the second time just to see my mother's reaction.

All these childhood stories undoubtedly contributed to the joke I carried on for years with my daughters, Weather and Lenox, when I would "accidentally" (so I lied) pass wind in their presence or they (really accidentally) in mine, telling it like my father, remembering the cadence, the word choice, the facial expression, the flawless delivery of the punch line, understanding without benefit of explanation the necessity of humor in a family, even scatological humor of the most odiferous kind:

"Did you excuse the frog, Lenox? I've told you that when that happens you are supposed to say, 'Excuse me, Mr. Frog, I'm so sorry, it must have been a clap of thunder or perhaps a distant harthquake or maybe an incoming meteor, or even an atomic bomb. I'm so sorry! Please excuse me, Mr. Frog! I didn't realize I was stepping on your tail."

Laughing as I told it, I duplicated or at least imitated my father's performance, and I reveled in the perpetuation of the squeaking shoe story in slightly altered form, taking pleasure from Lenox or Weather's discomfiture, reminding Weather that I had long ago conferred upon her as an appropriate nickname the only word of Cherokee that I knew, recalling together that exact moment, Weather a child of eight then, as we crested the Appalachian Mountains from the east going into---or was it out of?---the Great Smokey Mountain National Park after having spent several hours visiting the Cherokee Indian reservation, Weather in the back seat, freckled and carrot-topped and mourning the loss of her biological father, Hale Teeters, who committed suicide the year before, unexpectedly breaking wind and inspiring me to name her then and forevermore "Teguchi," which of course she demanded to know the meaning in English, so I enlightened her,

"Teguchi? She who passes wind," I said deadpan.

And then I could not contain myself, and neither could she nor Anne, my wife, and we all broke out into peals of laughter.

But I have digressed into my own musings, and I really must return to the other church, that unacknowledged shadow church that resided in Bug Tussle alongside and amidst the churches that these good folks acknowledged, and to Faith who, hopefully, found closure from this scandalous day and night with Phaeton, an illicit and disapproved moment snatched and wrested from the fabric of community disapprobation, damn the consequences, because to die without doing what had to be done, had to be said, between them, was to die with regret.

Then there was the pastor, Tanner Waltenham, a mighty man of God whose sermons were resonant with direct contact with the Most High, the pastor under whose tutelage and sermonizing I was saved in 1957 at age 11, the minister who gave me my first Bible that, despite what I am about to write, I cherish to this day, though it is old and bedraggled, with its fly leaf containing these words penned by him in red ink:

Presented
To
Jackson Clifford
By
Bro. Waltenham
Dec. 1957

Yes, this was the minister who wiggled his way out of the grand larceny charge a decade earlier and who, along with Evangelist Lloyd Benson, persuaded me to succumb to the allure of the haunting words that compelled me ever so softly and tenderly to “*come home*,” to renounce once and for all eternity all carnality and matters of the flesh and allure of this sinful world, which is a mighty hard thing to do particularly for a red-blooded American boy on the verge of puberty, what with the hormones and all kicking in and raging something fierce.

But renounce I did, surrender I did, and in total abnegation and supplication cast my feeble soul at my Savior’s feet, and I recall that night so clearly now, how arriving home I stood in the front yard and looked upward at the heavens, at the vast array of stars, feeling totally at peace and one with the entire cosmos, feeling free, as the old song says, “like a bird that from prison bars has flown,” a song that my Aunt Lear could not hear without closing her eyes, swaying in tandem with the rhythm, and then when transported into that inner state of being where all shame and all inhibition are rejected and forgotten, stepping into the aisle and jitter-bugging up and down, back and forth, magically or divinely even with her eyes totally closed, immersed, enshrouded, within herself and her God, missing all obstacles in her path even when bodies were laid out, i.e. “slain in the Spirit,” around the old-fashioned altar, “dancing in the Spirit,” Pennecostals called it, over the legs and the arms and the sprawled bodies, as her husband Gabe, though tone-deaf, banged out a semblance of the tune and the congregation lustily belted out the refrain, the piano player keeping pace, changing now to another song:

“He set me free, Yes He set me free.
 He broke the bonds of prison for me.
 I’m glory bound, my Jesus to see.
 Oh, Glory to God, He set me free!”

Although I never danced in the Spirit like my Aunt Lear, a part of me wanted to do so that night as I gazed up in rapture at the star-studded night-sky, locating and focusing on the Dog Star, Sirius, in the Constellation *Canis Major*. In like manner renowned liberal Harvard theologian, Hardy Cocks, one of the deans and gurus of the “Death of God” theology of the 1960’s, who after researching and writing a book on worldwide Pennecostalism (*Fire From Heaven: The Rise of Pennecostal Spirituality and the Reshaping of Religion in the Twenty-first Century*) candidly admitted that he would like to experience speaking in tongues, because Hardy Cocks knew what I knew that night: that what my Aunt Lear felt was the real thing, authentic, truth incarnate for her, the certainty and the joy of it pervading every pore of her being and routing out every shadow of doubt and despair from the very fabric of her being, and I knew that whatever it was or Whoever it was that moved Aunt Lear to dance I, too, felt that same force that night, my spirit pure and devoid of all guilt and shame, immersed in love that was overpowering, that simply could not be contained or understood rationally, love that passed all human understanding, the joy unspeakable and full of glory of which the old song spoke, feeling, no, not feeling, *knowing*, the grace that comes with confession and forgiveness.

Speaking of forgiveness, it is perhaps the strongest force in the universe, but the power emanating from forgiveness we as human beings are all too reluctant to unleash perhaps because once extended and accepted it is truly transformative, and most of us do not *really* want to change for the good or otherwise, so we clutch to ourselves the bitter memories of the hurts and the outrages that so-and-so did to us in some forgotten moment of the past, enfold and nurture it with our lack of forgiveness and our constant recollection of the insult, coughing the hurt or insult up and masticating on it perennially as the bovine species ruminates its cuds, while the cancer continues to gnaw away at our souls, our spirits, our *joie de vivre*, even while knowing that without forgiveness the spigot of love, that mighty fountain of rushing waters, is locked up within a prison of our own making and our own stubborn pride and refusal to relinquish the hurt or the pain that would free forgiveness to perform its transformative work.

I tell you all this, self-revealing who and what I am or at least was and if “was” is correct maybe will be again so that you who read these rantings might understand what happened when Roskus and I were playing in the sand around the tall sweetgum tree by the dusty road, playing ensconced in our childish innocence and blissful ignorance of what had already happened, not even knowing to listen to the adult conversation---really “shouting match” or “cuss fight” are more accurate and descriptive ways to portray what happened---as we, Roskus and I, babes to that moment with truly virgin ears and minds, perked up our ears at the word that no one in our circle of friends, relatives, or neighbors ever said, at least in public and if then not in the presence of children:

“Goddamn you, Tanner Waltenham!”

Burl Heffords continued to scream out his impotence, this man, an upstanding member of the church no less, who had been my uncle as the husband of my Aunt Louella, my mother's sister, but who now was married to one of my second cousins, Luvina Melcher (another of Uncle Wilt's daughters), who in turn had previously been married to my first cousin on my father's side, Waymon Clifford (adding now more grist for the elite Eastern establishment's view of the incestuous yokels of Arkansa), huffing and out of breath, red-faced with anger and shame,

“Goddamn you to hell, preacher-man!”

As the old saying goes, “little pitchers have big ears,” and our ears and our eyes, Roskus' and mine, were bigger and more open than they had ever been before, and I thought, *“What the devil is going on?”* and perhaps being somewhat of an incipient lawyer even then, even though I did not consciously realize such, I did indeed ask the right question because this time, in this place, with this minister, with this church-member and his wife, the operative word was not “God,” not “sweet Jesus,” not “forgive me, Father, for I have sinned,” but anger and rancor and hatred that could not emanate from One who is Love Incarnate even if such did come from the mouth of His saved and sanctified ones, this preacher who had bedded this church-member's wife, gotten her pregnant with his child (Burly being sterile, maybe even impotent, so my Aunt Lou told, but perhaps she had exaggerated in retaliation for Burly's beating her or perhaps he beat her out of frustration with his inability to get it up or keep it up). Besides, as the entire community knew, Burly had gone to California about three months ago, so how could the child possibly be his even if he were not sterile?

And so the child in Luvina's womb could not possibly be the husband's and the preacher had, after all, been hanging around a whole lot, no doubt laying on the hands and other members of his body not spoken of in Holy Scripture, the seed planted not in Godly love but in human folly and failure, a preacher---yet still just a man full of human foibles and weaknesses---who while saved to the uttermost had let the wily devil sneak in and take the hindmost, his rear---I didn't think much less utter the word then, *his ass*, that term being reserved for the creature on which Jesus rode into Jerusalem---and place it on the line, literally and figuratively, as the enraged and cuckolded husband repeated over and over again, weeping and moaning out his pain and his grief at this betrayal of trust:

“I'm gonna whip your holy preacher ass!”

And the words coming back, denials at first, facile explanations of the inexplicable and the undeniable, wheedling then and when that did not work, cajoling, and finally threatening in turn, revving up the shouted dialogue and drama played out before the two sets, Roskus' and mine, of what until this moment had been innocent and ignorant ears and eyes:

“Don’t you threaten me, you son-of-a-bitch! If you had taken care of your wife, I would not have had to do so!”

Yes, Brother Waltenham shouted, while the preacher’s wife, Lucinda, and the pregnant Luvina, raved and ranted and screeched at each other, the cacophony of their shrieking voices overriding the preacher’s “sons-of-bitches” and Burly’s “Goddamn assholes,” so that the yelling and the cussing and the betrayal of trust and position that underlay it all throbbed and pulsed and danced in the bright light of that sultry August afternoon and settled upon and *into* all who listened, not the least of which were those little ones, Roskus and I, whom the Good Lord had instructed to suffer to come unto Him but not to suffer in the way that the dawning knowledge, the creeping awareness, of duplicity and the trampling of trust shattered our illusions and stripped us of all innocence on that long-ago day as we listened, little pitchers with big ears, to the devil himself laughing raucously, hilariously, nearby.

Only much later in life did I come to realize that preachers are human, too, and like all human beings they sometimes act in a human manner, screwing and screwing up with the best of them, whether Assemblies of God or Baptist ministers or Catholic priests or Jewish rabbis, and to pass judgment on a fallen one, even a minister or a priest or a rabbi, is to condemn oneself, to imprison oneself within the dungeon of judgmental unforgiveness, and that we must move beyond human foibles and weaknesses, accepting people as they are but at the same time encouraging and affirming their capacity to change, recognizing as I now tell my clients, the Arkansa District Council of the Assemblies of God and the Pennecostal Church of God national organization, that a person who calls himself a Cristan, is in fact a Cristan, *is also human*, and his humanity is not left at the church-house door and not even at the altar.

I, a lawyer, the devil’s advocate no less, preach to these preachers, telling them that living is becoming and failing is growing and that what they call “sinning” hopefully leads to understanding and change, for we are all capable of change, are we not, the worst of us, the most debased, the most vile, preaching to the preachers that all people sin, all people fail, all people screw up their lives if not in a sexual sense then in another perhaps even worse sense, sinning and failing, sinning and failing, sinning and failing, sinning and failing, over and over again, if not by commission by omission, and if not in fact in the heart (as even moralistic Jamie Carter candidly admitted), and beseeching them, God’s chosen messengers, to extend to one and all the olive branch of tolerance and understanding and absolution that is the pre-requisite for redemption.

So well did I learn these truths that when Jimmy Swiggert “failed” I with the implicit blessings of my clients, the Arkansa District, went to the national officials in Springfield, along with three of the most prominent and open-minded Assemblies of God pastors---Tom Bartlett, Davis Schuster, and J. Don Jorge---in a vain, futile, and failed attempt to reconcile the humanly irreconcilable: church law, dogma, doctrine, polity, and practice with the scriptural tenets of love, tolerance, acceptance, forgiveness, grace, and reconciliation. Many times the former is elevated over the latter, and so it was in this instance: Jimmy Swiggert had sinned, and regardless of his confession and plea for

forgiveness and reconciliation, church discipline rules *must* be followed, right? *Wrong!* But, of course, they were.

In doing all this I harked back to that lazy August afternoon when I, too, failed, inexcusably so, in the feelings that I had, in the lack of understanding, in my refusal to extend compassion and forgiveness, in my judgmentalism of this man, this preacher, and this woman who, both of them, did many good and decent things in the name of their God but who were condemned by many, myself included, for this one act of what Bug Tussle folks would call “deviltry.” Moreover, I do not excuse myself by offering that I was a mere child, no, that may be an explanation but not an excuse, an acceptable one anyway, and I do not excuse myself that I, as a child, was ignorant of the dysfunctional home in which Luvina was reared, although I was.

You see, as with most child molesters and perpetrators of incest Uncle Wilt was a master at keeping things private, covered up, swept under the rug, and although some may have known, even then, what went on in his household, many of us did not know---had not a clue---but, again, that explains but does not excuse or justify my narrow-minded judgmentalism and condemnation of this woman and this preacher. And I do not excuse myself by pleading that I did not know then what I know now: that children from incestuous homes, whether themselves victimized or not, respond to this dysfunctional horror in multiple ways: by repressing and denying that it ever happened to them or their siblings; by becoming totally dis-trusting of the opposite sex and, possibly, sexually frigid or extremely inhibited; or---and this happens much too often---by making irresponsible choices over and over with the opposite sex, both in marriages and outside marriage in promiscuous affairs---behavior that, in one sense, they are utterly incapable of preventing, much of the time not even knowing *why* they are doing the things they do. Yes, my ignorance at the time of all these things might explain my lack of caring and understanding, but I do not lean of this as a crutch, an excuse, to justify myself, because judgmentalism---even for a child---is abhorrent, for even while I was pointing the hot finger of condemnation at Luvina and Tanner, I should have realized that my thumb was pointing right back at me, symbolically telling me:

“Who are you to judge these people? Who made you into God? Go ahead, if you, Jackson, are without sin, without fault or blemish, then by all means toss the first stone of the many that the angry Jovah of the Old Testament, in Deuteronomy, requires to be heaped on pitiful sinners caught in what He (or he) condemns as adultery.”

While I am not pleased with my conduct back then, it does please me to no end that the product of this illicit union is himself an Assemblies of God minister who carries on in the best of his biological father’s traditions without a whiff of the failure that caused him to come into being, yes, this delights me because somehow I suspect that the Being we call “God” transformed what that hilariously laughing and taunting devil, whom Roskus and I both heard so clearly on that long-ago innocent day, and who meant for harm this tragedy, into some lasting and significant good.

After writing the above, however, the headline of the *Maldoon Weekly Record* and the three Big Rock television stations' lead stories in June, 2005 once again shatter my innocence and my naivety as did that profanity-laced conversation years ago. Once again I hear the devil's raucous laugh resounding in the background as the headline and television stories trumpet in large, bold-face verbiage a lurid tale: "**Bug Tussle Preacher Arrested For Sex With Minor.**" Yes, Daniel Heffords, Assembles of God preacher like his father, and a teacher at Washita High School, has been charged with a sexual offense involving a minor male child. Innocent until proven guilty in a Court of law, Daniel has already been tried, convicted, and sentenced by many of the same good people of Bug Tussle who recall---indeed they never forget---the transgression of his preacher father years ago.

"*Like father, like son,*" they whisper behind closed doors, and perhaps it is so, perhaps there is some truth to this adage, but then again who are they, and who am I, to judge and condemn this man? Not one of these folks who now heaps scorn on this "fallen" preacher is in any position to cast the first stone. And neither am I! So I will withhold judgment, not repeating the mistake I made years ago with his mother and his father, lest I be judged as he is judged and, like Daniel of Bug Tussle and David of Israel, found to be wonting. For we are all wonting, are we not, and we all fall short of the ideal, and there is not one among us Bug Tusslians, indeed in the Bug Tussle universal, is there, who is without sin or fault or failure or stain or blemish?

Some things, however, even God is incapable of changing, or perhaps He is capable but simply chooses not to do so, as for example he cannot change the hardened and bitter heart of the un-penitent, which brings to mind my Aunt Rachel, another Melcher child of Uncle Wilt's and Aunt Etta's brood and my mother's first cousin, who married (here I go again disclosing evidence to the superior folks at the *Washington Post*, who believe that *Bill Clinton* had an interesting family, of the sordid, quasi-incestuous South) my Uncle Coyne Dodge, my mother's step-brother), and in whose family, both immediate and extended, incest was in fact not unknown, one of her male cousins, Lanny Melcher, (also my mother's first cousin) being accused of molesting his own daughters, an accusation to which I tended to lend credence after being tearfully told by one of my first cousins, Daisy---a beautiful and vivacious and curvaceous daughter of Uncle Raddie (Uncle Coyne's brother) and Aunt Nellie---how as a child Lanny had molested her, telling me sobbing and moaning and swaying back and forth and trying, in talking to me, to make sense out of this nonsensical and insensible victimization of her, a child, beautiful and gentle Daisy whose life in many respects ended, or at least never progressed, much beyond this "shameful" event with which she was utterly incapable of dealing.

Such allegations were given further weight in the community mind (here I go again spilling the beans!) when Lanny married Ellen, his younger first cousin no less, the daughter of Hubert Melcher, another of my mother's first cousins (are you totally lost and confused at this point, who doing what with whom a-swirling in your head?), this marriage outraging even the public sensibilities and decency of the normally reticent saints and sinners alike of Bug Tussle who, at least the sainted part of the community,

normally turned a blinded eye to such despicable happenings in their midst and declined to even mention publicly or acknowledge, although whispering endlessly in horrified tones behind closed doors of such matters.

Another example of the don't-say-in-public-what-you-see-or-know-but-whisper-about-in-private kind is the gay proclivity and lifestyle of Stan, Woo-Woo's middle son, who actually posed nude as some guy's she-bitch, with only a blonde wig as a disguise, for the *Free Press*, a Big Rock rag, in an article entitled, "*Queer in Big Rock*," Stan, a shy and reclusive and yet gentle and compassionate person who as a child would run into the back bedroom and hide under the bed when company showed up and who took greater pleasure in his dolls and his baby animals and his flowers than masculine pursuits such as shooting animals and decapitating fish, a cousin that I mentored when he was a child and taught to ride a bicycle, one of my favorite cousins, whether gay or straight, whom I nicknamed "Peachfuzz" and sometimes called "Snookerdill," the nickname that our Uncle Gabe Hollison had given him as he had also monikered Woo-Woo's other children, Jonathan as "Rough 'n Ready" and Jean as "Sourpuss," names I use to this day and will use to the day I die, at which time they will no doubt be grateful and relieved to be free at last of names that I at least simply refuse to abandon. Neither Uncle Gabe nor I, however, never gave a name to Woo-Woo's other boy, Tadwick which we all simply shortened to Tad.

Even while cherishing the don't-speak-in-public policy toward what folks called an "abomination," the good people of Bug Tussle whispered about Stan's maybe having been corrupted by our mutual first cousin, Ralphie Eason, a son of my Aunt Otis (one of mother's half-sisters) and Uncle Egbert Eason, who fled to California from the "project" housing at Janes Mill in 1957 when in the midst of the Eisenhauer recession the General Motors plant there abruptly shut down and the Runnels Metal plant laid off many of its employees, including Uncle Eg (as he was called). Anyway, they fled along with many other Arkies and Okies in a surreal repetition of the 1930's "Grapes of Wrath" flights to the Golden Land.

"*California done hit*," the wags said, meaning that California tainted Ralphie with those horrid, unnatural abominable lusts, causing him to take up a gay lifestyle, given all those Communists and fellow travelers and liberals---who were, Bug Tussle folks thought---pretty much one and the same, and they even whispered in later years after Ralphie was caught red-handed and red-penised molesting two of his young Eason first cousins, Doyce and Kim (children of my Aunt Sarah, another of my mother's half-sisters, and Uncle Eg's brother, Uncle Ferdinand---and here I go again offering grist for that Northern and Eastern stereotype of Arkies), and also two of his second cousins, male children of Jones Eason and Mahlon Eason, that he had probably molested me as well.

After all, they reasoned, Ralphie drove back to Arkansa in May, 1964 just as I graduated high school at Maldoon and took me back to California with him, and they truthfully told how I slept in the same bed with him at the Blue Swallow Motel in Tucumcari, New Mehico and later at his parents' home in Bell Gardens for three whole months while I worked at Olympic Screw (more evidence! they claimed) and Rivet in

Downey to accumulate monies with which to attend Arkansa College (now Lyon College) in Drasco, Arkansa, telling how I slept there alone in that bed with him in that darkened room and him a homosexual, a faggot, *a queer*, who surely could not have resisted me so nubile and no doubt eager was my slender, young body, not knowing in the telling of it the truth: that Ralphie worked nights, and even after his shift ended he would not come home until dawn night in and night out, leading me to tease him incessantly about all those girls he was chasing, not having a clue at the time that his interests were definitely not directed at the female gender.

Regardless, the truth never hindered either a good story or a hurtful gossip, especially in the Possum Trot suburbs, and never fazed in the least either the storytellers or the gossips themselves, and so they claimed that further “evidence” that Ralphie did, in fact, molest me is that he, so they surmised, *must have* molested Stan Malley because if such were not the truth then how in the world did one explain the outbreak of *two cases* of this queer plague in this one decent family?

Yep, the tongues really wagged and the wags really tongued every morsel and juicy tidbit of information and speculation after Ralphie caught with his proverbial pants down, fled in his vehicle to the Ontario, California airport where he jettisoned the automobile and boarded a plane for parts unknown but undoubtedly to somewhere where queers and child molesters, one and the same so they claimed, could practice their debauchery with abandon.

Of course, to every story there is the countervailing point of view, even in Bug Tussle, particularly if the second story is more sensational than the first, and so the rumor flew fast and furious that the older brothers of the molested children and the fathers, Jones Eason and Mahlon Eason, of the other two kids had caught up with Ralphie and, shudder, murdered him, leaving his automobile at the Ontario airport only to confuse and mislead Greater Las Angels law enforcement (called “PO---lice” by those telling the tale), and the authorities at the time, not being half as good as Sgt. Friday and Joe Gannon on *Dragnet*, were suckered in by the deception.

Either scenario, of course, could be used to explain perfectly the *third* appearance of sexual deviancy in the family, that of Doyce Eason who scandalized the family not so much by going to prison for robbery the first time (or was it drugs?) or stealing and selling his parents’ hogs or even robbing the J-Mart at Maldoon a second time after he got out of prison and right after his mother’s, Aunt Sarah’s, funeral, or even by stealing a car to make his getaway back to California after this robbery.

No, all these could be excused, accepted, not acknowledged in the family and community, but it was what he did with his first cousin, Jeannette Dodge (daughter of Uncle Hugh and Aunt Jane), after Aunt Sarah’s funeral that was finally inexcusable: wooing and seducing and bedding her before and after the robbery and on the long trip to California, perhaps even staying in the Blue Swallow Motel in Tucumcari, New Mehico where Ralphie had debauched me, and then shockingly shacking up with her in

California, what with her being his own first cousin and all, until such time as law enforcement finally caught up with him and extradited him back to Arkansa.,

However, Doyce did not learn his lesson *even then*: upon being released from the Arkansa prison system, he moved to Oklahoma and decided to try out the hospitality in the Oklahoma prisons or perhaps even the Federal penal system, or both, by running away again across state lines, this time to his father's house in Oak Grove, another suburb of Possum Trot, and then on to Magnolia, Arkansa where he was soon apprehended with a *twelve-year-old girl*, and then not just any twelve-year-old girl but the daughter of his *girlfriend* at the time, thereby insuring that the full wrath and fury of not only Oklahoma state law enforcement but also the Feds and, most significantly, *a woman scorned and a mother outraged*, which is the worst kind of fury, descended upon him.

As I write this, Doyce has after ten-to-fifteen years (how time flies when one is *not* in prison, and I don't rightly recall just how much time he served) finally been released, and since prison inmates, regardless of their crimes, do not take kindly to child molesters, Doyce with his one remaining good eye and battered and aged face and no doubt his puckered and loosened anus is one helluva sight to behold. What are the odds that he has learned his lesson? Don't ask; you already know the answer, don't you?

Or maybe you just think you do. You see, after being released from prison Doyce did not live long enough to savor his freedom or to test the restraint of his prison commitment to the Cristan faith against the hard realities and real temptations of the outside world. When he died of a heart attack on a ranch in Oklahoma, I went to his funeral at Bug Tussle. I was only one of a scant handful of relatives other than his extended family who bothered to attend. The Doyce portrayed there, like the image of many deceased persons at funerals, was not the Doyce that I knew and have described above, but a "changed" Doyce converted in prison and dedicated to daily reading of the Bible.

As I listened to the minister, Roger Nathan, recite all this, I thought, *"For Doyce's sake, I hope it is all true---that he in fact learned from his mistakes and that he in reality changed, however late in life, but what about his victims? Why was he unable to come to terms with his childhood victimization and change before he, a victim of Ralphie the child molester, took out his pain and anguish on so many of the innocents in his own life?"*

In any case, getting back from the relatively benign and boring subjects of homosexuality and child molestation to a more juicy subject, incest, and that of a child, while incest was a part of my Aunt Rachel's extended family, it struck much closer to home when her grandson, Lemuel James Eason, was accused by his pre-pubescent daughter, Chastity, of sneaking into her bedroom and inserting his fingers into that part of her anatomy that is forbidden to decent fathers. L. J. (as he is called) denied the allegations at first, and he retained me as his attorney when Dan Herman, Prosecuting Attorney for Sabine County and Bois D'Arc County (where the alleged crime occurred), charged him with statutory rape.

Not surprisingly, his family--- which included Mollie, L. J.'s wife, L. J.'s mother, Vivian, and my Aunt Rachel---circled the wagons and adopted the usual hear-no-evil-see-no-evil attitude (*speak-no-evil* not being, as you shall see shortly, in my Aunt Rachel's bag of tricks), turning the hot finger of condemnation on Chastity who should have, so they said, endured and accepted the unacceptable without bringing shame and calumny upon the family's good name such as it was what with Ralphie and Stan and Doyce and all.

In short, the child was not only not supported, but also she was berated and totally ostracized by those persons---her mother Mollie, her grandmother Vivian, a first cousin on my mother's side (who married Hilton Eason, my first cousin, son of my Aunt Olive Clifford Eason and Lecil Eason---here I go again!), and her great-grandmother Aunt Rachel---to whom she should have been able to turn for help and support. So intent were these folks on preserving the family reputation from scandal that they continued to deny that L. J. had done what he finally confessed to having done, doing so *under oath in open Court* as part of a plea bargain with Dan Herman (getting twenty years, of which he served less than eight), and of course his serving the prison time only exacerbated the anger and sheer vitriol directed at the victim, the young lady with the courage to come forward because her sister, Lurlene, was just entering puberty, and Chastity feared for her sister's safety.

With L. J. in prison, accepting twenty years rather than face the wrath of a Bois D'Arc County jury, the family's anger turned to bitterness to the point that Chastity to this day, as far as I know, has no contact with her family. For years the only contact she had was with me as I tried to help her get an education at Hardin University in Mercy, but of course to help her, who was just as much my cousin as was L. J. was to take *her side*, so the "tell-no-evil" rule that my Aunt Rachel had never practiced anyway went into hyper-drive, she telling one and all who would listen how sorry I am, how I had let "poor, little, innocent L. J." cop to a plea when everyone knew that he was innocent, regardless of whether he committed perjury, a felony itself, by swearing to the judge under oath that he had done it, and then how I had befriended that little wench who had made up such lies about her father or, if not lies, exaggerations, or, if not that, then she had no business telling it even if was the truth, which of course it was not, Aunt Rachel and Vivian telling the same stories all over Bug Tussle and Partway and Saginaw and Friendsburgh and other Possum Trot suburbs to family and non-family alike, adding to the story with those they could trust:

They: "*Why, do you know that we could have him disbarred for what he did?*"

Incredulous (or perhaps credulous) listener: "*NO! You don't say! What did Jack do anyway?*"

And then the repetition of denials of Chastity's story and L. J.'s denials (conveniently forgetting his sworn confession), my support of Chastity, and my "betrayal" of L. J., followed by:

They: "But that's not the worst he did, now is it?"

Listeners, open-mouthed with anticipation, juicy gossip being more valuable than gold in Possum Trot and its suburbs: "The worst you say? What's the worst?"

They, neither understanding nor appreciating the time a lawyer spends and the amount he charges, even when he gives family a fifty percent reduction:

"We paid him money, more than Vivian makes in a year, to give to Dan Herman to fix the case, and we thought it would be taken care of, but little L. J. got twenty years, which is not a very much for the money paid."

Listener: "Mercy me! You don't say hit! Is this the same Dan Herman---"

They: "Yes! The one and the same who---"

Listener, finishing: "Went to prison for accepting bribes to let people off."

They: "Yep, the one and the same, but he didn't stay bought this time. Bro (Bro Mills, husband of Andrea, L. J.'s sister) gave Jack the money---can you believe \$12,000?--- to pay Dan Herman, and either he paid it or he pocketed the money as fees, and for either of these he could be disbarred."

Listener: "Do tell!"

They: "Oh, yes, why Bro gave us the money to pay Jack after Jack told him to stop talking to Dan Herman's fixer, who had approached him, told him that the State PO—lice or maybe even the FBI had Herman under investigation and maybe even surveillance or wiretap, and perhaps the fixer's phone as well."

Listener, incredulously: "You mean Jack told Bro all that?"

They: "Cross my heart and hope to die. And he told Bro that he would take care of it."

Listener: "Take care of hit? What did he mean?"

They: "Just what he said. Pay Herman not to send poor, little L. J. up the river."

Listener: "Don't say! And he didn't pay him?"

They: "Of course he paid him, but it didn't do us any good now, did it?"

Listener: "Hit don't seem much like hit did."

They: "But this still ain't the worst part!"

Listener, licking lips: "Do say! What is hit? I just gotta know!"

They: "Well, there ain't just one more worst part. They's two of them."

Listener, amazed and frothing now at what she can tell her neighbor as soon as Aunt Rachel or maybe it is Vivian, hangs up: "Two worst parts? What air them?"

They: "Well, you know that part I told about Bro's talking with Herman's fixer?"

Listener: "Shore, I recall hit. What about hit?"

They: "Well, Jack, the scoundrel, tape-recorded Bro to protect himself, and now he has the tape in his lock box."

Listener: "Taped him, you say? Just like a low-life lawyer! And just because Bro was talking about talking about a crime when Herman's fixer called him?"

They: "You got it! Now since when is talking about a crime a crime? Asking the man how much Herman wanted ain't a crime, is it? Especially if Herman is doing hit for everyone else, and, besides, Bro has plenty of money to spend, being a multi-millionaire and all."

Listener, slyly, not wanting to offend: "Maybe that's the problem."

They: "What's the problem?"

Listener: "Well, you said Bro's a multi-millionaire and all, didn't you, with plenty of money to burn?"

They, irritably: "Yeah, I said it! So what's the problem?"

Listener: "Whoa, now, don't get mad at me for just having this here thought."

They, mad: "I'm not mad. Jest tell me! Tell me!"

Listener: "Well, like I said, I don't want to offend anybody, least of all you, but it jest occurred to me that maybe Dan Herman was insulted by the offer of only \$12,000 to drop charges for L. J.'s, er, touching his daughter? Have you ever thought of that?"

They: "Now, listen here! Whose side are you on, anyway?"

Listener: "Well, I'm on your side, of course, and L. J.'s, too, but that don't keep me from thinking, do hit?"

They: "Thinking? You're kidding, right? What exactly are you thinking?"

Listener, teasing a little but a little uneasy, too: "I cain't rightly say hit. You'll be mad."

They: "No, I won't! Just spit it out, wancha?"

Listener: "Okay, you asked for hit. Now don't get mad. What I thought is, if Herman would give L. J. twenty years for \$12,000, maybe he thought Bro would come across with more, what with Bro having already talked with his fixer and all and him being a multi-millionaire."

They: "That's crazy! You mean when Herman told Jack that twenty years was all he would agree to, he said that because he thought that Bro was gonna pay him more by paying the fixer?"

Listener: "That's exactly what I'm saying. I mean, he knew his fixer had approached Bro, so he was holding out for more."

They, furiously: "But don't you see? Don't you see? It wasn't the money---Bro has plenty of that---but Jack had warned him not to do anything and, if he did, so Jack told him, he would be caught."

Listener, knowing Jack, not believing: "So y'all expected Jack to ask Herman outright how much more hit would take and then handle the exchange?"

They: "Exactly, right! That's what we paid him to do. Git L. J. off, regardless of how he done it or what it took."

Listener, protesting a little, mildly defending Jack: "But he could lose his law license for that, couldn't he? And hit's a crime, ain't hit?"

They: "Shore, he could lose his law license. Ain't that what I been a-tryin' to tell you? And as for a crime, well, lawyers are nothing but criminals, anyway, and besides--"

Listener: "Besides what, Rachel (Vivian)?"

They: "Besides, better Jack go to prison than poor, little, innocent L. J., God bless him. At least Jack'd be among his kind there, wouldn't he? Yep, better him, especially after what he said to me (my mother)."

Listener: "What he said to you (your mother)?"

They: "Yes, and you're not gonna believe it. This is the absolute worst part of it."

Listener, salivating: "Do say! What? What did he say?"

They: "He called me (my mother) on the phone and told me (her) that I (she) was gonna split hell wide open if I (she) didn't stop gossiping about him and didn't deal with what he called the bitterness in my (her) heart. Can you believe it? It cut me (her) to the bone!"

Listener, probing, wanting more: "Do say! Now, why in the world would he say a hurtful thang like that to you (your mother), you (her) being elderly and all? You ain't been gossiping, have you, Rachel (Vivian)? You ain't got no bitterness, have you?"

They: "Course not! Have I been gossiping to you? Truth ain't gossiping, now is it?"

Listener: "Don't suppose hit is, but why would Jack say that to you, anyway?"

They: "Don't know. You know I have always been good to that boy."

Listener, trying to get at the truth: "But why did he say that he was saying hit? Tell me exactly what he said. I gotta know. He's my relative, too, you know?"

They: "Well, he started out mad. Told me that Annie had heard what I'd been saying about him. Told me that he didn't give a damn---I don't say that word, but that's what he said to me, 'I don't give a damn what you think about me or what you say about me, but when my mother calls, week in and week out, crying on the phone, over what you are saying, then I do give a damn!'"

Listener: "He said that?"

They: "More! He told me (my mother) to keep my (her) big trap shut---that's the word he used, 'trap.' And he told me (her) I'd (my mother would) split hell wide open if I (she) didn't change my (her) ways---his exact words---as if a lawyer knows anything about hell."

Listener, trying for levity, and failing: "Well, being the devil's advocate and all, he may know about hell."

They, not taking the bait, still angry and outraged, "You don't know how much he hurt me!"

Listener: "No, I cain't know hit. But ifen it's any comfort, he'll get his reward, now won't he?"

They: "I hope so! I hope so! Though that ain't bitterness speaking---Lord knows my heart, and it's pure as the driven snow, now ain't it, me being washed clean in the Blood of the Lamb--- but it's hurt. I just can't get over it!"

Listener: "But he'll get hisn, he will!"

They: "Shore he will. Shore he will."

Yes, consider this, just perhaps once upon a time in a land not so far away and a time not so long ago there lived that little girl, and she lived alone in her head in that house where the bad man, her father, lived, and she dreaded each night going to bed because she knew what was gonna happen, what had already happened too many times: the touching, the probing, the pushing, the grunting, the stroking, the moaning, the fondling as she lay immobile, still, detached, floating somewhere outside herself, pretending against all reality not to be here at this moment, letting him think that she was asleep so that in the morning when he smiled at her, his baby, and whispered, "Good morning, darling!" from somewhere deep within the sheltered dark places of her mind a part of her could reach out and wrench the muscles of her face into the semblance of a smile, a rictus really, because no one else must know---he had told her that over and over and over and over and over again:

"No one! NO One! No one must know! Do you understand me? DO you understand?"

"Yes, daddy! Yes, daddy! Please! Please! Yes, I understand!"

Oh, yes, she knew that it was just their shared secret, between them, him and her, this sharing of herself and himself in this very special way that God Himself, so her daddy told her, ordained and approved, a secret that he justified to himself, if indeed he even needed or cared for a justification, because his wife, his daughter's mother, was laid up in that darkened room, withdrawn, sick from what she knew or maybe even feared and didn't want to know, sending the dimes and the quarters for the prayer cloths to the preachers from Del Rio or Juarez and weekly to U. V. Grande so that she could at least pretend that she was trying to get well, to get healed, and having only relief when, outside herself in a similar yet dissimilar manner utilized by her daughter on those long nights when daddy was in her room, she could detach, dissociate really, her thoughts, her feelings, from her wretched life at the little church and, handkerchief or prayer cloth flapping about her face, close her eyes and dance up and down the aisles, moaning and wailing out piercing shrieks of her despair, seeking desperately to immerse herself, forget herself, assuage her pain, in Him.

This worked, of course, temporarily and at least until the time when she was back home after church in that darkened sick room, her daughter next door, and she, the mother, saying nothing when he got back from the home of her sister, Aunt Precious Eason with her two nubile daughters, her husband's nieces no less, late at night and entered her daughter's room, not listening, not wanting to hear because to open her ears was to hear the unspeakable and to open her eyes was to see the unfathomable, this Melcher sex demon that consumed her husband and compelled him to do what she could not even admit that he was doing, the mother in one room, the daughter in the other, both alone within themselves, the daughter never telling even when a half century later her

own grand-daughter, Chastity, claimed the same thing happened to her that did not, did not, did not happen to her long ago, furious that the little slut, the ungrateful tramp, would tempt L. J. like that, make him do the things that she said he did.

Why, everybody knows, don't they, that a red-blooded man can resist only so much? She knew, didn't she, about men and their filthy desires and lusts, and she didn't tell, did she? Did she? So why did that little hussy have to tell and ruin everything? Why couldn't Chastity just live in her mind the way she had years ago? And why did Jack, that slick shyster of a lawyer, have to take up for her? Nobody took up for me, now did they? Did they? And I'm all right, ain't I? Ain't I? I survived, didn't I? Didn't I? I have not hardened my heart, now have I? Have I? Nor gossiped about anyone or anything, have I? Have I? I keep things to myself, don't I? Don't I?"

Oh, where does the heartache end? Why does this woman, a good and decent woman in many respects, harbor this bitterness to the end of her days? Why has she been unable, or perhaps unwilling, to confront and deal with her own great pain and degradation? When will the incestuous chain be broken? When will the pain end? When will the sick silence be shattered? Who will speak up? Who will speak out? And who will tell, and who will know, and who will look after Bug Tussle's children, and the children of all the other Bug Tussles all around the nation and world---and when? I ask you again---when?

Yes, there is an invisible doppelganger church in Possum Trot and all its suburbs, including Bug Tussle, and in all communities, rural and urban, throughout the world where things happen that the good folks at the other church, the visible one, do not want to know, and especially acknowledge, because to acknowledge them would be to confront evil and it is always much easier, is it not, simply to sweep evil things under the rug, hide them away in a closet, and then strive furiously to keep them there? Yes, there is an invisible doppelganger church in my Bug Tussle and in all Bug Tussles all over the world, and, at least in part, it is some of the same people, the same saints, attending the first church, the visible one, who have founder status, charter memberships no less, in the hypocritical, perhaps even evil, doppelganger church, invisible though it may be.

Chapter 8 ***The Eason Saga: The Spaceman And The Idiot***

*"There's nothing in this whole wide world worth a solitary dime,
Except old dogs and children and watermelon wine." Tom T. Hall*

"It was a tale told about an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying something." William Shakespeare, as modified by Jack Clifford

Adjusting a slightly wider angle and a larger time-line, Susej could foresee other tragedies in this small community: how Daniel Eason left the farming to his brother Robert, the rube, the idiot, the one who whooped and hollered at his little brown mule

and scraggly dog, whom he named "Possum," belting out crazy stuff about pole-cats and wampus-kittens and bobcats and other catamounts in imaginary brushpiles, whooping so loudly that his nonsensical rantings could be heard echoing back from the DeCoq Hills northward across Bug Tussle to reverberate off the distant tall slopes of the Jack Mountain itself almost to Hot Springs, providing a constant source of amusement to the kids in the community, Daniel just getting up one day and announcing without room for or even invitation to argument to his brother, Robert--- the one everyone thought of as a rube and an idiot because he acted so strangely, a docile child-like man in a grown-up body---that he was quitting farming to go to work at Robert Sarter's peckerwood sawmill. A chapter in the unpublished manuscript picked up the story:

For years Daniel toiled at the sawmill, earning a pittance wage, which was all Robert Sarter could afford to pay given the lumber prices, without Worker's Compensation when a finger was sawed off or a foot crippled or without Social Security whenever or if ever he could afford to retire before he died, the last---the Social Security---becoming irrelevant when lumber prices plummeted even more, and Daniel had to be laid off---"let go" he called it. And there was absolutely no prospect of employment for a crippled man in his fifties and nearing his sixties with a bum foot during what the damned Eisenhauer Know Nothings insisted was only a recession, a kind but misleading word for depression, of the late 1950's (a time in which families and friends like their forebears, the Arkies and the Okies of the Dust Bowl days of the 1930's, picked up everything they owned, stuffed it all, kids and dogs and cats included, into questionable automobiles, and set off for the golden land of California).

No, there was no job and no hope for Daniel---a short, swarthy, haggard man with years of DeCoq Hills dirt and Sarter sawdust ground into his weathered face---who had not even a grade school education and who could neither read nor write and who had absolutely no marketable skills, even if there had been industries nearby that needed marketable skills, which there were not, and who with a crazy whooping and hollering brother to worry about tried for a time to go back to the only profession, other than sawmilling, that he had ever known: subsistence farming.

One of the last of this dying breed, Daniel tried against all odds to scratch out on that rockpile of DeCoq Hills hill where his and Robert's father, old Matt Eason, had eked out a living of sorts in better times with which to support his brood, Robert and Daniel included. Along with Robert and Daniel were four others born to him and his wife, Aunt Precious my great-aunt, a sister to my mother's mother, Sarah Alice Davis Lenox Dodge. To complicate things further one of their---Matt's and Precious'---children, Clotilda, later married aged Grandpa Hart Clifford, thus becoming a step-mother to my daddy after already being a first cousin to my mother, all of which simply fits the stereotype of the Arkansa incestuous yokels perpetuated for years by those uppity and perverse Northern and New Yorke writers and media moguls who are invariably politically correct and even sensitive, except when it comes to Southerners, evangelical ones in particular.

Grandpa Hart would not, of course, have made his daughter-in-law's first cousin a step-mother to her husband Elbert except that he had been a widow for many years since

his first wife, Alice Isabelle Stainbridge, known as Allie, died on June 16, 1921 of influenza and except that all the Eason children, excepting Daniel and Robert, wanted to get away from old Matt Eason's homestead as soon as possible and except that Grandpa Hart was encouraged to court Clotilda and marry her by two upstanding members of Bug Tussle's churches, one a Baptist and the other a Pennecostal, who did not want her around when they, though married themselves, the local wags said, developed insatiable attractions to Clotilda's sisters, Maudie and Honey, who if community gossips were to be believed (and everyone believed it even if there was no basis in fact for it except for two or three illegitimate children, one of which, so folks claimed in hushed tones, looked suspiciously Pennecostal and another distinctly Baptist) were quite loose and generous with their affections and amenities.

Everyone in the community knew the stories of course and spoke of them in private but at the same time overlooked them in public, and they whispered also how Matt hoarded and hid the sugar and the flour and the coffee and the salt from Aunt Precious in the recesses of the darkened loft to keep her from using too much, doling out only that minuscule portion that he wanted her and the kids to have, perhaps out of sheer Eason cussedness or meanness or maybe something more mundane: enervating poverty that dictated that every penny had to be squeezed until the last vestige of value was wrung out of it because to do otherwise in this time and place was simply not acceptable.

In any case, Old Matt more than paid the price, a "holy retribution" so all the old devout biddies murmured, Baptist and Pennecostal alike united and certain and even the two stalwart church-going visitors to Maudie and Honey agreed--- Pennecostals and Baptists and even Church of Crist folks in agreement despite their irreconcilable differences in theology---of the justness or maybe it was simply the retribution of their shared God, when Matt, on August 27, 1923 it was, tried to frighten Aunt Precious by racing his mules that were pulling the wagon toward the ford above the Mary Bell eddy of the DeCoq Creek, only to succeed not only in frightening his wife half to death but also in killing himself when he careened from the wagon and broke his neck on a hard rock there in the creek bed, which was not, folks said, necessarily a tragedy for him and certainly not for Aunt Precious.

In dying so recklessly, however, Old Matt left Aunt Precious living on the hardscrabble farm with Robert and Daniel and Jackson, their younger brother, and their two older sisters, Maudie and Honey (Jackson and Maudie and Honey having the good sense ultimately to go to California and Oregon and Maldoon, Arkansa, respectively, at least after they---the three of them---starving, the whole family starving, starving and struggling merely to survive in the depressingly hot and dry and soul-destroying year 1932, when the Great Depression and the Dust Bowl, like two matched horsemen of the apocalypse, stalked the land and ravaged its people, when the only fat creatures in Bug Tussle were those---the rats and the buzzards and the possums---who consumed the animal carcasses littering the land, stole and butchered one of Francis Heller's heifers and, later after being caught, confessed both to being hungry and the theft, but who despite the best efforts of one of Maldoon's best attorneys were nevertheless sentenced by

the Court without nary a scintilla of mercy and sent away to prison, hunger and the hungry be damned!).

Of course, it did not help, despite wily Coy McJoseph's "hunger" defense, that Francis Heller, hearing a cow lowing, followed her to the back forty near the DeCoq Creek where she stopped, mooing pitifully, at the head and skin of what could have been no more than a junior high calf and that a bloody trail led from this spot directly toward the Eason homestead. And it did not help either that another co-conspirator, Wilhelm "Blackie" Warren, a vagrant worker at the Sanders Sawmill, was apprehended by Constable and Justice of the Peace William Dodge, my grandfather, while he hid out in the bell tower of the abandoned Happy Home Church on the corner of Ashley Oliver Lane and, when coaxed down by Grandpa Dodge and taken into custody, promptly implicated himself and the Eason trio as well.

Oh, the smartest (some said "crookedest" but is there any grade of difference among shysters?) lawyer in Maldoon could have dealt with all that, but it was *the other* thing that caused the jury or maybe it was the Court to disregard Coy McJoseph's "hunger" defense: that despite not having a hoof on the place and swearing to the not-gullible jury or Court how hungry they were, Jackson and Honey and Maudie and Blackie peddled fresh beef in the community and insulted community intelligence by trying to pass it off as their own, and someone in the community, no one knew who, reported it to the authorities (It was not the kindly Francis Heller who, even though he pleaded for mercy for his neighbors, had to accept that the law required its pound of flesh.). Of course, it was July, 1932, one of the hottest and driest months of record, so after eating their fill and with no refrigeration available back then, they must have *had* to peddle the beef, but that defense, offered by me (a Johnnie-come-lately shyster whom some in my family---but I won't name them---believe to be right up there with Coy McJoseph in slickness) probably would not have succeeded either. No, not even Coy McJoseph could find a way to hoodwink the jury or Court on this one, and so Blackie and Maudie and Jackson all served time for their crime (one year each with Jackson age 17, serving his sentence at the Boys Industrial School at Pine Bluff).

However, the Court suspended Honey's sentence upon good behavior, and she at least had enough sense to know that "good behavior" did not entail flouting community mores by taking up with a Black man as did Opal Donaghey, who with her Black lover, Ira Hill (no *known* relation to Glenn Hill although he did peddle his wares and trade his goods, perhaps even "swap out," with Black women at Witherspoon as well as white ones at Bug Tussle and surrounding communities) was charged and convicted in 1938 of "concubinage" and given a five-year prison sentence (when she gave birth to a distinctly dark baby), a social faux pas that the Bug Tussle Community and even Maldoon's law enforcement simply could not, would not, overlook

In any case, Maudie's and Jackson's departure to prison, in turn, left only the two old bachelors, Daniel and Robert and nubile 19-year-old Honey alone, alone except burdened with an invalid mother, Aunt Precious having contracted face cancer from long, searing exposure to the Arkansa sun, a cancer that in time ate away her lips and her jaws

and even her nose, the pain excruciating, unbearable, her screams heard for a mile across the DeCoq Hills, the stench, oh yes, the stench smelled for half a mile downwind and recalled vividly seven decades later by then-young Barry Heller, no money for medicine, no morphine, nothing but pain and stench and rotting and putrefying flesh until the black flies settling on her tortured face added insult to injury by depositing their eggs in the open wounds, eggs that in a short time turned into a crawling and feeding brood of larvae, “maggots” everybody called them, eating away the putrid flesh but in all their ugliness and horror somehow cleansing it, or at least medieval doctors once so believed.

They cleansed it, that is, at least until Uncle Wilt Melcher, husband to my mother’s aunt and Grandma Dodge’s sister, Aunt Etta, and Bill Pence, a first cousin to Aunt Precious, the oldest sister of Grandma Dodge and Aunt Etta (Their mother, Lizzie Davidson, the wife of my mother’s grandfather, Robert Davidson, was born a Pence before succumbing to the Davidson charm) came there, their Cristan duty they said, and cleaned and washed the ravaged face, coming so often with Honey and Maudie (Uncle Wilt’s nieces no less, Maudie now being out of prison) always there flittering and hovering in the background that the church ladies in the community, Baptist and Pennecostals alike, who would never admit that they were gossiping, took to whispering to each other and even to those who did not want to hear and even at funerals in hushed, incredulous tones from behind the gently wagging Atkinson or Cooper Funeral Home cardboard fans or Tom Fincher an even later Manny Blankson or Roy Tredgwick for Sheriff fans, whispering with tongues that wagged even faster than the fans, rushing to disgorge the secret (supposed) knowledge that not only horrified but titillated them, making sly references to the “known” sex drive of old Uncle Wilt, and poor old Bill Pence, well, he just happened to get painted and tarnished with the same broad brush, the gossips not *knowing* anything but saying anyway that which, whether true or not, was none of their business except to the extent that everything in Bug Tussle in those days was their business and no secret lasted any longer than it took one good sister to get to the house of her nearest neighbor, and, of course, their gossiping, if such it was, proved justified, so they claimed, when the two or three illegitimate children came along, one looking suspiciously like a Melcher and another surprisingly like a Pence, so claimed the busybodies of both churches.

This was when Daniel abandoned farming and went to work at Sarter’s Sawmill, he and Robert just two old bachelors set in their ways, now completely alone after Aunt Precious’ merciful passing, strangely devoted to each other and to their DeCoq Hills ramshackle dwelling. Neither of them had ever ventured farther from home in their entire lives than Maldoon to visit sister Honey or early in life when Robert lived with and worked as a farm hand for some wealthy landowners in the Washita bottoms except for the time that some of the neighborhood boys persuaded dim-witted (so they thought, wrongly) Robert to accompany them to Mott Springs where, they promised, they would buy him some beer, which of course he could not turn down, only to take him to a black whorehouse set up in a railroad car on a train siding, Robert not realizing their intent to assault and ravage his virginity until much too late, the alcohol dulling his already dulled senses, until the black woman grabbed him and tried to pull off his gum boots and his

filthy overalls that he almost never washed (and sometimes in later life and maybe even then shit in) while cooing in his virgin ears,

“Honey, I knows what youse needs!”

Yes, she cooed these words into these most virgin of virgin ears, and Robert, finally understanding the practical joke played on him, jerked back and ran as best he could with his galluses dangling and his gum boots half on and half off, leaving the six-pack of beer or at least whatever was left of it behind, scuttling across the railroad tracks like a scorched polecat or a whipped wampus-cat that he whooped about and then beyond the railroad into the safe, all-encompassing darkness where he continued to yell and scream and curse and vent his frustration and pain and humiliation and, perhaps, seething anger heavenward for all in Mott Springs town to hear, only two or maybe three moons now weaving and wobbling overhead, not whooping and hollering as he did at home for the amusement of himself and the community kids, but wailing in terror and abject pain at the fate that had almost befallen him, screaming out his despair and his impotent and furious rage and pain and degradation:

“I am now almost fifty years old and never kissed by much less bedded by a woman of any color, size, or description,” he thought, “and I am gotten drunk and offered up as a practical joke and public spectacle and humiliation for these young crackers’ laughter and amusement, as a cruel and hurtful joke, to some fat, black hooker in a railroad car.”

And with only two moons, or three at most, spinning overhead and the canopy of stars rotating around the moons left to right and then right to left and then back left to right in a disconcerting celestial dance, Robert looked heavenward and vented his despair:

*“No! No! No! **NO!** It shouldn’t be like this! I am a man even if they don’t think so! I am a man, by God! You hear me up there, God, I’m speaking to you! I am a man and not an idiot! I’m not an idiot! I’m NOT an idiot!”*

And so after this traumatic event neither he nor brother Daniel ever ventured much beyond Bug Tussle, simply going about their subsistence farming as best they could after Daniel lost the job at the sawmill, toiling after the mule and wielding the hoes in the hot, muggy July heat amongst the omnipresent weeds and grass that would not and could not be subdued or vanquished, until Daniel’s crippled foot, the one he had injured at the Sarter sawmill, swelled up so large that the concrete-hard brogan had to be cut away and half his foot removed, his foot swollen and infected and oozing pus and him with no money for a doctor and no community medicine woman with any homespun remedy, until Murdick Oliver took him to Big Rock for the surgery, unable to work after that, hungry, alone with his half-wit brother, Robert, brooding over his plight, depressed, sitting for hours on end under the tall sweet-gum tree at our house where he would come to cadge a free meal, sitting but saying nothing, nothing at all for hours on end, Roskus and I, just wee boys then, playing around him in the sand at the road’s edge, playing but

yet sensing that something was wrong, *just not right*, with this pitiful creature who had already, if the stories we heard were true, swallowed a full bottle of iodine in a futile attempt to end his pain (Uncle Gabe Hollison had rushed him to the emergency room where his stomach was pumped), yes, brooding and withdrawing into himself until that day, a Sunday morning it was, a bright and cloudless day under an azure sky when the good folks of the community were praying and worshipping at their churches, insulated and inured to all pain and unpleasantness, that Daniel finally accepted the inevitable: that he could not go on, that the pain he felt was beyond intolerable.

And so he left his brother, Robert, and, looking back at the sagging house and rotting barn one last time, took himself across the woods and pastures to the road that ran down to Ashley Oliver's house from the Francis Heller loop, the southeast corner of which had stood in years long past the Happy Home Church, the predecessor of the Bug Tussle Missionary Baptist Church, and once there and within maybe a couple of hundred feet of the church that was no more but at which as a child he had attended and, face enshrouded in celestial joy, a mere boy then, played the church organ that he had somehow learned to play, this church existing only in his memory now, a church at which he had perhaps heeded the call to surrender his soul, lay down his life, relinquish his cares at his Savior's feet, choosing now to return to that place where he in years past had found whatever peace and absolution one finds in abject abnegation and surrender, Daniel the man-child looked around until he found a slender persimmon tree, or maybe it was a blackjack tree, at the road's edge, a good sturdy tree with a strong, handy limb dangling out over the road, and thinking,

“This is as good a time and place as any. They will have no trouble finding me here.”

And then he ceased thinking, feeling, and concentrated instead on the task at hand of tossing the strong, frayed (but not too frayed) plow rope that he had used for years on the old mule, or some said it was a better rope that he had borrowed from Ashley Oliver's barn, over the over-hanging limb, outside himself now but mechanically going through the routine of making the loop and tying the slip knot and then climbing robotically onto the fence post, beyond now the thinking and even the feeling and the anguish that until now would not stop, placing the slip-knotted loop over his head, his senses going from total shutdown to super-awareness--the rough feel of the rope around his neck, the warbling of a nearby mockingbird, the white flowers blooming on the thorn-bush across the way but not on his brow, the smell of fresh-mown hay in Freeman Oliver's field, and the unseen echoes of the long-ago melodies and plaintive organ music from that now-gone church of his faded and lost youth asking him, pleading with him, oh so softly and tenderly, *ye who are weary, come home, come home, come home, come home, softly and tenderly, Jesus is calling, calling for you and for me, calling, Oh, Sinner, come home, come home, come home, See on the portals He's waiting and watching, watching for you and for me, come home, come home, ye who are weary, come home, calling, Oh, Sinner, come home, though we have sinned He has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me, come home, come home, come home, Ye who are weary, come home, come home, come home, Earnestly, tenderly Jesus is calling, calling, calling, Jesus is calling, calling,*

calling, waiting, watching, calling, pleading come home, come home, come home, Oh, for the wonderful love he has promised, promised for you and for me, though we have sinned he has mercy and pardon, pardon for you and for me, come home, come home, ye who are weary come home, a mantra now, outside himself and devoid of space and all time and bereft of all except the weariness, the call of home, the still and hushed and ancient and haunting music flowing over and over and over through every minute bruised and bedraggled tendril and synapse of his tired brain and wasted mind, and he poised there on that cedar fence post, delicately balanced in that state between now and eternity, the fog in that chasm between life and death engulfing him---and as he launched himself from that cedar fence post into space and eternity the pain and the sorrow and the defeat and the failure of his miserable life deserted him, and he soared like an eagle toward the heavens, flying away in the words of the old hymn “just like a bird from prison bars has flown,” his only regret, his only worry, at the last nano-second of his wretched life being that brother Robert, the half-wit, the idiot, would now be left alone on that merciless farm surrounded by these godly but strangely unaware and disconnected people in this the most uncaring of times, the late 50’s of the Eisenhauer era.

By sheerest of incongruous coincidences (and surely as a cosmic joke engineered by the Jokester himself---that old, sly, toady fox!), at the precise moment that Daniel leaping from the fence post and then into space, became the first spaceman from Bug Tussle, the respective congregations at the Assemblies of God, the Missionary Baptist, and the Plains Bayou Church of Crist launched into their respective renditions of “I’ll Fly Away,” that haunting and melodic song by Albert E. Brumley, and the community resounded with joyous hope and penultimate praise to Him whose name they each worshipped, each in his own (“right,” so each said) way, but Who, hopefully on this Sunday morning at least, was more present near that church that existed now only in time, yes, maybe He was present at that persimmon or blackjack tree with its sturdy and handy limb where reposed now all that on Harth was left of Daniel Eason, dangling and spinning at the end of his rope on Ashley Oliver Lane until someone, Pearl Oliver it was, coming home from church found him just as Daniel had foreseen that she would, and Pearl’s husband, Truman, rushed to get the sheriff and coroner (one and the same in those days) and other help, one being Gerrie Pence, to cut down Daniel’s body, Gerrie bedeviled to this day with that image: the dangling corpse, its hangman’s noose tied incorrectly around the wrinkled, dirty neck, the agony of the expression when the neck did not break and Daniel slowly choked to death, and he also recalls the suicide note from Daniel, a man whom folks believed could not write at all, a note scratched with a pencil on a tiny piece of paper in at most a first grader’s scrawl: “*Daniel Eason. I done it.*” That was all. No justification. No excuse. No explanation even. And no blame. No blame, because Daniel knew, even if the good souls of the Bug Tussle community did not, or at least would not acknowledge, yes, Daniel knew, and yes, he *knew that they knew* what had driven him to this lonely and pitiful ending.

Yes, maybe He, the God whom they worshipped, was more there on the corner of Ashley Oliver Lane that Sunday morning than in the midst of the faithful whose lips worshipped Him as they gazed heavenward, each enshrouded in contemplation of that day---far away each secretly hoped!---when he or she would “fly away”, but as each good

churchman and church lady lustily belted out the rousing hymn, their eyes gazing upward in rapt expectation, not a soul at any one of the churches (and I cannot and do not excuse myself from this judgment) felt a need to ask for forgiveness for not bothering to look downward into the gutter where Daniel Eason had groveled and suffered so long in front of unseeing and uncaring eyes, and not one sainted soul (While I do not fit this category, neither do I excuse myself from it!) felt that he or she owed any penance (after all, “penance” is a *Catholic* concept) or required any absolution for failing to ask of Brother Daniel, “*Oh, Brother, Where Art Thou?*” as he wallowed in his depression and suicidal thoughts.

And so perhaps they, and I, were so blinded in worship of Him that they, and I, failed to see Him whom they, and I, worshipped so vigorously in song swoop down in his fire-chariot of wheels-within-wheels over Ashley Oliver Lane on that serene and cloudless Sunday morning so long ago and whisk Brother Daniel Eason on his long journey from despair to hope, from weariness to home, which is a much shorter distance than the oddly inexplicable disconnect between the brains and the hearts of these good people, myself included, of Bug Tussle on that wretched Sunday morn.

Or maybe the wheels-within-wheels fire-chariot of the universal Overlord was nowhere near Ashley Oliver Lane that long-ago Sunday morning. Maybe He was off in some distant corner of his vast domain piddling with some minor project that interested Him for the moment, indifferent and unhearing and uncaring what happened on this isolated, primitive world orbiting the star called Sil in an insignificant galaxy called the Silky Way in one inconsequential universe at the extreme fringe of his innumerable universes, yes, maybe He was off somewhere *delighting perhaps in traversing His vast domain in search of some blathering bacterium or virulent virus or insentient inanimate that He can transform, magically some believe, into more interesting and more complex versions of the same.*

Instead, if some literalist interpretations of Holy Scripture is to be believed, maybe another vessel appeared in the sky from a non-time and non-place in this dimension, blazingly bright and hot and eager and hungry, smelling not of the crystalline sea but of sulfur and dead things, piloted by monstrous creatures who, if the human eye could but see them, would induce terror and loathing in the bravest of hearts, some resembling a dragon and others with mixed body parts of a lion and a bear, and as Bug Tussle’s first spaceman launched himself into space, he simultaneously launched himself into that aspect of time that is frozen and immobile and eternal, called eternity, and the vessel aptly named “The Collector of Souls” whisked Daniel Eason to his new and everlasting non-existence: his not-home, which is what Cristans call “hell.”

However, I choose *not* to believe this because to condemn Daniel Eason and his disturbed and wasted mind might very well be to condemn myself and those of us who, thorough our indifference and neglect and failure to act, bear the guilt of being complicit in his suicide. No, I choose to believe in a more merciful God who has the intelligence and compassion and understanding to know, and to forgive, that which hounded and chased Daniel Eason to that persimmon or blackjack tree on that Sunday morning long

ago, and, if understanding and forgiving that, can also understand and forgive me and other Bug Tusslians whose guilt, a collective community guilt, abides to this day, percolating and metastasizing like a cancer just beneath the surface of our placid lives, and I don't even believe that it is necessary to explain to Him why we did not do more because He understands *that*, also: Curt Boshears' tearful plea that "*I was just a little kid!*" at the time and that even the adults at Bug Tussle, and indeed many of the more sophisticated folks at Maldoon in this era, had never heard the word "psychology" or had an inkling what to do with mental illness or how to respond to a person wallowing in suicidal thoughts, and that while all this does not *excuse or justify* it does *explain* even though an explanation to the Omniscient is entirely unnecessary if one simply acknowledges and confesses his guilt and comes to Him with a penitent heart.

Years later, however, as I reflected on this second possibility, the one I have just rejected, I wondered what it must be like, if indeed there is such a place in eternity and if indeed souls are immortal and death fails to bring sweet nothingness, for Daniel Eason and the hordes of humanity, probably 99% if fundamentalist interpretation of Holy Scripture is to be believed, whose destination is not home but that other place that Cristans call hell but that is really nothing more nor less than not-home.

So I put myself in Daniel Eason's place that Sunday morning as he became Bug Tussle's first spaceman and launched himself from that cedar fence post into space and time. Daniel of course, would not have written it this way because he could not even write, and he would not have thought it this way because his mind was oblivious to ethereal matters. Nevertheless, I have no doubt whatsoever that he not only talked to Darkness but wrestled with him, and I am positive that he could have identified with what I wrote, because the hell I describe existed, if not in eternity, in the all-consuming darkness of his tortured and fractured mind prior to and during that final morning.

My children, you creatures of my loins, you strangers both near and afar off---all of you, make what you will---or make nothing at all---of what I/Daniel Eason saw. The choice is yours, but I warn you: beware of some "old friends" and avoid this place for no light abounds there and no hope and no joy, and without light and hope and joy life itself is impossible. I titled the piece:

My Old Friends

"Hello, Darkness, my old friend. I've come to talk with you again." Simon and Garfunkel in "Sound of Silence."

I came to my old friend, Darkness, inquiring, "Tell me, old buddy, how am I doing this morning?"

And Darkness answered me saying, "You are doing not-fine for you have not-crashed and are not-crooked and not-croaked and are still not-breathing, although you are somewhat bloodied and mangled, but your old friend, Time, also assures you that you, lost in him, will soon be not-fine and not-free."

And I said, “Not-fine and not-free are better than fine and free, right, as not-feeling is better than feeling and not-loving is better than loving and, well, let me not take this thing to an extreme and talk about not-living, okay?”

And Darkness answered, “You must relinquish! You must enfold yourself within me, and I within you, my tentacles wrapping around and not-nourishing your not-pain and not-needs, and you must eat of this not-fruit or you shall surely perish. I said that you shall surely die.”

And I said to Darkness, “Tell me, wise one, before I do this thing that you ask, why is it that mankind seeks the light and ecstasy, clings to the hope of them as a drowning man grasps for a sodden and torn and useless life jacket in a frozen and forlorn sea?”

So Darkness told me, “I have known you always and was with you before there was a you, so I will tell you the truth. You created ones strive to find something that is not of this universe, a spark (better yet a conflagration) caused by two souls meeting, merging, joining into one so as to be transported into another time and place where light and ecstasy abound, an unnatural universe I assure you, ephemeral and gossamer and unreal.”

“Now, hush,” Darkness continued, “Know that I am not-light and embrace me. Take me into yourself, and I will sup with you and you with me. Shush your not-crying and squelch that not-pain and give yourself over to me totally, because, you see, you and I are one and the same, and I will cuddle you as you huddle there in your not-aloneness and envelop you with my satiny cloak and remove from you all knowledge of what might have been, which is the tragedy of those who cling to hope.”

“What if I don’t want to?” I asked.

“What choice do you have? He responded. “Did they leave you any choice? Did they? Did they? Be honest, now, damn you! Did they?”

“No,” I said, “No choice. They left me no choice. No choice. No not-hope. None. Nada. None. Nien.”

“So, then, don’t run from me, “Darkness crooned. “I am waiting for you and calling to you if you will only surrender your not-significant soul to me. Is that too high a price to ask for not-peace, for surcease of not-anguish?”

“No,” I said, on the verge of capitulation. “It is a small price, my Lord, and my soul is worthless and spent anyway, as you---the Collector of Souls---should very well know.”

And so with those words I surrendered all to him, and Darkness took me and engulfed me and swallowed me, and I swallowed him, so that we became one, he and I, and I died within myself and, in dying, lived again, reborn beyond the need for any further dialogue with myself/Darkness.

And now? Now? No, not “now”, forever! Forever! Now is forever! Forever is now!

Now/forever, I look up from this abyssal pit at the firmament where there is not-light and where not-stars not-glimmer, and as I slip-slide and slide-glide down the winding axis of not-time I catch a faint whiff of something, light or ecstasy perhaps---though I don't even recall clearly the words anymore much less their meaning---swimming in the cold and empty void where once perhaps they lived for a micro-second before flickering and waning and dying and not-being, as am I.

And, in consuming me and casting me into his blackened hole, Darkness spoke to me one last time, inquiring in a mockingly solicitous manner, “So, Daniel/Jack, how are you really, doing in there? How do you really feel in this Stygian abyss?”

So I told Darkness the not-truth, because he knew already and there is simply no use lying to the Father of Lies, “I am a rock. A rock knows no pain. A rock never cries.”

“Never, ever not-cries,” I cried out, shaking and pummeling my fist at the empty heavens, not-crying where no one could ever not-hear or ever not-care.

Well, that's not true, actually, for there is my old friend, Darkness, to not-hear, and my old friend, Time, to offer not-hope that all this not-pain will not-end sometime before eternity itself whimpers to a close, so I take not-solace from them, My Old Friends.

What would a soul do without Old Friends?

And so I thought, “If the latter scenario is correct and in fact Darkness is Daniel's destination, is it not in part the fault---the sin of omission readily comes to mind---of those good saints, myself included (though I decline the “saint” label), parroting the wistful words of that haunting song while eagerly awaiting to fly away to their imagined home?”

Oh, yes, they sang the song on that bright and cloudless Sunday morning, and nothing, nothing, nothing I tell you---nothing at all--- not the yet undiscovered suicide of Daniel Eason on this innocent and serene Sunday morning or anything else, in the Harth below or the heavens above, in this or all the other illimitable universes of the cosmos, prevented the good saints from belting out the words with gusto:

*Some glad morning when this life is o'er
I'll fly away.*

*To a home on God's celestial shore
I'll fly away.*

Chorus
I'll fly away oh glory
I'll fly away
When I die, Hallelujah by and by
I'll fly away.

*When the shadows of this life have grown,
I'll fly away.*
*Like a bird from prison bars has flown,
I'll fly away.*

I'll fly away, O Glory,
I'll fly away.
When I die, Hallelujah, bye and bye,
I'll fly away.

*Just a few more weary days and then
I'll fly away.*
*To a land where joy shall never end
I'll fly away.*

Chorus
I'll fly away oh glory
I'll fly away
When I die, hallelujah by and by
I'll fly away.

Whatever his destination and whatever his reward or non-reward, however, Daniel need not have worried about his dim-witted brother because Robert was nothing if not a survivor. And even though a rube and an idiot, Robert mourned Daniel in his own way, a way that the community marveled at but did not understand. Robert, somewhere and somehow without any money, bought some red paint, and he painted the cedar fence post and the persimmon or blackjack tree bright red, and he kept them painted so long as he lived. Perhaps in some dim recess of his idiot mind Robert sensed that the bloodying of this fence post and this tree would serve as a continuing reminder, perhaps even a gentle rebuke, to the community of its neglect and indifference to Daniel's plight.

Yes, Robert was a survivor, and he was smart enough, as also was Daniel before his death, to know the houses in lower Bug Tussle (Annie's and Aunt Woo-Woo's or Aunt Lear's or the Boshears or others) and those in Upper Bug Tussle (Bill Pence's, Elmer Malley's, Frank Heller's, Ashley Oliver's and others) where he could always cadge a free meal, even when he had fouled himself so long and so often that he ceased to smell his own excrement, and somehow as if by telepathy Robert seemed to always know when

there was a big family gathering and, knowing, would come (as also did Daniel before his death), an uninvited and sometimes unwanted guests, to partake of the plenitude of foods. And Robert also knew who could be counted on to wash his clothes once a month (Woo-Woo) and to give him oranges, apples, and a bit of candy and cake at Cristmas (the church) or perhaps a Klimm's cola or orange or grape out of the number 10 washtub where they were laced down with ice, at least on each Fourth of July (Uncle Ray Dodge), and where the homemade ice cream would be waiting (Woo-Woo's or Lear's or Uncle Ray's).

Yep, Robert knew as a child would know those who would pass him by in a cloud of dust and those like Harlon Dodge who would stop in his dirt-stained pickup and let Robert ride to town to buy what few necessities he could afford or, if he had no money, to go to the Welfare Office to pick up the commodities ("modities" he called them), and he knew when the annual Decoration Day was at the Bug Tussle Cemetery and Community ("Munity" he called it) Building where there was food on the ground, more food and more variety than a hundred starving Roberts could have ever devoured.

You see, Robert the rube, the idiot, the dummy was not such a dummy after all; in fact he was really very smart in his own way, shuffling and whooping and hollering his nonsense about the rich Maldoon folks in charge of county government who could, by law he claimed, simply "demn it and take it" (condemn a person's property and take it) if they so chose, the power of eminent domain being something fearsome and awesome and even evil to him who had never taken anything from anyone in his life against their will, talking and making a fool and a clown of himself, much like some of the Black folks in this and previous eras, until he became invisible, a non-presence, a non-entity without form or substance, ephemeral and unreal, a downright embarrassment that most good folks in the community simply overlooked because to look at him, to see him, to acknowledge him, would have been to see themselves in the mirror, and they would then have to admit their own selfishness and unconcern and lack of caring and Cristan charity, their individual and collective violation via omission of their own Lord's admonitions about the poor and the meek and, yes, the little children, to which Robert in his childlike innocence was quite akin.

A strange apparition even in blazing August, he bundled up in not one but two pairs of overalls and in winter three or four pairs layered over each other for warmth, his tattered toboggan pulled down over his head in winter and capped with a broken-down hat, a stick, his stick, not a walking stick but one like it, that he used to scare all the wildcats and wampus kittens and polecats and assorted other catamounts from the brush-piles of his mind. He shuffled up and down those dusty roads, followed by his old dog Possum, too old and feeble at the last even to subsistence farm or to put in a small garden until finally it was too much for him, this coming back and forth from his remote DeCoq Hills home across the ford at the Eason eddy and on then to Bug Tussle looking for both sustenance and companionship, for even an old man and an idiot gets lonesome at times when his only companion is that small, yipping dog that refused his constant commands to roust those wampus kitties from the imaginary brush-piles in Robert's mind.

So his brother, Jackson, now well off in California, and perhaps in a fit of conscience from having bought in for back due taxes the old home place and its surrounding eighty acres, the old Matt Eason homestead that was chock full now of huge pine saw logs, paying perhaps a hundred dollars or so of taxes and with that payment extinguishing forever all Robert's and Daniel's claim to the land and the timber on it, bought Robert an old school bus and set it up on the old Loseman place about two hundred yards east of our house where old Dr. John Farr (a Yankee-born, Indiana it was, doctor who delivered me, thus tainting and tarnishing me forever with the Yankee brush) had once lived and practiced his brand of country doctoring for Robert to live in with his old dog Possum and by now a dozen or so cats and kittens that, mostly feral, nevertheless never refused a handout if Robert ever had any to offer, and he did share, the cans of Vienna sausage that he bought by the case and the pork and beans people gave him and the canned meat from the 'modities (commodities).

For several years he lived there in this un-cooled, unheated, dilapidated school bus even during the hottest of summers and the harshest of winters, not getting around so good anymore but sometimes attending the local Assemblies of God church that was no more than a stone's throw away and when not attending sitting in his yard with his dozen or more cats and kittens and his old Possum listening to the sometimes lusty and sometimes heart-warming hymns wafting on the still night air from the small church and drifting into his eagerly awaiting and hopefully believing ears, songs that whispered and spoke about and promised that there would be "no tears in heaven, no sorrows given," that death and sickness and pain and poverty and hunger, and, yes, even his idiot mind perhaps, would all be gone, vanquished, in that Beulah Land of the cloudless day and unclouded sky, sensing perhaps in his half-witted way that this old world that he had endured so long, that he had fought and wrestled to a standstill even if he had not triumphed over it, was not his home and that this old house that he now lived in was shattered and broken beyond even the hope of repair.

On those nights when the temperature was warm and the soothing smell of honeysuckle or the wistful fragrance of wisteria infused the air and the bullfrog symphony across the road at Glenn Hill's pond competed with the fiery Pennecostal hymns in the sultry night-time heat, Robert would sit hoping, thinking (even the fireflies flickering faster than the broken tendrils of his misfiring synapses), hoping, longing, yearning, perhaps even believing,

"I hope that they, the songs, are right, cause I shore ain't seen nothing but pain and poverty and hunger and sorrow here."

Perhaps then he would cry a little silently into the uncaring night thinking the what-might-have-been and the if-only thoughts of all old men and old women everywhere in every time who have only one future and that one bleak, thinking over and over and over and over to himself,

"If only I had not been born a rube and an idiot on this hardscrabble farm in this worst of times, it would not have been necessary to take me to Mott Springs to a Black

hooker down at the railroad tracks for me to have known a woman, a woman who would have loved me as I am, without shame or even regret, and I would have loved her, too, even more than I love old Possum there and all these wampus kittens.”

Perhaps then in the cloyingly sweet honeysuckled air under the panoply of untold bejillions of suns, Robert in his own rube-like and idiotic way would take the thought, the fantasy (for even idiots spin fantasies and dream dreams, do they not?), a step further and imagine himself not as a rube or an idiot, an invisible yet mirrored conscience to the community, but one of the paragons of respectability and sages of school-learning who could have his way with any woman he chose, but not just any woman, no, not just any woman would do, for even an idiot longs with all his heart for that *special* woman whom he can love and court and entice and romance with words of love, even poetry perhaps, that he shared only with her in words and concepts that Robert the rube and Robert the idiot could not decipher but only long for as some incomprehensible missing *something*, a dull ache or a void perhaps, in his soul.

Join with me now, won’t you, in that moment of what passes for introspection in this Bug Tussle idiot’s mind as he contemplates the what-might-have-been of that *special* someone to whom he writes this trilogy, the first extending an invitation and the other two positing one of two possible but mutually exclusive responses, outcomes, her choice of which determines the timeline that Robert follows in this particular what-might-have-been alternate reality. Robert’s trilogy is as follows:

OPTION

*If I hadn’t searched for eons on end
 For perfection to love, someone to blend
 In that sacred rite of complete consummation,
 The denial of Self in love’s abnegation,
 I wouldn’t wait for you to decide;
 I’d resign for a lesser to sing at my side,
 And regret forever the opportunity denied
 By an option ungiven---or unexercised.*

*“Option” is more than a legal sound,
 Gate to Gethsemane where feelings abound
 Floating in the shadows of your fears
 Calling you from the silence of those empty years,
 Calling you to forego the pain and the tears
 And open your Self---your being as a whole---
 On the altar of trust---your body and soul.*

*So it’s yours to use as you see fit
 Choose now if you can---or wait a bit
 Just remember “I love you” cancels regret*

*And slashes the cord of that coiled bind
 In the spidered strands of your mangled mind.
 Don't wait too long or the option passes---Please!
 Once gone---there are no more guaranties.*

EPITAPH
(WORDS THAT SILENCE SAID)

*I've heard bugles bellow and horns blast
 Bagpipes pipe and drums crash
 Thunder caboom and lightning flash
 Carving out the words that silence made:
 "Hopes don't die;
 They just fade."*

*Water gurgling strangled melody
 "Poetic justice" screamed the trilogy
 But elixirs can't quell the misery
 Or hush the silence, without a trace of temper:
 "Worlds end not with a bang
 But with a silent whimper."*

*Yes, these are the words that silence said,
 Epitaph chiseled in my granite head:
 "Only he who stumbles is ever disjointed;
 Only he who expects is ever disappointed;
 Only he who asks does silence refuse,
 So reclaim your option and pay your dues!"*

WHIRLPOOL OF OUR DREAMS

*Why can't you---
 Release it all, let it go,
 Let it fall
 Where it may
 Forget tomorrow, live today
 Feel
 What you've never---
 Ever---
 Felt before
 In the shelter of my arms?*

*Release is what you crave
 From yourself*

*From suffocation in your narrow grave
 From the program of computer-mother
 Locked into your brain
 Propelled by another
 From the lagoon of love's refrain
 By the waves of your fears.*

*I can't, you've told me,
 But "I can't" is something
 Alien to my ears
 Foreign to my tongue
 Anathema to my being.*

*I could forget---
 Painfully removing my Self
 From the shadowed shelf---
 Where you have placed me---
 Brushing off the dust
 Like one brushes off a bust
 Covered with the squirming
 Wigglings of fire-ants
 Swarming, burrowing
 Tunnels to your core.*

*But then my tomorrows
 Would be as gray as my todays
 Reflections of my yesterdays
 Without you.*

*If it means anything to you---
 I love you---please!
 It means everything to me.
 And I need you
 And I know that you
 Know what that means
 Because you, yes you,
 Need me, too.*

*And perhaps together
 You and I---as one
 Can view the pinnacle
 Scale the skies
 And find the meaning that eludes us
 In the shadows of our eyes
 The whirlpool of our dreams
 Floating by on butterfly wings*

*Nectar-sweet love for the weary
Upon the bleak and dreary
Deserts of our days.*

In the cold winter, however, when the north-wind brought sleet and snow slashing and swishing through the cracks in the sagging and busted bus windows and when the temperatures plummeted to near zero, Robert would huddle in his old bus in the makeshift bed, four pair of overalls on and three pair of socks under the gum boots, huddling there with his cats and one dog the only company and the only warmth until someone---perhaps Uncle Gabe Hollison with some of his delectable char-grilled barbecue finely chopped so that Robert, with no teeth, could consume it, or Luvina Melcher (now Hill) with her fabulous hot tamales or Faith Heller with her scrumptious dumplings or Bonita Heller with her mouth-watering blueberry pies---would come by with a plate of hot food and a steamy thermos of coffee, accepting these gifts, grateful, knowing that whatever he did he was born alone and that in time---and not too long either---he would die alone in this freezing bus.

And so he did. Almost.

He froze almost solid one long winter night when the temps dropped to sub-zero and a thirty-mile-per-hour wind tentacled its wind chill right through the un-insulated tin of the old bus and past the layers of overalls and socks and gum boots and into the suppliant flesh and even through the quivering bones, at least the bones of his feet that were so frozen that they had to be amputated when he was taken as a charity case into the Swamp Gas County Memorial Hospital, a charity case that the hospital and perhaps the doctor too no doubt charged Medicaid twice as much as for decent folks with jobs and families and money and insurance.

His feet amputated, unable to get around at all now, the whoopin' and hollerin' and wampus-cattin' frozen or at least driven plumb out of him, he was taken to a Maldoon nursing home that was not home, at least not in the way that his DeCoq Hills shack was home or even the old bedraggled bus that was now home only to abandoned cats gone wild and perhaps Robert's Possum, his beloved dog, who all waited in vain for Robert to come home. Yes, Robert longed to return to either of them, the old shack or the tin bus---despite the palatable food and warmth and doctoring at the nursing home---begging, pleading with, the doctors and nurses and what few Bug Tussle folks would visit him for the few months that he lived, entreating, crying only with a small trickle of tears, asking in his old man's voice devoid now of everything except hope, and even that futile, that they just permit him to die at home.

Finally, still in the nursing home Robert slipped away to that place more beautiful than even he in his wildest idiot imagination had ever dreamed, where once again he can whoop and holler and wampus-cat and pole-cat an eternity of brush-piles to his soul's content and where old Possum, no doubt, still trails at his side.

In that *other* reality, however, where the whirlpools of his dreams reside and where no epitaph of rejection and abandonment is to be found, Robert the not-rube, Robert the not-idiot, vibrantly lives on, loving and being loved for all time, even in that ceaseless and frozen state of non-time called eternity, by that *special* woman to whom he once, in that if-only and what-might-have-been world, optioned his heart and his soul and his future, and in *this* Bug Tussle of *this* alternate time and place Robert the idiot is not an idiot after all.

And maybe in this what-might-have-been and if-only world the poetry that he shares with his special woman is perhaps better than the poem that Robert, the idiot, the rube, composed and chanted in the Bug Tussle of my youth, a poem that, I think, seriously calls into question the community assessment that Robert, even in this time and place, was an idiot. I hear him now as I write, chanting these words as he shuffles through the woods from his DeCoq Hills home:

*Polecat, polecat!
Nine little kittens
Sack 'em up! Sack 'em up!
Git 'em! Git 'em!*

Chapter 9 More Tweaking: The One And The Other

“He’s a walking contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction, taking every wrong direction on his lonely way back home.” “Pilgrim: Chapter 33” by Kris Kristofferson

Glowing from the praise lavished upon him for his other tweaking suggestions, Retep continued with his ideas for last-minute alterations to the installed software, a smile curling the corners of his lips because he knew that he was about to venture onto his favorite topic: The Other.

“A second matter, High One. I forget. Is it this one or is it the other creature—whose scheduled insertion was/is/will be stardate 00008191946--from whom you intend to remove the usual control mechanism?”

“The other creature,” Susej replied. “You know that as well as I do! With this one I shall leave the normal control in place but give him the capacity, the free will, to do wrong (which I foresee he will---innumerable times), but with the other creature I shall do the exact opposite: remove the control mechanism but give him the capacity, the free will, to do good, and I, too, foresee his choices---unless he exercises the option I am giving him to alter my foresight. To him and him alone, and not to this one, I give the power to transcend the pre-ordained.”

Retep in turn: “I know it’s premature to discuss this other creature---the initiation of the insertion sequence for him is several Harth months off, but if I may speak my mind plainly---you know I mean neither you nor the great Ruler DOG (“May His Name be praised forever!”) any disrespect---it seems to me that a place called No Hope, given that

you are removing the usual control, is a rather ludicrous place to insert this creature, is it not?"

"Not at all," answered Susej somewhat sharply, "For I have hope for this one as indeed I do for all my infinite creations throughout all my creation and un-creation epochs. He, too, is my beloved and my child and my chosen one. Surely you understand that, Retep?"

"Indeed I do," sighed Retep, "But I can't help but wonder about this particular experiment. You yourself have seen on the space-time continuum how he was/is/will be, and nevertheless here you are inserting him not only into a town called No Hope but also into the "Home of the World's Largest Watermelons."

"So? I'm sorry, Retep," Susej responded, "but I don't divine your meaning. Is there something about watermelons that I'm overlooking?"

"Well, among the humanoid cultures---pretty universally on this insignificant planet---there are certain recognized symbols (a harthling, Dr. Sigmund Freud, first postulated the theory), and one of the strongest of these is the phallic."

"So---do you have a point to all this?" Susej drawled, "Or are you simply engaging in your usual avocation of trying to fill my already cluttered mind with more minutiae about all creation?"

"No, my Lord, I am serious or at least half-so," Retep laughed. "What I'm saying is that given the huge ego you're giving this other creature and the fact that you are excising the normal control mechanism and given the cultural significance of the watermelon as a phallic image, he will most likely internalize these world champion fruit as the measure of his gargantuan ego, appetite, and even his sexuality."

"What chutzpah! What super cojones!," Susej laughed, a twinkle in his eye. "This would not be the first time in history for one of my inadvertent cosmic jokes, now would it Retep?"

"No, my Lord," Retep chuckled, "but must you mark him with such distinguishing characteristics?"

"We digress." Susej admonished. "Let's get back to the creature at hand. We can deal with the other in his allotted time. Just install the control mechanism into this one, and let's get on with it."

"So be it; it is done as you wish, my Lord," Retep murmured, "But before we leave the subject---and forgive me if I sound impertinent---may I be so bold as to ask what exactly do you hope to achieve in this experiment---this programmed interaction of this creature with The Other?"

“My inscrutable purpose,” intoned Susej sternly, “Now inquire of me no further. I will say this, however: for each of my creation my will is that he/she/he-she/it acquires knowledge and wisdom and learns love to the point that once learning it he/she/he-she/it forgets the knowing of it and simply emits it in like manner as the suspiration of the lungs or gills. I also want each of my creatures to eventually remember home. Beyond that, Retep, it is not for you---or for them---to know.”

“I apologize for over-stepping my bounds and assuming on our relationship,” Retep bowed deeply at the waist and genuflected.

“Think nothing of it, Retep,” Susej assured, “As with your other multitudinous transgressions I have cast them into the sea of forgetfulness, and I remember them no more. Now, let’s focus back on this creature, if you will.”

“Thank you, My Grace,” murmured Retep. “I have one final consideration. Do we want to install a homing beacon in this creature?”

“You see why you’re my number one assistant,” praised Susej, trying to lift Retep’s crestfallen mood. “You think of everything. Sure, let’s do it---perhaps in his forehead, disguised beyond human recognition as a harmless polyp. Should a Harth doctor discover it---and I foresee that Dr. James Sun, who incidentally is The Other’s doctor as well, will discover it in the 1980’s Harth-time, but he will (despite his world-renowned brilliance) diagnose it as a simple polyp that does not need surgical removal.”

“As you wish,” assented Retep, slightly inclining his head. “It is installed. Now, shall we do our final spatial and temporal pre-initiation scans to make absolutely certain that this particular space-time continuum is the best for this creature as he implements your grand design, whatever that may be?”

“Carry on, lieutenant,” commanded Susej.

As Retep adjusted the spatial controls of the horus-scope to a wider geographic view, he tweaked the temporal mode as well so that the full parameters of this creature’s new world and time might better be seen and evaluated. Although the area and time had, of course, been scouted and known for eons, evolution has a way of changing places, people, and cultures, altering them minutely so that perhaps they would interfere, however tangentially at first, with the master plan, so one of Retep’s duties is to update cultural and environmental data on both the spatial and temporal planes just prior to initiation of the insertion sequence. The Ruler DOG (“May His Name be forever praised!”) and Susej might be infallible, Retep thought, but he knew that he was not, and any minutiae not accounted for and thus not programmed could result in gross distortions not only of an individual creature’s life plan but also the life plans of those around and associated with him and even those afar off.

Actually, Retep mused, it is quite difficult to understand much less explain the catastrophically damaging impact to the fabric of the time-space continuum emanating

from a random factor not properly allowed for, but Retep viewed it as the polar opposite of an harthquake: whereas an harthquake's greatest damage is at its epicenter and the tremors diminish in intensity as they radiate outward, a time-spatial deviation from the master plan, even for one creature inserted into a remote and isolated backwater planet such as Harth, continues to grow in terms incalculably exponential (that's the closest Harth concept of the mathematical progression that is simply not understandable by mere humanoid minds) from its core. In short, the greater the distance the greater the ripple---no, "ripple" implies small, "cataclysm" or "tsunami" are better words!---the greater the damage, and that simply would not do. Susej and the Ruler DOG ("May His Name be praised forever!") required no less than perfection, and it is my job to insure it, Retep thought.

"Okay, so we have seen, then, the house and its immediate surroundings and some of the odd creatures there, but what else can we see?" Retep mused. "Let me adjust outward a bit and look at more of this so-called Bug Tussle community and characters at large."

"I was just gonna suggest that," Susej replied. "Carry on."

So with a final adjustment to the zoom function of both the spatial and the temporal controls of the horus-scope, Retep brought up the undulating hologram for Susej's review and final approval. They gazed at both Bug Tussle, Arkansa mid-1940's through early 1960's Harth-time and at what the creature had written in several chapters of his unpublished book.

Chapter 10 **Lurdevell The Lame-Brain: Of Money and Grace**

For the love of money is the root of all evil---" I Timothy 6:10.

Then there is Lurdevell Fitzgibbons, another of the last of Bug Tussle's dirt farmers who inexplicably learned to barber despite the two-by-four that his father, Jim Fitzgibbons, slammed into his head. Or maybe it was not a two-by-four---stories differed, some saying that it was a singletree and some saying a claw hammer. The claw hammer version had some credence after my Uncle Wilton Dodge witnessed Jim slam his younger son, Archer, with a tack hammer when Archer kept letting the wallpaper that Jim was trying to tack up on the living room wall slip a little bit, so after two warnings Jim's terrible temper got the better of him and, forgetting that he had already lame-brained one son, Lurdevell, he bonged Archer on the top of the head, and not gently either Uncle Wilton said, with the steel hammer. Fortunately, Archer's skull was harder than Lurdevell's and while addled for a while he was not lame-brained.

Jim Fitzgibbons was a stern and mean and ornery and irascible man, so the community said, particularly when he would get liquored up, which he did quite often in the earlier days of his marriage to Mizz Ellie, and even later when he would get into

Lurdevell's stash of home brew that he cooked up and bottled in gallon jugs and buried down behind the house, and when drinking Jim would get physical and abusive, screaming and cursing vulgarities at his wife and children alike and striking out at anyone within his reach, particularly his illegitimate grand-daughter, Billie, born to Jim's daughter Flower and fathered by Garvin Call (so people said, and Jim apparently believed it to be true because he gave Garvin a most horrible thrashing when Flower got in the family way), and his abuse of Billie ended only when one of my first cousins, Genevive Clifford, who married Uncle Wilton Dodge and thus became my aunt as well as my first cousin, told Jim in no uncertain terms that if he ever struck Billie again that the sheriff would be out to see him. Even more than Billie, however, Jim would beat Lurdevell mercilessly, perhaps because Lurdevell was weak and somewhat passive even before his father applied the two-by-four to his skull, and bullies, even mother and father bullies, always pick on the weak and helpless, do they not?

Sometimes Jim, in fits of temper, would even horse-whip Lurdevell for all the community to hear at Clayton Sarter's barn (Clayton's wife, Diffie, was Jim's daughter, so Jim felt free to use the barn whenever he saw fit, even in later years when he also liberally applied the same whip there to his younger son, Archer) that stood across the road from the Bug Tussle store. Sipping a Klimm's Cola or maybe a grape or orange or strawberry, listeners at the store would hear Lurdevell screaming and begging and crying, the sickening slap-slap-slap of the whip echoing in rhythmic counterpoint to Lurdevell's screams and his obsequious begging:

"Please, Daddy, enough! Enough! I won't do it again! I promise! I promise!"

The begging and promising, however, never, stopped Jim's screamed cursing and the whack and slap of the merciless whip, for Jim would stop only when he decided to take a break, and then he would lock the barn door on Lurdevell, whose whimpering and moaning could still be heard at the store because Lurdevell *knew* that it was not over: that Jim was merely taking a break perhaps to chug down a soda pop so as to maintain his strength before it was time, once again, to mete out more of the corrective whip to his cowering son.

However, it was his swinging a two-by-four at his son just as he sometimes had to apply it to a stubborn and recalcitrant mule that finally addled Lurdevell. While the earlier beatings had hurt, this last two-by-four assault left Lurdevell not just addled but dim-witted as well ("lame-brained," people whispered), and the kids at the Bug Tussle School (who knew nothing of Jim and his two-by-four) where Lurdevell had, prior to his lame-braining, been *the* star pupil in math, a whiz we would say today, simply could not understand why Lurdevell suddenly could not even do simple arithmetic anymore.

People whispered, of course, other things as well about Jim Fitzgibbons because in a places like Bug Tussle whispering is a primary tool in the arsenal of community approbation, in the good folks' censure and even ostracism of those who deign to transgress and flaunt the rigid moral, or maybe we should say "moralistic," standards. Everyone knew, for example, why Jim manufactured a boundary line dispute with both

my uncle Hillie Clifford and with Grandpa Hart, claiming that the lane that meandered south from the Assemblies of God church to the old Clifford log dog-trot was on Fitzgibbons land. Even though the road had been there for years, and so adverse possession or at least a prescriptive easement undoubtedly applied, Grandpa Hart, along with everyone else in the community, understood why Jim concocted this confrontation, and so, understanding as he did and being a gentle man who loved even his unlovable neighbors, Grandpa Hart did not contest the matter but simply turned the other cheek and had a new road built twenty to thirty feet beyond where Jim claimed the boundary line was. Uncle Hillie, however, never gave in to Jim's demand that the lane running between their properties from the Bug Tussle Road down to the Dodge Loop right at my Grandpa and Grandma Dodge's homestead be closed because it "is on my land," and so the lane remained opened at least until my Uncle Hillie died and my Aunt Gert finally gave in just to stop the feud.

Of course, Grandpa Hart's kindness merely heaped more humiliation, "coals of fire" the Good Book calls it, on the head of the proud Jim Fitzgibbons whose anger and venom toward my grandpa stemmed from another well-known incident several years before. It was in the early 1930's, the Dust Bowl years, when many crops failed for lack of rain, which fell only sporadically, if at all, and then on the just and unjust alike or, in this case, missing the "just" Jim, so he believed, and falling on the nearby Clifford land, an injustice if ever there was, so Jim believed. Therefore, Grandpa Hart's corn crop was, if not bountiful, at least more than Jim and Lurdevell managed to eke out on their drought-stricken land, and as the winter progressed and the small pile of Fitzgibbons corn dwindled and then disappeared Jim looked with envy upon the corn crib of his neighbor and felt it only right that he help himself so as to correct the injustice that the Almighty, in his whim or caprice, had visited upon him.

And so he did, Jim did. He help himself, "steal" is the proper word, and when Grandpa Hart noticed that his corn was dwindling faster than it should he thought some varmint, some animal such as a raccoon, was coming in through a large crack and carting off the precious ears. So he set a large steel-trap just inside a crack between the logs, and it was maybe ten o'clock that night, a time well beyond when decent, hardworking folks at Bug Tussle were all in bed, when Grandpa Hart awoke to a most horrendous scream out at the corn crib. Pulling on his overalls and old brogans, Grandpa Hart lit his old lantern, grabbed his shotgun (because he knew not what creature he had trapped, maybe even a panther so loud were the screams), and made his way out to the barn, where the trapped creature howled and screamed. You see, the crack was not big enough for Jim to get his other hand through so as to free his trapped hand, so he was caught. And Grandpa Hart, as he was wont to do, spoke to Jim Fitzgibbon, his neighbor, saying:

"Jim, what are you doing out here sneaking around and stealing corn from my barn? Don't you know me well enough that you could ask me for the corn and know, too, that I would never refuse you even though I have little enough for my own use?"

And Jim: *"We're hungry, Hart, that's my only excuse. Our corn has run out, and my kids, well, they don't even have any cornmeal much less flour for bread, and so I*

thought it would be all right to borrow some of your corn to make cornmeal. You know I would have paid it back, don't you?"

And Grandpa Hart, magnanimously: "Shore you would, Jim. It's all right. That's what a neighbor is for, ain't it, to be neighborly and share what is needed. Now go on up to the house so Clotilda can stop the bleeding and clean up that wound. And give me that tow sack. I'll be there dreckly with your sack full of corn."

And Jim: "I don't know what to say, Hart."

And Grandpa Hart: "You don't have to say anything, Jim. Now if you need some more corn for your kids you ask me next time, you hear me?"

Maybe it was this humiliation, this moral failing, that caused Jim to take out his impotent rage and fury, his public humiliation, on his son, Lurdevell the lame-brain, or maybe it was just plain cussedness and meanness. The community was just not sure. Whatever the case, while Jim might ignore any part of Scripture prohibiting stealing and drunkenness and wife-abuse and coveting his neighbor's land, he righteously and with a vengeance applied the verse about not sparing the rod to his children, and he interpreted it not literally like most good Baptist but to include the whip as well as the rod.

And stealing? Well, maybe Jim thought that it is not really stealing to "borrow" a little corn, now is it? And if he found somebody's steel traps out in the middle of the woods, particularly if they were on his land, they were his for the taking, weren't they? At least until somebody claimed them? And the same rationalization applied to apples and peaches as well as evidenced by Jim's "borrowing", one early morning before dawn, several bushels of apples and even more of peaches from his eastern boundary neighbor, Bill Walls, who later that day found Jim set up in his wagon down by the store peddling vegetables and Will's peaches and apples, so he confronted Jim:

Bill: "Jim, I think I'll take some of them there apples and peaches. How much you selling them fer?"

Jim: "A nickel a pound, I reckin, if that's all right. How many you want?"

Bill "Well, I figure I might as well take all of them seeing as how you stole them from my orchard this morning."

Jim: "Why do you say that, Bill? These here are my apples and peaches."

Bill, knowing that Jim had no apples and peaches like this on his place, "Okay, then, just take me up to your house and show me the trees where these came from, and I'll not call the sheriff."

Jim, fearful: "*There's no need for that, Bill. Just take all of them.*" And Jim went off toward home, caught and humiliated by another neighbor, abandoning not only the apples and peaches but also the rest of his vegetables and produce as well.

So because of his father, Jim, Lurdevell the lame-brain never had a chance in life, and like Robert Eason and Daniel Eason and Odus Clifford, he was a confirmed bachelor unknown by or to any woman because no upstanding, or non-upstanding woman either for that matter, would have anything to do with him., mentally addled as he was. Lurdevell was a man who year-in-and-year-out, just like his father Jim and his grandfather and all those before them, followed his old mules up and down the hillside furrows to make the corn that he fed to the mules so that they, the mules, would live another plowing season so he could follow them up and down the furrows to make the corn for the coming winter to feed the mules, and so on and so forth, making no money from the farming because no one did, no one could.

But bartering, ah, that was a different story, although how Lurdevell managed to learn the trade no one knew, but from the quality of his haircuts community wags said that he must have practiced with a bowl over someone's head because that is exactly how his haircuts looked. Somehow, Lurdevell the lame-brain did learn bartering for which he charged at first a nickel and then a dime and then a quarter for a haircut on the porch of the old sawmill dogtrot house, and he held on to every nickel and every dime and every quarter that he ever made. He used an old pair of hand-clippers before the days of electricity and even afterwards because if one did not change, adapt, to modern farming methods and machinery, why would he change to electric clippers when the manual ones worked just as well, and the charge would still be a quarter, electric or not, would it not, for that was even more than these country yokels could pay, was it not, and with him having to bear the extra expense of electric clippers, well, that just did not make any sense, now did it? So he would clip and snip a while with his old hand clippers, then blow away the loose hair from the back of the ears with his snuff-filled breath before going after the hair with his scissors followed by some more snuff-blowing and more clipping, and if it was a Sunday haircut he might take time to stop and listen to something that Thomas Steve, the Missionary Baptist radio preacher, was saying on his broadcast on KBAK from Maldoon.

As he clipped one country head after another, Lurdevell always took the dimes and nickels and quarters and put them into the quart jar and then the gallon one and later more gallons of jars that he buried in the woods, perhaps in the same spots he buried his home brew, because everybody knew that banks were not to be trusted. No one was sure whether he spent his own money or whether his brother, Dewey, who lived in California and was well off, paid for it, but he finally gave in to modernity when he in the early 1960's bought a 1940's Chevrolet truck that he could scarcely drive and that would barely pull itself up the shallow hills, not driving it except when necessary because gasoline cost more than fifty cents a gallon and that was the price of two haircuts, and when driving not really driving but simply letting the old truck chug along at its own pace, a speed that must have comforted Lurdevell, the lame-brain, because it was not much faster than that of a good mule, sawing the steering wheel from side to side through clutched and white-

knuckled hands the same way he whipped the harness on the mules in a fearful and frantic side to side gesture, first “geeing” them to the right and then “hawing” them to the left, all with appropriate tugged movements of the harness lines, so that the confused and dumbfounded mules like the truck wove back and forth over what was meant to be but seldom was a straight line.

As he drove, Lurdevell, the lame-brain, had a habit of talking to himself or rather to the goshdarned truck the same way he talked to the mules, and he also habitually spit out the window what snuff tobacco he didn’t swallow “to kill the worms” or save to exhale onto the necks and cheeks and ears of those Bug Tusslians stupid enough or poor enough to endure the hour-long clipping and scissoring and snuff-blowing torture sessions that Lurdevell called a haircut and for which they paid him a nickel or a dime or later a quarter for the privilege of going home and sticking their heads in a foot-tub of soapy water so as to wash away at least the loose hairs and snuff if not the humiliation of it all.

Yes, Lurdevell lived unmarried in that old dogtrot house of rough-cut lumber cut at some peckerwood sawmill with his mother, Mizz Ellie, and his ogre-father Jim, who had made him the lame-brain that he was. In the winter of his life Jim, now an old man stooped and bent with arthritis and with a walking stick for support if not comfort, but still ornery and mean, so people said, yes, in those last of his days when his hair had turned to cotton, would trudge, and he a Baptist no less and who being such *could not possibly* fall from grace, up the hill to the Assemblies of God church, take a seat toward the back, and trickle torrents of tears down those aged, withered cheeks while thinking his own old man if-only and what-might-have-been thoughts, obviously touched and regretful, not at all the ogre that the community gossips and his own behavior had made him out to be, sitting there alone within and yet beyond and outside himself in a world that had passed by not only him but also his son Lurdevell who was himself a man in his late sixties now, knowing that Lurdevell, the lame-brain, was lame-brained by his, Jim’s, own hand, thinking the doleful thoughts of the aged:

“Oh, where has all the time gone? Why did I do things the way I did? Why can’t I have a second chance to make things right? If only I had not been possessed by this furious temper demon that caused me to lame-brain my own son!”

Yes, Jim the once-saved-always-saved Baptist sat there night after night in these fiery Pennecostal services internalizing the intense emotions or maybe it was vice versa: that the Spirit in this place sensed the void in Jim’s soul, its yearning for absolution, and merely externalized via the tears what Jim Fitzgibbons was thinking and feeling and, in the venting of the torrential tears, extended a balm that Jim soaked up, the same solace from those same hymns that Robert Eason on the other side of the church sitting in front of his old school bus also absorbed as if by osmosis, hoping---Jim and Robert as one now, united in the hope, the two of them, two old men broken and shattered by life, hurting and yearning in that vast internal place that no one sees, in the aloneness of the soul on the verge of death, intertwined and indistinguishable in the heat and the passion and the sheer emptiness of their lonely spirits--- that the truth, the hope, and yes indeed the grace that

these songs spoke of was offered even to them, to him, Jim, and that, ogre that he had been or maybe even still was and perhaps even could not help but being, he could find absolution in this place, appropriate it to his failed and miserable life if he could but lay his burdens down, but not yet quite able to accept the call of home despite the crooning and the tugging, not quite ready yet to relinquish all the pain and the failure and the regret and the loss that he felt.

And every time his mind touched on pain and loss he remembered his other son, handsome Archer, the light of his life, a youthful Korean War veteran, who took Bobby Joe Price and my half-aunt Elsa Clifford, not yet out of high school, the daughter of Hartwell and Clotilda, to Sin City (Mott Springs was called that by decent folks then because of the evil liquor, open whorehouses of both colors, and flagrant gambling operated by the mob) where one drink led to another and then another and then another. And, Jim remembered, how freshly home from the war Archie had money to burn and so he had not been content until he bought that 1946 Black Ford convertible even with his mother, Mizz Ellie, pleading with him not to do so because she had a premonition, a "bad feeling" she called it, about it all, and he remembered as if yesterday that dreadful night, April 9, 1954 it was, the very day Archie bought the car, when a man, Clifton Loseman it was, came down the hill to the porch of the old dog-trot house, knocked on the door, and when Mizz Ellie opened the door said:

"Mizz Ellie, I've got something to tell you."

And he, Jim, sitting here now years later in the Pennecostal church with the plaintive hymns wafting through his aged mind, recalled as if only yesterday how Mizz Ellie had said to Clifton Losemen with that voice usually so sweet but now breaking with resignation and barely concealed pain:

"You don't need to tell me, Clifton. I know already. It's Archer, isn't it? He's dead, isn't he?"

Yes, Jim recalled, Mizz Ellie "knew" with that special connection that mothers have to their children that he whom she had carried and birthed and who was the apple of both, hers and Jim's, eyes was no longer in this world, only not knowing the details until Clifton Loseman filled them in: how coming home on Highway 7 Archer pushed his new convertible up to in excess of ninety miles per hour and, failing to negotiate what was known (with just cause) as "dead man's curve," slammed straight into a tall pine tree, killing Archer at once, so Bobby Joe Price the only survivor said, and Elsa, well, so Bobby Joe claimed, she breathed only long enough to utter three words: "Oh, my God!" Not "Oh, my God, help me!" Just "Oh, my God," thereby creating a debate among the devout as to whether this was a prayer to or a curse at the Almighty or maybe even both.

Yes, tears trickling down his ancient face, Jim remembered all this, and more, and he was not yet ready to relinquish the pain of laying Archer out in the bedroom on the west end of the dogtrot, his coffin overlaid with a sprawling American flag, while Elsa was laid out in her father's, Grandpa Clifford's, old log dogtrot house, laid out without an

American flag, displayed there not only in death but also in shame all because she had quaffed one too many, or rather Archer had, and both their judgments and their reflexes had been impaired when they suddenly rounded dead man's curve at a high rate of speed, a fatal and eternal mistake to both the body and the soul, so the two old biddy aunts (Aunt Gert and Aunt Elvira, wives of my father's brothers, Hillie and Lammy, respectively) said, the same ones who examined Elsa in her coffin, feeling and pushing and probing on her stomach, believing, no, not believing, *knowing*, that she at death just *had to be* pregnant with Archer's child.

Aunt Gert: "You do know they wuz drinking, don't ye?"

Aunt Elvira: "Oh, yes, they wuz beer bottles all over the accident scene. They wuz plastered, I hear."

Aunt Gert: "And they wuz speeding down that highway like the devil hisself wuz after them."

Aunt Elvira: "Come to think about hit, I reckon he wuz, doncha thank?"

Aunt Gert: "Shore thing! And I reckin he got um both, too. Why, I don't know what the preacher's gonna be able to say."

Aunt Elvira: "Me, neither. Now he cain't rightly preach them into heaven, can he?"

Aunt Gert: "No, he cain't rightly do that, what with Elsa being in this condition and all. Even if she did say 'Oh, my God,' as Bobby Joe Price says."

Aunt Elvira: "What condition you talking about, Gert?"

Aunt Gert: "Well, hit's obvious, ain't hit?"

Aunt Elvira: "Gert, I don't know what ye are talkin' about. Jest tell me."

Aunt Gert: "Why, hit's there right in front of yer eyes! Cain't you see hit?"

Aunt Elvira: "See hit? I don't see nothing. Show me."

Aunt Gert: "Here, give me yer hand. I've already felt. Now, feel that?"

Aunt Elvira: "Feel what? I feel her belly. Is that what y'ins talking about? What about hit?"

Aunt Gert: "Well, feel how swollen up and all hit is?"

Aunt Elvira: "Reckon hit's jest the gasses. Dead folks do that."

Aunt Gert, insistently: “*NO, hit ain’t the gasses! Feel here, right here! You know that’s where babies are?*”

Aunt Elvira: “*Babies? Well, I do feel something---*”

Aunt Gert: “*And hit ain’t gasses, is hit, Elvira? This is Archer’s child you’re a-feelin’, ain’t hit?*”

Aunt Elvira, feeling, exploring, “*Why, I thank yer right, Gert. Archer’s child, that’s what I’m a-feelin’.*”

And so it came to be rumored about the community, and whether it was true or false did not matter after a while, because everybody simply accepted it as gospel truth, right or wrong, and now when I go to that old log, dogtrot house where Elsa’s picture still hangs on the wall in the living room where she was laid out in her casket more than a half century ago, her picture even then looking over what remained of my half-aunt, Elsa Clifford, I ask myself first and then address her picture, not really expecting an answer but wanting one anyway:

“*Is it true, Elsa, what they said about you? Is it? Were you and Archer in love? Or was he just a drinking buddy, a handsome and somewhat exotic man who had been all the way to far-off Korea in service of his country? And did you succumb to his charms and your own needs, a young woman living in a nowhere place in a house built in another century, seeking desperately a ticket out? And if you had lived, would you and Archer have gotten married and raised that little girl whose life was stilled on dead man’s curve that fateful night?*”

But the picture does not answer, and Elsa stares down at me mute and silent and reposed, and the old adze-hewn logs are silent, and the old pioneer house is silent, a house where no one has lived since Odus, Elsa’s brother, an old bachelor, died in this very room in May, 1984, a house where my father, a baby then, must have sat in front of the glowing mud-and-straw fireplace, and now only the rats and the lizards rustle back and forth in the dark places of this darkened house that for more than a century was not a house but a home, where Elsa’s ghost---or is it merely my memory of her?---still lingers, at least in my mind if not in fact.

And I see Elsa in her red overcoat coming up the road with J.T., her brother, both out of school because the land is encased in snow, and I, perhaps in the first or second grade at the time, at the east window of our house, bundled up against the cold even with the old cast iron stove glowing beet-red, looking out the window at this winter wonderland where snowbirds are hopping around picking at the bread crumbs that Roskus and I had put out for them, and seeing Elsa in her red coat, and J.T., coming to visit, my heart soaring at their sight, hoping that my mama would perhaps permit these “big kids” to take me outside to play in the snow or maybe to gather some clean snow for the vanilla snow ice cream that we all loved so much, and later I thought:

"Yes, on the timeline that I know, this was tragic. It hastened Grandpa Hart's demise a few months later on February 4, 1955, and many thought that he grieved himself to death over Elsa and, if not over her, over the mean rumor that swept like a brushfire through the community, and Clotilda, well, she was Clotilda, sister to Robert and Daniel, a mute and voiceless soul bereft of even hope in a hopeless land, but a mother still, a grieving mother, and then there was that ogre, Jim, and sweet Mizz Ellie, yes, they lost the darling of their family, the bright and handsome lad, the one who unlike Lurdevell could have carried on the Fitzgibbons legacy, such as it was."

And I thought, *"But maybe, just maybe, in another timeline or in some alternative universe, all this did not happen, and they, Archer and Elsa, negotiated dead man's curve that night, and, well, I can speculate, think, until my mind is tangled about the rest, but I can never know, can I? I can never know! There are doors through which I cannot pass, and I hate it! I hate it! Sometimes I hate this fricking fishbowl!"*

No, Old Jim Fitzgibbons felt for a long time, there was too much to relinquish, but the Pennecostal preacher said, and the Baptist in him believed it as well, that only grace could erase all pain and that such grace came only upon complete abnegation when, in desperation and surrender, he would be able to forgive himself and, forgiving himself, become forgivable and, forgiven, finally find the peace that had eluded him all his life even into this his eighty-eighth year, and so when he finally surrendered to the awaiting peace, it was marred only by the worry about Lurdevell whom he knew that he would soon leave behind, a half-wit product and lame-brain of his own hand, child of his loins struck down in his youth by him, a mean and vengeful ogre-father unworthy of the grace that he now felt and accepted, knowing Lurdevell, how he was, knowing how he clutched to himself the pennies and nickels and dimes, even begrudging the English sparrows what little corn they ate from the mule trough so that he made a deal with the two Clifford boys, Roskus and Jack, Jim recalled, that he would pay them a nickel for every English sparrow that they killed with their sling-shots (they called them "bean shooters") only to renege when they within an hour they brought him four birds for which Lurdevell had, reluctantly and only with Mizz Ellie's insistence, to pay the boys twenty cents, which by gosh was almost the price of one haircut, yes, fearing that Lurdevell's love of money would be the death of him yet.

And so it came to be.

As Jim feared and foresaw, it happened several years later when Lurdevell and his mother, Mizz Ellie, the woman with the most wrinkled face in Bug Tussle and the one who was never without a huge radiant smile, in the time before Mizz Ellie succumbed to the slow going away of Alzheimer's and was placed in a nursing home in Maldoon, lived in a house trailer bought by the relatives and set up in front of the old rotting dogtrot, when Lurdevell becoming too old to go away in the woods to bury his money in the gallon jars brought all of them instead into the house trailer that one cold night caught fire and Lurdevell, loving money more than life itself, paid the price of his priorities when he, an old man now, seeing everything that he had worked and scrimped for and everything

that he had worshipped, that gave life, at least his life, any value or meaning or purpose, about to go up in smoke ran an old man's shuffling gait into the flames from which he never emerged.

When the fire cooled the next day, only molten lumps of copper and silver could be found among the still-smoldering ashes with Lurdevell's skeletal hands still clinging to what little remained of that which he had worshipped his entire life. Or, charitably, maybe Lurdevell did not rush back into the burning trailer to retrieve his money but, nobly perhaps, rushed in to rescue that other fellow who had come to live with him and his mother. The community did not know about this other fellow, but Lurdevell did. Lurdevell saw him every day, and he was puzzled about him as my brother, Roskus found out one day when he stopped by to give Lurdevell and Mizz Ellie some cantaloupes, and Lurdevell first disclosed the existence of the other fellow.

Lurdevell: "*Come on inside here, Roskus. I want to show you something.*"

Roskus: "*What is it Lurdevell? I need to go on and give away the rest of these cantaloupes.*"

And Lurdevell, insistent: "*It's not something, Roskus. It's a him. It'll just take a minute. Could you come on in and tell me who this fellow is?*"

And Roskus: "*What fellow, Lurdevell? I didn't know you had someone else living with you.*"

And Lurdevell: "*Yep, he moved in a couple of months ago, and I don't rightly know who he is.*"

So Roskus relented and went inside the trailer, and Lurdevell led him back to the end, to a locked door, fumbled in his pocket until he found the key, inserted it into the rusty lock, and opened the door, Roskus thinking:

"Now, I know that Lurdevell is a few bricks short of a full load, but surely he is not stupid enough to lock up some fellow here in his own bedroom, is he?"

Once inside the room, Lurdevell turned to Roskus and asked, pointing at the mirror:

"Tell me, Roskus, who is that fellow? I don't recognize him."

And Roskus just shrugged and did his best not to laugh, at least until he escaped the trailer, got in his pickup truck, and drove on down the road, after he told Lurdevell:

"Why, Lurdevell, I don't reckin that I recognize that man, either! I wonder who he is."

Yes, Roskus let on that he did not recognize the man either, the man with a strange resemblance to Lurdevell, with the same unshaven and bewhiskered cheeks and the same unkempt hair and same bedraggled clothes and the same perplexed eyes looking out of the mirror at the perplexed old man-child staring at the strange fellow who did not live, at least in Lurdevell's lame-brained mind, in the mirror at all but who had taken up corporeal residence in Lurdevell's own bedroom. After all, he was there every time Lurdevell looked, wasn't he?

With Lurdevell gone and her mind failing, Mizz Ellie lived on until age 103 in a sterile and lonely nursing home in Maldoon, if indeed "living" is the word, "existing" maybe in that nether world between life and death, the shadow world of Alzheimer's, where reality comes and goes, freshens and fades, and where time is indeed non-linear: where yesterday is today and where tomorrow will never come and today is a blurred and Daliesque caricature of itself and where an old woman's prune-wrinkled face staring in the mirror sees the young belle of fifteen scant years who wed at No Hope in 1910 the dashing Jim Fitzgibbons from Indian Territory near Cloud, Oklahoma before the whole Fitzgibbons clan packed up and for some unknown reason moved to their patch of poor Harth in Bug Tussle, Arkansa.

At Bug Tussle for year after year and decade after decade Mizz Ellie had worked like a slave in the fields alongside her husband and her dim-witted son, Lurdevell, working day in and night out (because a woman's work is never done, she said, and she was right) shelling and cooking and canning the vegetables and the fruits and the sausage from the hogs killed every Thanksgiving so that when the winter came her man, her mean and gruff husband who showed Mizz Ellie little love and little pity and little understanding of her plight and even less of all this to their son, Lurdevell, and all the other children would not grumble and complain with hunger pains as they scurried off in the mornings, in the rain or snow or heat of August, perhaps to the little one-room Bug Tussle school a mile away or over to the back forty to pick the purple-hull or whippoorwill peas that would sustain them with needed protein for yet another year of what passed for life in this place.

Several times I observed Mizz Ellie who never missed the Sunday service at the Bug Tussle Missionary Baptist Church, cry quiet tears as she listened to some particularly moving bluegrass gospel tune of the Kinser Brothers or heard the visiting evangelist tell in terms less emotional but no less compelling than the fiery Pennecostal preachers up the dirt road at that other church of that bright tomorrow in that fabled land where all that she had suffered and endured, from her husband's indifference if not his violent temper and otherwise, would be forgotten, where all that she had lacked would be available, where all her sacrifice and endurance would be rewarded, and where time itself would stand frozen and immobile in a realm that the preacher called "eternity," where---as the tears zigzagged down the innumerable wrinkles on the too-soon aged face---Mizz Ellie could see, could hope, could *believe* that what the preacher was saying was true and not a mere chimera, an opiate of the masses, a cruel illusion that inspires not hope but false hope, she not thinking now but simply in mute and acquiescent acceptance clutching unto the very

cells and pores of her body this grace that was extended to her without any price except the believing and the partaking of it.

And perhaps as she rocked back and forth there enthralled by the vision emanating from the maudlin gospel bluegrass song or the soothing cadence of the evangelist's words, Mizz Ellie thought:

"It's really true! My God will wipe away all tears!"

So, for her, it was so, although she did not and could not grasp conceptually the enormity of what she had so trustingly accepted: that her God whom she believed through grace could and would wipe away all tears in the land of which she dreamed is/was/will be, *must be*, Himself/Herself/Itself outside all time and space, unencumbered by the space-time continuum, not a prisoner of linear timelines or finite spaces, but, if such as she was told is true---that He in fact created all that was and is and is to be---then human imagination cannot contain it and human dreams cannot envision it and human language cannot begin to describe it: this Creature or Entity or Force or First Cause who, by definition of His being the Creator, must be outside the creation, the cosmos, and yet still a part of it because it is/was/will be after all his handiwork, his creation, could at His whim or His caprice or even His indifference move without (outside and beyond) the strictures of the space-time axes that in all the illimitable universes anchor and cohere His handiwork via its mathematical and ordered regimen, so that in this universe in which she now lived and labored under a dying star (are they not all dying?) called Sil in a solar system with only one life-giving blue-green planet in a remote spiral arm of this so-called Silky Way galaxy, itself only one obscure and insignificant galaxy among the untold quadrillions or be-jillions of galaxies in this universe alone, that in this universe and indeed in all the other incalculable universes of his innumerable multiverses He could, in fact, wipe away *all* tears---not just future tears in heaven or wherever---but ALL tears past and present and future by simply re-winding and re-booting the time-space continuum in which those tears existed so that they did not exist and never did exist so that a state of "*never was*" is attained, which is perhaps what Cristans mean by Heaven.

Mizz Ellie, however, never thought this because it was too deep and she was a simple person and a gentle soul, and even as she teared more and wept into her stained white handkerchief, her face becoming hot and flushed with emotion in this Baptist meeting house where little emotion is condoned, her other hand swinging the Hooper Funeral Home cardboard fan back and forth, back and forth in a rhythmic cooling of her fevered brow and impotent evaporation of the salty torrent that washed and flowed through at least a hundred miles or more of crevassed wrinkles etched and chiseled into the pitted face, her effervescent smile appeared and the glory of her grace shined forth, radiating and transmitting the peace and hope and dreams that she accepted in her heart: yes, *radiating* is the only applicable word, radiating in this Baptist church and throughout the community to all those with whom she came in contact, spreading the joy and the love that was imparted to her soul to others in greater need than she, not fearing its giving or its loss, because she had an infinite supply that bubbled and welled up inside her and suffused her countenance with joy and ecstasy in the face of all adversity and travail, her

smile and her kindness and her grace scarcely diminished at all by the Alzheimer's that even as it took her body and ravaged her mind could not quell the beatific smile and its vibrantly pulsating grace that was the essence of this good and decent and long-suffering woman.

With Mizz Ellie living in the nursing home, the old sawmill-lumber house sprawled deserted and sagging and empty for years until the pine saplings and paper mulberry sprouts eventually grew up into an impenetrable thicket, completely shielding the house from the Bug Tussle road. The now empty fields throughout the one hundred sixteen acres where Lurdevell spent the days of his life behind his mules deteriorated into brambles of saw briars and pine seedlings and wild honeysuckle vines to the point that even jack rabbits had trouble moving about, but when the Fitzgibbons heirs decided to sell the old homestead Roskus and I bought it if for no other reason than to make moot now and for all time what Grandpa Hart had already mooted anyway with his simple refusal to squabble with his neighbor, Jim: the precise location of the boundary line between the Fitzgibbon and Clifford properties.

Chapter 11

The Revival: “Gimme That Ole Time Religion”

“Gimme that old time religion, Gimme that old time religion, Gimme that old time religion, It’s good enough for me.” Pennecostal Revival Hymn.

“The thing that hath been, it is that which shall be; and that which is done is that which shall be done: and there is no new thing under the sun.” Ecclesiastes 1: 9.

“Whoa!” bemoaned Retep, letting out his breath after scoping the last few chapters, “For a community where nothing much ever happens, to hear this creature tell it, a lot goes on just beneath the radar.”

“I’d say,” responded Susej, “And most of it is so tragic. Maybe we’re making a mistake inserting him into this time and place.”

“You think so?” inquired Retep. “Do you think all this unacknowledged pain and suffering will scar his psyche permanently?”

“Well, from what we’ve read so far,” Susej answered, “I’d say there’s a helluva bunch more tragedy than humor in this place, and even the humor has a sorta gallows aspect to it, don’t you think?”

“Doesn’t most humor?” Retep rejoined. “It’s the absurd that gives the mundane a comic punch, and this place and time, so far as I can adjudge so far, has more than its share of the absurd.”

“You’re right about that,” said Susej, “But maybe we’re getting an exaggerated view of things by focusing on his unpublished manuscript instead of simply horus-scoping the place and his life as we would normally do.”

“Let me suggest something, my Lord,” Retep offered. “Let’s move the horus-scope further in time and try to find something else he’s written that might offer us insight into this time and place and his life.”

“An excellent idea,” beamed Susej. “See what you can find.”

So Retep scanned and panned the horus-scope over the years until he located another piece written by this creature but not, for some strange reason, included in his unpublished manuscript. Since it is clearly a story about a religious revival, the two at first marveled that he had not seen fit to add it to his manuscript. He titled it:

BRINGING IN THE SHEAVES: WARP(ED) SPEED AHEAD

I’ve seen it all before at the Bug Tussle church or at Brother Comer Hotton’s revivals in Maldoon, or something similar at least at Bug Tussle and other Pennecostal churches, but it is only after the service that I recall the movie “Elmer Gantry.”

I am here tonight because a friend of mine from Bug Tussle, Gary Pence, a Missionary Baptist no less, insisted---persisted is the better word---even pursued me relentlessly, and he would not, probably could not, hear the word “no.”

Eyes gleaming and speaking with Pennecostal fervor, he, a heretofore unemotional and staunch Baptist, insisted that I needed a “tune-up,” a life-changing experience, and who am I to argue with that? I am long overdue for a tune-up; my soul is out of lubricant, and it could use a good greasing.

So I have arrived early to observe, to decipher, to collate, asking myself over and over, “What in the world am I doing here tonight?”

With beaming smiles and close body embraces---unwelcome intrusions into my body space---the members welcome me. They hug me warmly, asexually (?), men hugging men and women hugging women, openly and unselfconsciously. There’s not room for either homophobia or body space here!

As a visitor, however, I wear a special yellow tag identifying me as a prospective convert, so I get an extra dose of attention and hugging. Why does that good-looking blonde across the room not embrace me? Why, for her I *might* even convert!

Members are diverse as is the case in a Pennecostal church, some old and some young, mostly white but with a substantial sprinkling of blacks, who have always taken to the Pennecostal style of worship and who, even before the so-called liberal churches admitted them to membership, made up a significant percentage of many Pennecostal congregations. I recall as I look around tonight that it was an old one-eyed illiterate black preacher, William Seamore, who hosted the Jazusa Street revival in Los Angels in 1905 where the “Spirit fell” and people began to speak in other tongues---white and black and yellow and brown, men and women alike, all worshipping, even preaching, together in a frenzied deconstruction of racial and sexual barriers that the *Los Angels Times* and other papers chastised and bemoaned on their front pages. I wonder if I will hear speaking in tongues tonight. It’s possible because unless it is the glare of the overhead lights most of these people have a sorta washed-in-the-blood-of-the-Lamb look of total absolution and abnegation.

As the appointed, or rather the anointed, hour draws nigh, a palpable pulse of expectation enshrouds the place. Several members rush me to my seat and urge me to move on down front. I resist and sit in the back but to no avail: I am immediately surrounded by the faithful who dutifully “make me welcome,” or so they think. Actually, I feel a little bit like Daniel in the lion’s den surrounded by ravenous carnivores, only these creatures want not my body (unless that blonde does) but my soul.

“Lord, deliver me,” I whisper Daniel’s prayer in desperation.

As the lights are dimmed, total darkness descends. The crowd becomes quiet, expectant and hushed amidst an air of electric anticipation. A film begins on the huge screen at the front of the room, and as soft music permeates the room, a crooning voice asks, “Would you be wise?” How can I say “no” to that question?

The soft music parallels poignant but happy faces parading across the screen, and it closes with a stunning view of Harth’s blue and white globe suspended in the cold void of space. I begin to realize that something cosmic, perhaps even universal, is going on here tonight.

As the lights flicker on, a nattily dressed and stylishly coiffeured man not dissimilar in appearance from Benny Honn or Ritchie Rogers strides confidently to the podium. He booms out a greeting. Their faces expectantly upturned, the faithful thunderously respond in unison. I remain silent. The sermon begins, and the theology is familiar, if somewhat eclectic, and the psychology is transparently manipulative. The delivery is participatory, and the theatre, well, it’s simply superb!

“You are,” he booms, “responsible for your life, for its successes as well as its failures. You, yes you, can make a difference not only to yourself, but also to your family, your community, your state, your nation, and in fact to the entire world.”

I experience my first disappointment: the litany does not include our galaxy or the entire universe. I thought this was supposed to be a universal religion.

“Through your own efforts,” the preacher continues, “through your imagination, through sheer will-power, you can bootstrap yourself and the external world into a higher plane of living, beyond the humdrum drudgery of day-to-day existence in the pitiful box that you foolishly call your life.”

He has my attention. I’m good at bootstrapping; after all, I bootstrapped myself out of Bug Tussle, did I not? And there is a helluva lot of drudgery in my daily life. Maybe he’s on to something.

“You, yes, you,” he is shouting now and appears to be looking straight at me, “can create your ideal future now---at this very moment!

Yes, Lord, yes!

I hear unspoken gasps from all over the room as flashbulbs explode in the neophytes’ minds. They *want* what he’s offering, an ideal life, so the faithful murmur their approval, punctuating the preacher’s message with resounding bouts of applause. When the crowd’s enthusiasm wanes, the preacher expresses irritation and urges them on to even greater participation. Like lemmings rushing headlong to the sea, they blindly follow his admonitions with deafening applause. The greatest applause of the evening, however, comes with the revelation that the gospel will soon be preached in Soviet Russia, the mission field there apparently being “white unto harvest.”

As the preacher continues his sermon, I note several pre-conditions, several hitches, to my creating my ideal self in my ideal world. First, I must realize my condition by undertaking the painful but (so I’m told”) exhilarating process of self-examination. As the preacher phrases it, I must step outside the prison of my “box” and look at my Self and my life as they really are. In doing so, I must be willing to re-examine old behaviors and old belief systems, discarding those that have no validity for the “new me.”

I understand the theology: *I must recognize my sinful condition and repent of my sins.*

Amen, brother, tell it like it is! I’m coming home, Lord!

Moreover, the preacher says, I must undertake this process with honesty and openness. I must admit both to myself and to others the way things really are. I must learn not to be afraid of open communication about my inner self, and I must become comfortable with vulnerability.

In short, I must confess my sins with my mouth, familiar theology indeed.

Step three, I am told---and I am fascinated by the simplistic formulation of this gospel---I must accept responsibility for my actions, my feelings, and in fact my entire miserable life. I must metamorphose from the victim to the victor. I must make a commitment to change, casting aside the dross to reveal the “pearl of great price” that is the “new me.” Triumphantly, like a butterfly from my cocoon, I must emerge into my new and exciting world tomorrow, my own paradise on Harth.

In short, I must be “born again.”

Praise Jesus! Praise Him. Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Furthermore, and only now do I come to the heart of this gospel, I must *act* on my commitment, take immediate action to create the new me, my ideal future now, in the soon-to-be and self-proclaimed best of all possible worlds. Exactly what action must I take? Well, my initial action must be both actual and symbolic: I must immerse myself (sprinkling, my good Methodist friends, will simply not work!) in life’s possibilities, bathe myself in the rejuvenating Springlife waters of my imagination.

“You see, it’s really so *very* simple,” the preacher explains. “You can create whatever you can imagine and declare into existence!”

Preach it, brother! Preach it! Glory! Glory! Glory!

What he means, I think, is that by declaring it, it is so; so be it, and it is done! Presto! My ideal future is here now!

In other words, I must be baptized in the Springlife of living waters and then act as if cleansed.

By now, however, I anticipate the final hitch and pitch, the *raison d’être* of this meeting: “You cannot, the preacher thunders, accomplish all this by yourself! You need assistance from the enlightened one.”

We need you, Lord, we need you! Every hour we need you!

Then he proceeds to tell me that for a mere \$450.00 dues, I can attend catechism classes, the initiates’ “basic training.”

I get his message: I must join the church, be disciplined in the church’s doctrine, and pay my tithes faithfully, and not necessarily in that order.

Finally, the preacher makes his clinching argument: this gospel, this good news, is good for two kinds of people: (1) those with problems; and (2) those without problems who simply want to attain a higher nirvana. As the old snake-oil salesman used to shout:

“It’s good for what ails you and good for what don’t!”

As so defined, I am obviously a candidate for conversion: I cannot avoid such an all-encircling definition of my sinful state. The preacher then calls upon members of the congregation to give personal testimonies about how their lives have been changed. I listen, fascinated, as a dozen disciples placed strategically around the church rush to the microphone and glowingly affirm magnificent and splendid visions of self-discovery and self-awareness. They tell of “wrong doing” transformed by “right thinking,” all of which is proclaimed to be transformed as of *right now*, the future tense being banished from the English language.

The more grandiloquent the testimony, the better the communicant strings together the proper litany and parrots the accepted jargon, the greater the avalanche of applause. Apparently, there are different levels of heaven in this religion, and I realize that I am hearing from those true believers who have attained the Seventh Heaven. They---these disciples if not the apostles themselves--- have, presumably, completed basic training and have sailed right through both advanced and the “Master’s” training, the latter presumably at the feet of the Master, himself, the head guru who (naturally) lives in California (where else?). Naturally, they have paid greater tithes for these courses, have learned correspondingly more, and are eager to demonstrate their expertise.

Among my favorite examples is a plumber (he’s actually a lawyer) named Don whom I know well (the name and profession I should change to protect the naïve) who arises to testify emphatically that, “I am an effective plumber. I proclaim it!”

I doubt it. From personal experience I know that this particular plumber cannot even find a toilet, much less fix one. Heck, he probably does not even know how to *use* one! Of course, admittedly, I speak of yesterday and with the unenlightened mind of a true skeptic if not an infidel.

“Tonight, right now,” he wails, “at this very moment, I *am* an effective plumber!” And behold, I am told, it is so.

Another devotee takes the microphone to proclaim that he is living his life “musically,” whatever the hell that means, while I---a prisoner in my “box”--- am no doubt trapped down here in my self-built purgatory, singing un-harmoniously, totally out-of-tune.

He assures us that if we want to live “musically” like him, the Master’s latest *ex cathedra* utterances are enshrined in his newest book, which just happens to be for sale out in the foyer for a mere \$18.99 “love offering,” but I need to rush to buy one because there is a limited supply. Moreover, for those who truly thirst, for those who are weary and heavy laden, the “basic training” is available just for tonight at the “special price” of \$450, a fifty percent discount from the regular price, and my money is refundable unless I am totally satisfied. For another mere \$900, another huge discount just for “right now”, he proclaims, I can have the advanced training.

I experience another disappointment: there are no records or cassettes or compact discs for sale, and this congregation apparently does not believe in prayer cloths, bottled water from the River Jurdan, or other holy relics. Or maybe they simply have not proclaimed such faith aids into existence yet.

In closing, the preacher waxes even more eloquent. His pose reminiscent of the best televangelist, his voice tremulous with emotion, his eyes brimming with tears no less, he exhorts the converted to proselytize this entire generation, to witness to the entire world. The next generation, he apocalyptically prophesies, will “live perfectly focused” in that wonderful world tomorrow---in harmony and in peace with themselves, with nature, and with all the “beautiful people,” the “saved” and the “elect” no doubt, of the late great Planet Harth.

Come quickly, Lord Jesus! Come quickly!

Appropriately, the service ends as it began with the same film, the same haunting song asking softly and tenderly whether (“*Oh, Why Not Tonight?*”) I would “be wise.” The same now beautiful and enraptured faces peer down at me, emblazoned on the huge screen in the hushed and darkened room. The Harth’s lonely blue-and-white globe spins silently, transfixed and suspended there in time and space, beckoning those with The Truth to save her, to conquer her for The Cause, this saving Gospel. The faithful file out, most with a near narcotized look of quasi-orgasmic ecstasy engulfing their faces.

If unisex love can indeed usher in the New Age, the ideal “future now” of which they speak, it has arrived here tonight in Big Rock, Arkansa, as the members again hug each other---to use their terminology---“pee pee to pee pee.”

An old-fashioned revival service? A brush arbor camp-meeting at Bug Tussle? A Jimmy Swiggert crusade? Hubert W. Strongarm or Garver Ted Strongarm? The Right Reverend Robert Schuster? Robert Pilton’s name-it-and-claim-it Pennecostal gospel? Orel Rogers’ health-and-wealth religion? Narman Vincent Pale’s positive thinking? Sig Siglar? Burl Knightingale?

And the answer is: none of the above---and all of the above!

Come one, come all, welcome to Springlife, the est of the eighties, a New Age self-help revivalism, the latest secular Moonyism, sweeping like a California wildfire through the lost and searching Yuppies of Arkansa!

A self-described “human development” and “human transformation” movement, Springlife is actually a religion without a God, unless it’s the California guru, except each person is told that he or she fits that designation, and glad hosannas are unceasingly rendered to deified Self and, you guessed it, to Springlife itself!

The ultimate trip to the final frontier, this religion is bringing in the sheaves (and the shekels) at warp(ed?) speed ahead. In essence, Springlife offers egocentric space treks

that boldly go where no man has gone before: warp (ed?) speed ahead into the vacuum between your ears and the void in your wallet. It makes grandiose promises, utter transformation instantly no less, or at least during the five days of “basic training,” and well, if you are not “transformed” there, you need the “advanced” and then the “master’s” training, don’t you now, laddie?

As Coca-Cola is to Pepsi, so Judeo-Cristan thought is to Springlife, i.e., if we posit Judeo-Cristan philosophy as by definition the “real thing” (and, yes, I know that many do not!), then Springlife is the Pepsi generation’s fizzling imitation, a devilish and unoriginal mimicry foisted upon unsuspecting souls as the genuine article. Not surprisingly, Springlife even has a symbol of the Holy Spirit, an abstract dove, adorning its literature.

Springlife’s name-it-and-claim-it faith provides Jiffy-Lube answers to life’s complexities, an elixir for all the soul’s ailments, a New Age balm in the Gilead within each of us. Just as Orel Rogers and others who tout the health-and-wealth gospel confuse Jesus Crist with Santa Claus, so Springlife---in its emphasis on changing the objective world via subjective declarations (*“even if you don’t believe them!”*)---confuses God with Self and Self with God.

Medieval magic in New Age form, Springlife is like a crock of Shiites posturing as The Ultimate Revealed Dogma (acronym anyone?), whereas in reality it has all the trappings of both a secular humanistic religion and a mind-control cult.

You see, I learned something tonight from this service. I have learned to leap into the Springlife of my imagination, delve into the void of universal possibilities, and to simply name-it-and-claim-it with gusto.

Consequently, I proclaim that Springlife is a simplistic, pseudo-religious cult.

Lo and behold, Bingo, it is so!

Hallelujah and amen!

“Wow!” exclaimed Retep, “does this guy tell it like it is, or what?”

“Yep,” answered Susej, “he obviously means what he says, and he says what he means.”

“That’s what I like about him,” Retep rejoined. “He writes what he feels, and he feels what he writes.”

“Absolutely correct,” agreed Susej. “But what do you think about his ramblings about religion?”

“I’d say that he is ninety-nine percent accurate,” replied Retep. “For every authentic there is a facsimile, a fake, or rather many of them.”

“Yes, after reading all else he has written along with this odd piece, I’d say that he understands faith and grace,” Susej continued.

“He certainly does,” agreed Retep, “and he appears to be most sensitive to the deification of Self as well.”

“Yes, that part of man that aspires to be God,” Susej noted, “it is very difficult to control. You see, it’s much easier for man to simply believe that his destiny, his fate, is within his own power and, therefore, to enthrone himself in his own heart.”

“Well spoken, my Lord,” Retep agreed, “It’s just the opposite of the humility and self-abnegation that you espouse.”

“Yes, and do you know what’s worse?” Susej asked. “It’s that this view has permeated Cristanity itself. Why, to hear certain preachers and even entire denominations tell it, each person---however poor or sickly---is meant to be rich and in perfect health.”

*“You’re right,” agreed Retep, “And the tragedy, the inescapable logic of this theology, is that for those poor souls with continuing sickness or poverty---even after they’ve given every dime they have and then some to these hucksters and have repeatedly seed-faithed or proclaimed the sickness and poverty away---is that it’s **their** fault---“*

*“**Their** lack of unbelief,” Susej interrupted, “that causes the poverty and sickness.”*

Then Retep picked up the thread, “That can only be cured by giving more and more seed-faith money and making more and more proclamations to the effect that what is (the poverty and the sickness) really is not, the false hope continuing until one day they hopefully wake up and realize that authentic faith implies, includes, doubt and that life in any reality is never simplistic but always complex and that there are no panaceas and no cheap or instant grace.”

“Preach it, Retep,” Susej praised, “Just like you did years ago on Harth! Preach it, my man!”

*“I can only repeat,” Retep rejoined, “what you said long ago which is **not** simply to “have faith” but to “have faith **in God**” so that the power to change, to heal, to procure harthly blessings is firmly rooted not in faith alone but in **the object** of that faith.”*

*“Absolutely!” Susej agreed, “Because to believe otherwise is to arrogantly assert that a person simply by believing something to be can **will** into reality what he proclaims in his mind, making the need for the numinous superfluous, don’t you think?”*

“That I do,” Retep said, “And it is heart-breaking to see so many hucksters and snake-oil salesmen preying upon the praying, seducing the gullible with a doctrine that deifies Self and insults, minimizes, or even emasculates You, My Lord, and the great Ruler DOG (“Praises and hosannas to Him forever!”), if either of you are even mentioned at all.”

And so Susej and Retep felt good about this creature’s spiritual condition, knew that all was/is/will be right with his soul.

And so it was/is/will be.

So Susej directed Retep to move on to less transcendental and more mundane matters in the unpublished manuscript, and via the scanning horus-scope Retep ’scoped out the next few chapters.

Chapter 12

Partings and Politics: Woo-Woo, The Origins Of The Vast Right-Wing And Vast Left-Wing Conspiracies, And 666 BHM

“The great story here for anyone willing to find it, write about it and explain it, is this vast right-wing conspiracy that has been conspiring against my husband since the day he announced for president.”
Hillary Rodham Clinton on NBC’s “Today” show, Tuesday, January 27, 1998.

*“This calls for wisdom: let anyone with understanding calculate the **number of the beast**, for it is the **number of a man**. Its number is **six hundred sixty-six**.”* (Revelation 13:18)

The hologram fixed on a chapter from the unpublished book depicting a scene from a couple of Harth years after this creature’s, Jackson’s, birth, and then Retep digressed off once again, as he was so wont to do, into his fascination with The Other creature and the interaction between this one and The Other. It made for a jumbled viewing, but then Susej was used to Retep’s irrational but intuitively connected leaps of imagination, so without protest or reprimand he went along for the ride. It was a disjointed and bumpy one indeed.

Aunt Wanda Lou, my mother’s sister or rather half-sister (her mother, Alice Davidson, first married Herman Lenox, who died in November, 1912 just a few months after Annie was born in February, 1912, and then married William Dodge, who already had six or seven kids of his own when his wife Adelle Pray died, and then the two of them, William and Alice, spawned a passel of other little Dodges, including Wanda Lou,

all of whom Annie---who stayed at home and married at the late age of thirty-four---essentially raised to the point that they thought more of her as a mother than a sister or half-sister) came to live in the household after a disastrous early marriage and divorce.

Her first husband, Horace, a Servatt cursed with the infamous Servatt temper, had physically abused her because Horace's sister, Lorene, peddled the story to Horace that Wanda Lou had taken up with Pastor Snake Natwood while he, Horace, was in the war, a story that Hattie Servatt Clifford, Horace's sister, vigorously denied (and she ought to have known, because Wanda Lou lived with her a great deal of the time while her, Hattie's, husband, Elfred Clifford, fought the Germans in Europe). What gave the story any credence whatsoever, however, was the fact that Snake Natwood, after being charged with Burglary and Grand Larceny by Cole C. James, the Prosecuting Attorney for Swamp Gas County at the time, escaped by the skin of his teeth when in January of 1944 the charges were nolle prossed.

Naturally, this caused Snake to believe that he was "bullet-proof," particularly after he repented and was saved (whether for the fifth or sixth time, nobody knew, this being strictly a non-Baptist problem) and managed to wangle Assembles of God credentials, which in turn landed him the pastorate of the Bug Tussle church, where he strived mightily to stay on the straight-and-narrow, especially since he had personal testimony to give as to how the devil was such a sly old fox. However, the demons of alcohol and adultery that he possessed---yes, he possessed them; they did not possess him---began to stir even while the Lord, so he said, worked mightily to sanctify him, and the struggle---no different from those that you, and I, encounter every day, with every decision between right and wrong, the light and the dark---was fearsome indeed.

While he managed for a short time, maybe even a few months, to resist the cornucopia of home brew and female pulchritude that the old sly fox put in his way to tempt him, Snake eventually succumbed and, and with his conscience dampened by a jug or two of white lightning, he set out to conquer all the nubile---and non-nubile for that matter---members of his flock---and even those in other flocks and outside *any* flock. Understandably, he did not last long as the pastor at Bug Tussle where everything is known about everybody, and known so vividly, graphically, to the point that it seems that they, each member of the community, knew of sinning, apprehending and perhaps even appreciating it vicariously almost simultaneously with its occurrence or, at least, as soon thereafter as Sister Melcher could spread the gospel truth to everybody. So Snake was dismissed, lost his Assembles of God credentials, moved back to Maldoon where the pickings were better than at Bug Tussle, and where he gave himself totally over to his new master, who unlike his old Lord accepted him unconditionally as a drunk and a lecher without any insistence on change whatsoever.

In any case, Wanda Lou was childless until she came and embraced me unto herself, she whose name I could not pronounce at ages one or two, but whose name as I did pronounce it---"Woo-Woo"---was not only the first word that I ever spoke, uttering it even before "mommy" or "daddy," but also, shortened by everyone but me to simply

“Woo”, became the name by which she came to be known and called in the entire family and community.

Woo-Woo was a gentle woman whose love of children was profound and authentic and without limits. Her universe, so I felt, revolved solely and exclusively around me as she held me in her lap and encouraged me to read even before I could talk. Only knowing instinctively what I was doing or at least was supposed to be doing, I jabbered away in a babyish “Doodle, doodle, doodle” that delighted her and only prodded me to do more to please her: to “count” with the same methodical, sing-song “doodle, doodle, doodle”---that was indistinguishable from my “reading”---when she held me up to the Chamberlane Drug Store calendar that hung from a nail on the wall and on which various and sundry patent medicines were advertised---Black Draught---or was it Cardui? ---a woman’s remedy for “that time of month”, whatever that meant.

On the calendar below the moon signs that the Bug Tussle folks used for planting crops and a sundry list of major and minor holidays, my mother would scribble information that needed to be remembered (such as when the mare or one of the cows was bred or the date the corn was planted). Sometimes instead of holding me up to the calendars to “read,” Woo-Woo would put me in the little canvas baby swing that dangled on a rope from the rafters and push me way up toward the sky, the light rushing at me through the north window in that small room (it was only twelve feet square at most), my baby body floating up and back toward the window impossibly high off the floor, the sky outside barreling toward me only to rush away again, my heart pounding in mixed terror and excitement but yet knowing that she would never let anything happen to me! You see, Woo-Woo loved me, and I knew it, and I was secure---cocooned---in her vast love, because I knew that Woo-Woo loved *me!* She loved *me!* She loved only *me!* Typical id (and kid), right?

A little later in time after Woo-Woo left and moved to Maldoon, I recall her making me a coconut birthday cake when I was four years old, but she was not content merely to put candles on it, let me blow them out, and then slice me a piece. No, Woo was *fun*; she pulled off the candles after I had puffed (endlessly it seemed) at them, and then she held me above the table, my head dangling down toward the cake, where she told me to take a bite out of the middle. What fun! How exciting for a four-year-old! After Maldoon, Woo-Woo moved to the project housing at Janes Mill, where her husband, Clete Malley, worked at Runnels Metals Company, and I was a regular visitor. As we entered the small duplex apartment, Clete invariably said, “*Well, we can hang you up on a nail somewhere,*” which was, I suppose, his way of making me welcome. Woo-Woo’s way, however, was to spoil me---with bananas and oranges and cereal and toys by the dozen and other exotic things that I never had at home.

And she continued to teach me, to encourage me, not only to read and to count, but also to expand my knowledge in various ways. One incident I recall well. It is dark and I am in the back seat of Clete’s Pontiac, standing and looking out the windshield and at the pretty green and yellow lights on the dash. I notice the speedometer and ask about it, and Woo-Woo explains. Outside, I see the double yellow lines on the new pavement on

what is now Highway 280 but then was referred to as “the cutoff” from Maldoon to Janes Mill (the only paved highway used to go through Butterfill and Magic Cove before curving back to Janes Mill). Anyway, the bright yellow stripes, double at times, and then single and then not solid but broken fascinated me, so I asked. And Woo-Woo explained, using the occasion to instill a moral lesson as well about the consequences of “crossing the line.” Basically, what she said is that we have the power, the free will so-to-speak, to cross the line, but if and when we do so, we have a duty, an obligation, to assume responsibility for our conduct, and that means paying the consequences. She said that there are always consequences for crossing the line, if not now, then later, and that our choices, right or wrong, good or bad, come back around to us, and though she did not use the word *karma*---would not have an inkling as to the meaning of the word---her lesson could, I think, be understood by both good Cristans and heathen (to Bug Tusslians) Hindus.

One time while Woo-Woo still lived with us at Bug Tussle my daddy bought me a little rubber hatchet that I would swing playfully, making chopping gestures here and there, but Woo-Woo took it away and hid it to keep me from hurting myself. She replaced the rubber hatchet, however, with a little smiling rubber dog (yes, dogs can and do smile, and if you don’t believe it, I still have my doggie to prove you wrong) that sat upright and squeaked when I mashed it, and I was so enchanted with it that years later when my daughter, Lenox, was born, I pulled that little old doggie out of my mother’s cedar chest where it had been stored for years and gave it to Lenox. Woo-Woo also bought a string of red and yellow and green and blue and purple and other-colored rings that she tied to the rafter above my baby bed so that they were just within and maybe just without my childish hand that groped and tinkled and rattled them as I laughingly batted them about. This scene, the baby bed between the old cast iron stove and the east window with the multi-colored rattlers dangling from the rafters, is the earliest memory that I can recall.

Another time my daddy bought me my first Barlow pocket knife, and I, not much more than a toddler, was so proud of it, carrying it wherever I went in the pocket of my cutoff jeans as I wandered about the yard and pasture, my brother, Roskus, and his blanket and bottle tagging along behind me, thumb in mouth, and babbling baby words and non-words to me, his older brother, and when I lost that cheap, little knife it was as if my world had ended, so fond of it was I, and I searched desperately and desolately for it for days on end, going back and forth, back and forth, back and forth around that fenced yard and then into the bitterweed-choked pasture until it occurred to me that Woo-Woo may have taken the knife as she had taken the rubber hatchet, and so I ceased my searching, and it was only years later that I found the knife in a pile of dirt and rocks that the well-diggers deposited by the dug well in our front yard after they dynamited and picked and shoveled to increase the depth so that in drought years we would not have to go across the dusty road to our neighbor’s, Glenn Hill’s, well to have drinking water.

Speaking of which, as I learned to toddle Woo-Woo gave me, just a little boy now, a pint bucket of my own as she would trudge across the dusty road in the still, hot, August heat to fetch cool buckets of water from Glenn Hill’s well when our own well went dry, shambling through the heat and the humidity of an August afternoon as Caitlan, Glenn’s

pretty daughter, washed her hair on the back porch by the well, singing, her voice lilting and clear and joyous:

*“Gathering flowers for the Master’s bouquet,
Beautiful flowers that will never decay
Gathered by angels and carried away
Forever to bloom in the Master’s bouquet.”*

Approaching the Glenn Hill well, I can see us still, drawing the water and going hand-in-hand back to the ramshackle house, where---skipped forward in time---I picture another scene: Woo-Woo and I and a man, Clete, on a hot July noon-time standing in the back door, the man’s arms around Woo-Woo and his hands gently on her swollen stomach, and Woo’s arms around me, while in the back yard the hens cluck and scratch in the bare Harth and the beautiful old red rooster flaps first his left wing and then his right wing and then chases the hens and pecks them on the head and wrestles them to the ground for whatever mysterious purpose I know not.

In the background the battery-powered radio---it is still before the electric age in Bug Tussle---is turned up loud, and the announcer is talking about the Reds in some strange place called Korea where the American forces have been shoved back beyond something called a “parallel,” the news creating a tension, an uneasiness, in the man, Clete, her husband, a veteran of World War II who had known combat, the smell of fear in the air dissolving into fits of laughter when Clete finally understood why I kept insisting that I am “for” the Reds: that red is my favorite color du jour as displayed by the magnificent red rooster who presides over his backyard domain with first his left wing and then his right wing flapping.

Instead of continuing to ‘scope the unpublished manuscript, Retep, wanting to add some details that Jack had omitted from his writings, picked up the story and told it as Susej listened sometimes with amusement and sometimes in open-mouth incredulity. Retep’s version---and you must remember that he is not infallible or omniscient, tends to wander ponderously into minute digressions, and apparently is fascinated, maybe even fixated on, The Other and his relationship to Jack---is as follows:

This red rooster scene no doubt marked the embryonic birth of the vast left wing conspiracy, a story ferreted out by some right-wing organization years later who made no bones about their position that he, called Jack later in life and not Jackson, was a Commie and that he, along with Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, should have been sent to the electric chair in 1950 for supporting the Reds in Korea---Retep was making one of those infamous schizophrenic leaps of his now, completely out of time sequence---a conspiracy theory funded and fomented by Richard Mellon Scaife no doubt. After all, Jack had gone to Oxford as a Fulbright Scholar along with The Other, the Rhodes Scholar from No Hope, and everybody knew that The New World Order, created at the behest of the Bilderbergers, the Freemasons, the Council of Foreign Relations, the Papists, and sundry other one-worlders arose out of those elitist universities such as Oxford that were, everybody knew, hotbeds of subversive activities and recruiting bases for the KGB itself.

*Once discovered, of course, the red rooster story was used by the right-wing zealots as incontrovertible *prima facie* proof of not only a vast left-wing conspiracy but also that all Oxford Scholars from Arkansas were left-wing, Red-sympathizing, collectivist-loving, CFR-embracing, Bilderberg-bumbling, card-carrying, un-American internationalists who either killed draft notices that were legally issued to them or criminally conspired with others to kill them. Whatever the precise role, there is not, they contended, nary a dime's worth of difference between killing a draft notice and being an accessory to this high crime. In fact, they argued, quite convincingly to their rabid followers, that none dared not call it treason, the unpatriotic conduct of both these scalawags.*

After all, had not this Bug Tussle Oxford scholar embraced the Reds openly even during the Korean War, merely adopting the "red rooster" guise when challenged (being not a total dummy even then and the red rooster being right there in the backyard under his nose, a handy excuse for his slip-up) even at the time that the great patriotic American, Senator Joe McCarthy, was gearing up to root out all the Communist dupes and stooges in public life, Hollywood, and even private life, the invasion of which by God was justified in the name of patriotism and Americanism itself!

Another nail in Jack's coffin, the Scaife snoopers found when they talked to some of his Maldoon High School friends. They told of how he, an impoverished Bug Tussle country yokel at the time, was fascinated with that Socialist, Jack London, and his adventure stories, which of course led him to read Jack London's biography wherein London extolled the horrors of capitalism's exploitation of the working masses in London's East End and told of his, London's, working in a fish factory in Monterey, California, at age eleven to help provide for his destitute family. The classmates told how after this Jack, then Jackson, would go around saying that he was a Socialist, a champion of the downtrodden and the impoverished, who were victims of the ruling bourgeois class, and while he continued to profess to be a patriotic American, they thought that his criticism of America was out of bounds and that he should either love it or leave it, which is what he did when he went over to Oxford, where he became even more radical, or so these classmates maintained.

In fact, the Scaife-funded expose proved "conclusively", so it claimed, that this Bug Tussle fellow traveler had confirmed his suspect proclivities years later by openly playing on the Oxford "B" basketball team with a Communist, Jan Copal, from Communist Czechoslovakia, whom the other one, the No Hope Rhodes Scholar, actually visited in his home country while on his clandestine trip---no, not trip, mission, assignment!--to the Soviet Union in 1970 where his indoctrination and his recruitment without a doubt proceeded apace at the headquarters of the KGB under the tutelage of the very persuasive Oleg Rabito who had previously approached and tried to recruit the Bug Tussle scholar only to be rebuffed (or at least that's what Jack always maintained, but one can never be sure of the word of a one world order globalist, and him a shyster lawyer, can one?).

Scaife's private investigators did, however, uncover the covert meeting that the Bug Tussle Oxonian had in 1969 on the Left Bank (where else?) in Paris with his high school French pen pal, Jean Louis Thibault. It seems that even scrap paper was too valuable at Bug Tussle to throw away, so at Oxford the Bug Tussle lad was going through his billfold one day and found Jean Louis' address in Paris. As brazen as The Other, he wrote Jean Louis and asked him to respond if he received the letter with one of his own care of The American Embassy in Paris. Can you believe the audacity it took to set up what you are about to see unfold right under the noses and eyes of the American CIA agents in Paris? Incredible, or as the French would say, "incroyable!"

Anyway, Jean Louis received the letter, and obviously knowing of Jack's political proclivities via their long correspondence during high school, he arranged a cell meeting on the Left Bank, way back through twisting and unlighted alleys with corkscrew turns that see-sawed back upon themselves as they sought to throw off any CIA operative or independent wet worker (assassin recruit) that might be trailing them, coming finally to this ancient eight story building with its darkened stairs, heaving and huffing up those stairs to the top floor where the cell meeting was already underway, but not just a Communist cell meeting, no, not just that, but a cell of the Che Guevera wing of the Chinese Communist Party, or so they claimed, and they did in fact appear to be so, what with their long, dirty hair and scraggly dress and Soviet and Chinese flags and Che Guevera posters plastered all over the walls and the "Communist Internationale" playing incessantly on some broken-down stereo, the strong port wine being passed around freely, it being as high octane as the political discussion about the American pigs and fascists and imperialists whose iron heel even now pressed down upon the proletariat of the world, American corporations even then trying to undermine and co-opt all things French and with tentacles reaching even then into Mother Russia and Maoist China seeking to subvert the working classes and re-direct the revolutionary ardor of the working class themselves by introducing them, addicting them, to decadent capitalistic ideas, consumerism, decent goods, and other capitalist pleasures.

However, Scaife's best investigators could not find out whether Jack signed a membership application that night or whether he received his card that night or whether he merely commingled his blood with theirs in that gruesome and grisly ritual of wrist-slitting and sacrifice and political comradeship that every patriot knows occurs at those Communist cell meetings.

Yes, sir-ree, these Arkansa Oxford scholars, neither of them, had any conscience and thus had no fear and no shame in bringing their subversive ideas back to America, notwithstanding the fact that The Manchurian Candidate had already been published warning of such stooges and puppets and sleeper cells of the manipulative and treacherous Soviet regime, all of which proved once again the sheer chutzpah, the super cojones, so claimed the right-wing extremists, of this man from No Hope and the sheer duplicity and deviousness of the guy from Bug Tussle whose Soviet programming was so deeply and skillfully implanted that he could even deny such to one of America's premier polygraph examiners and seem to be telling the truth.

Not only that but also the two of them, the Halfbright Scholar (and that is giving him more by half than he deserves, they said) from Bug Tussle and the Rhodes Scholar from No Hope consorted with Joe Shytry, another member of that Communist cell that masqueraded as a basketball team at Oxford so that they, the conspirators and cell members, could move about freely and unsuspectingly from left-wing university to left-wing university in England, no doubt smoking the weed but trying not to inhale so that years later they could swear that they never inhaled (and the one from Bug Tussle always swore up and down that he, too, never inhaled, at least never inhaled the rabbit tobacco that he smoked as a child at Bug Tussle and, therefore, believed that his friend from No Hope had not inhaled the weed at Oxford either in the same manner that he had not split the “i” from the “s” in the word “is.”).

Oh, yes, they spouted their anti-American, pro-Red, anti-war propaganda, the teammate with the name that certainly was not ‘Merican but sounded even Russian, Joe Shytry, the one who was the last nail in the coffin, the final proof---at least all the proof that Pat Marcioni needed, if indeed he ever needed any proof at all for his Clinton films, to produce the film and persuade the Right Reverend TV-Evangelist Gary Foulwell to air it---as he had previously done, but not just aired, “hawked” is a more appropriate word, on his national TV program, “The Old Timey Gospel Hour,” for a hefty price no less, that solidly-researched and fact-based exposé called “The Clinton Chronicles” to which the nasty, leftist media had refused any credence whatsoever.

Yep, Joe Shytry, the Scaife exposé alleged, was not only a member of the Communist-front group Students for a Non-Mugwump Society (SNS) but also a pot-smoking, peace-loving, protest-marching war-resister who cowardly stayed in England rather than do his patriotic duty to roll back the Red tide in Thailand by shedding his blood for those gooks for whom all good Cristans knew that Crist Himself died not, while at the same time the two Arkansa Oxford scholars conspired to kill a draft notice that later when he ran for president the one from No Hope would deny that he had ever received, and later still---perhaps because of the election of the No Hope scholar---Shytry somehow wangled his way back to the United States, the same country that he and the two Arkansa members of the Oxford cell obviously hated and reviled. Shytry, of course, took a professorship---where else?---at Berkeley. And if that don’t prove it, nothing do, do it?

The final nail in this very logical and well-documented left wing conspiracy came to light when Rev. Foulwell’s private investigators found out in Harth-time 2004 that the one from Bug Tussle, now a lawyer in Mott Springs, represented many of the “deep cover” plants from Soviet satellite countries---“sleeper” agents without a doubt---disguised as local Romanian citizenry with un-American names like Perett and Cernatt and Ciupitu, who, Godless atheists that they were, even went so far as to pose as upstanding members of the Seventh Day Adventist and Pennecostal churches---and also represented two Czech spies who did not even have the good sense to cloak themselves in the Cristian faith and who were no doubt recruited years ago, right from their mothers’ wombs, by that other member of the Oxford cell that masqueraded as a basketball team, the Czech Communist, Jan Copal.

Another damning bit of evidence that they, the right-wing conspiracy nuts, knew, but simply could not document because he had it hidden somewhere---or at least not displayed---was that he had a framed membership certificate from the Marxist RSVP, the Revolutionary Socialist Victory Party, duly executed by Comrade Chairman Storm Danner, the Los Angels lawyer whose residence was the national headquarters for this Maoist-front group, and also Comrade Secretary Anna Ritchesin, a braless Stanford Law School graduate by way of Swarthmore who refused like that leftist Hillary even to take her husband's, Tim's, last name, the certificate stating in no uncertain terms that "Jack Clifford is a member in good standing of the Revolutionary Socialist Victory Party."

Comrade Danner and Anna "Hanoi" Ritchesin conferred the membership upon Jack, the right wing groups understood, when this member of the Oxford cell spent over three months in California consorting with the RSVP loonies while litigating a sex discrimination lawsuit on behalf of Vanilla "Sue Sue Sue" Morton against the patriotic Texaco organization, that they, and his leftist crony shysters, successfully portrayed as having no women or people of color anywhere in its upper management structure and thereby suckering an inner city jury of what the vast right wing conspiracy called wops and spics and wetbacks and niggers and Japs and lesbos and cross-dressers and Chinks and queers into awarding a verdict that, with attorney fees and other add-ons, would be in excess of \$20 million, the largest verdict in U. S. history for an individual victim of sex discrimination, so Comrade Danner claimed, all because Texaco followed legitimate and time-honored All-American business practices of keeping its company "pure," that is, a "good ole back-scratching, back-slapping, wink-at-the-sexist-racist-jokes white boys' club" to which women and people of color need not apply.

As Retep danced around with this digression, Susej could see that the vast right-wing conspiracy theorists stuck to their finely-woven story "proving" this Bug Tussle Half-bright Scholar a life-long member of a vast left-wing conspiracy even though as a Mott Springs lawyer Jackson, now called Jack, flaunted all sorts of signs of right-wing connections and sympathies. For example, the left-wing folks who thought---no, knew---that he was a member not of their conspiracy but of a vast right wing conspiracy publicly told everyone who would listen that there was a story there "for anyone willing to find it, to write about it and explain it."

Moreover, they pointed to the sure proof: he had his office adorned with a circa 1900 Navaho rug with swastikas cleverly reversed in a patently and pitifully obvious attempt at camouflaging his true beliefs and also a Japanese flag from Guadalcanal given to him by his friend Ray Davis, a marine in World War II, the brilliant red rising sun no less, framed and displayed in a place of honor and respect and adoration---almost a shrine, and maybe a Buddhist one at that---in his Mott Springs office.

What caused much debate and consternation, however, among both the vast left wing conspiracy kooks and the vast right wing conspiracy nuts was, Susej saw, that the Bug Tussle one quite publicly drove around in his 1997 Ford 150 pickup without a Remington shotgun or even a gun rack or a Confederate flag or a squirrel tail or a coon

tail on the aerial or a WWJD (What Would Jesus Do) bumper sticker or snuff or ‘baccer stains on the door or half-full bed of Bud cans in the pickup bed, yet he proudly drove with a license plate that, heaven forbid, could not be simply coincidental but must have been specially ordered (even if his wife Anne’s 665 BHM on her 1997 Jeep Grand Cherokee, licensed the same day, undercuts that theory), boldly proclaiming “666 BHM,” which everyone with an inkling of knowledge of Scripture knows is the devil’s mark, the Mark of the Beast.

What the kooks and fruitcakes at each extreme did not discover, however, or it might have altered their interpretation of the license plate, was an incident that occurred at Arkansa College (now Lyon College) at Drasco in 1968 right before Jack was scheduled to traipse off to St. John’s College, Oxford, which, of course, is where he met The Other. It was late one night in Bryan Hall, and Jack and his good friend and roommate, Lancelot James, who aspired to be a Presbotarian Minister (and now is) were talking. The door was closed, and no one else heard the conversation. They were talking about Cristanity and, in particular, the book of Revelation. Since most Presbotarians view Revelation as, at best, allegorical or, at worst, as the deluded ranting of a starving hermit on the Isle of Patmos, Lancelot had never read the book, particularly Chapter 13. The overhead lights were turned low, and Lancelot’s lamp was off as he sprawled on the bed listening in shadows to Jack read to him. As the end of the chapter approached, Jack read the following verses:

16 And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads:

17 And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.

18 Here is wisdom. Let him that hath understanding count the number of the beast: for it is the number of a man; and his number is six hundred threescore and six.

*As the last word, “six,” died out, a voice SCREAMED shrilly down at the end of the hall: **666!** Lancelot and Jack froze, chills running down their spines. Who had shouted **“666”** so loudly down at the end of the hall? So they investigated and found that a friend, Shreve Ross or was it Dunk McDaniel, was doing some accounting homework, and he was having difficulty getting figures to balance. He was super frustrated, and when the numbers finally did balance at 666, he vented his frustration by yelling **“666.”***

“Go figure,” Retep told Susej, “What are the odds of this happening? And what are the odds of Jack’s, by sheerest of coincidences, being assigned a license plate boldly proclaiming “666 BHM”? More intriguing yet, what are the statistical odds of both these things happening to one of your creatures? Also, I see in ‘scoping further that this one discussed this incident in detail with The Other while both were at Oxford. How odd!”

“And Susej responded, ambiguously, as he was wont to do, “I do not deal in the odd or in odds, either. I deal in verities and certainties.”

Knowing that he was treading on dangerous grounds, Retep nevertheless had to ask, “Susej, have you been fooling with my program behind my back? Have you inserted some code or sequence into this one’s program that you didn’t tell me about?”

But Susej would not answer directly, passing off the subject and bringing all inquiry to an end with a curt, “Some things, Retep, are my mysteries and those of DOG (“Praise DOG, most high ruler!”), and they are not for you or this one to know except in due time. Understood? Now move on with your story, please!”

So having no choice and no chance to inquire further, Retep continued his rendition of this strange and mysterious matter:

While the vast left wing conspiracy fruitcakes swore up and down that the Nazi symbol and the Rising Sun Buddhist shrine offered definitive proof of Jack’s rabid, right-wing, fascists views, on the other hand the vast right wing conspiracy zealots, especially the Aryan Nation and NAAWP and American Spectator connoisseurs, neatly ignored these obvious right-wing symbols because they could not, would not, stomach a member of that collectivist Oxford cell slithering by and posturing as a patriot by wrapping himself in the sacred swastika and the revered Rising Sun flag, especially since he proudly displayed his Anti-Crist sentiments on his license plate for all to see. They, the right wing nuts, said that Jack knew what The Other, the one from No Hope, also knew: that the best way to lie is to sucker up as close to the truth as you can get, even if you have to split an “is” in the process, and Jack sure as hell dared anybody to believe the truth when he paraded around with that 666 BHM proudly displayed on his license plate for all creation to behold and wonder.

On one thing, however, Susej saw that both the vast left wing conspiracy and the vast right wing conspiracy agreed: the 666 on the license plate proved beyond any doubt whatsoever that he, Jack, was in league with the devil incarnate, if not the Beast himself, and at times The Other when he was president, the one from No Hope, had reason to believe that such might be true so demonic were Jack’s assaults on his presidency to the point that the mass media labeled Jack his “arch-enemy” or “nemesis” or both, which of course Jack denied vigorously, his lawyer lips moving all the while,, but maybe even Jack did not know, or could not admit, even to himself the truth about his actions or his nature.

In short, each of the extremes from its own warped perspective---which, come to think about it, is not very far removed at all from the other (sorta the way Hillary seamlessly segued from a Goldwater girl into the Black Panther mode)---claimed that they had known all along: that he, Jack, was in league with the devil incarnate, and since the devil himself clearly occupied both extremes, the right and the left (at least from the perspective of the other extreme), the only question remaining was this (and each extreme debated the issue incessantly without finding a definitive answer):

“Is this satanic sucker a right-wing devil or a left-wing devil?”

Since he had seen that old red rooster flap both his left wing and his right wing years ago while standing in that door, Woo-Woo's arms securely around him, no one could ever conclusively answer that question, and the wrangling has continued on throughout the history of this backwater planet on this particular time-line.

Neither extreme, moreover, could ever agree on the meaning of the BHM following the 666 on the Arkansa license plate. Some on the left fringe---particularly the blathering scumbag Cajun, Jamie Harville, the relentlessly odious Moe Kline, and the Clinton lapdog/suck-up, Sidney Blumenwater---who wanted to demonize Jack from before birth claimed that the license plate meant "666 before his mother" or "666 biding his moment" or maybe "666 boy, he's mean." The Other, Retep claimed, would surely concur with the last characterization about Jack being "mean" because even Rob Rennett, the president's legal counsel in the Paulette Janes lawsuit, backed off his December 2, 1997(this reality time) subpoena duces tecum that demanded of Jack everything and anything he had in his possession pertaining to Bill Clinton when Jack informed him as follows:

Jack: "Rob, how are you? This is Jack Clifford."

Female underling attorney, also on the line, "That's Mr. Rennett, not Rob, to you, Jack."

Jack: "Not to me, he ain't. Hello, Rob, I received your subpoena duces tecum today. What a delightful surprise!"

Rob Rennett: "Great! How soon can you comply? We need everything right now!"

Jack: "Soon, maybe even today, if you want me to move that fast. But do you really want everything you've asked for? Do you even know what you're asking for, tell me that?"

Rob Rennett: "I don't know what you mean."

Jack: "Well, Rob, it's really very simple. I'll give you everything that I have, everything that you asked for, but you may not want it."

Rob Rennett: "Why the hell not?"

Jack: "Because if I give it to you, then I feel compelled to give the same materials to Paulette Janes' lawyers, and I have already declined their request for testimony and materials, and I will not cooperate with them unless the Court orders me to do so. Moreover, I assure you that they will not try to force me because, well, how shall I say this delicately? Let's just say that I let them know that there are certain things I know, maybe even items I have in my possession that they don't really want, either."

Rob Rennett: "What kind of things do you have that I might not want? Can you give me an example?"

Jack: "Most assuredly! Let's start with about a thousand phone calls I received after Paulette Janes went public, many from Arkansas state employees or friends or relatives of state employees, telling me certain things and leaving me their phone numbers."

Rob Rennett: "What did you do with that information?"

Jack: "Nothing. Nothing at all. I just wrote it down, the phone numbers and the information conveyed, and I put the notes in a safe place, and I'll tell you something else: I've retired from my Clinton crusade. It's over. I'm through. Done. Fini. I reject the arch-enemy and nemesis role conferred upon me by the press. Bill, the president, knows that."

Rob Rennett: "What do you mean by 'the president knows that'?"

Jack: "Talk with your client, Rob. Ask him."

Rob Rennett: "Ask him what, Jack? You're being a little obtuse here, don't you agree?"

Jack: "Perhaps so, and that does not become me, so I'll level with you, Rob. Ask the president about the letters I sent to the White House in late November and early December, 1994. Ask him if I did not, in my own way, retire my role, and you just check as much as you want and try to find anything, anything at all, that I've said or done against him since that time."

Rob Rennett: "Letters? I know about the one letter that you gave to the press, the one in James Steward's book, Sport Blood. Is this the letter you are talking about, or are there more?"

Jack: "There are more, two more to Bill and one to Hillary, none of which I have made public, delivered, back-channelled, like the first via Federal Express to Mick McClard at the White House as per directions given to me by Skip Raithford when we met shortly before for lunch at Shorty Small's restaurant in West Big Rock."

Rob Rennett: "Why should I see the letters, Jack? What's in them?"

Jack: "Nothing to concern you or your legal defense efforts, Rob, but after reading them, I dare you to think of me as his enemy, regardless of what I have done to oppose him. But it's not what's in the letters that you should be concerned about; it's what is not, and the phone numbers and notes I've told you about are a part of what I have and what I know. Comprende, amigo, or is it, 'mon ami'?"

Rob Rennett: "I see, Jack."

Jack: "Do you really, Rob?"

Rob Rennett, irritated: "I said I see, didn't I? We'll get back to you on this subpoena duces tecum."

Jack: "Would it be fair to say, Rob, that we understand each other? That unless you tell me in writing to respond to this subpoena, I may ignore it?"

Rob Rennett: "You may ignore it. If we want anything, we'll get back with you."

Jack: "Good enough! Thank you, Rob for being so understanding. It was surely a pleasure talking with you this fine morning. Please give my regards to your client."

Rob Rennett: "Goodbye, Jack."

Jack: "Goodbye, Rob."

The right-wing zealots, on the other hand, stuck with their Oxford cell conspiracy, maintaining that the 666 and the BHM might not pertain to Jack at all but to The Other, the one from No Hope, except tangentially to the extent that the Bug Tussle one with the license plate was still obviously a fellow-traveler in spite of some public distance and tension and seeming enmity between the two Arkansa Oxford scholars (a mere ruse, they claimed). The Other's identity as the Beast---hedged only by some not insignificant evidence pointing to Hillary as the culprit---seemed absolutely clear, so they claimed, and in support they offered the following so-called "proofs"---drum roll anyone?---derived it seems from a hodgepodge of postings plastered all over the internet by, who else, internuts (short for internet nuts) of the highest and most rabid order:

- (1) *The official name and signature of the ex-president is William J. Clinton, and giving numerical values to the letters in both Hebrew and Greek, the two Biblical languages ,William J. Clinton adds up to 666 in each language;*
- (2) *Using the English language and giving letter values to the alphabet of A=6, B=12, C=18, D=24 and so forth until Z=156, both William Jefferson Clinton and Hillary Rodham Clinton add up to, shudder, 666, as does "Devil & Dragon," the only question remaining as to who, Bill or Hillary, is the Devil and who is the Dragon;*
- (3) *Using the same alpha-numerical code (the right-wing fruitcakes made a big deal of the Beast's identity being protected by "code"), Bill Blythe IV, Bill Clinton's real name, adds up to, you guessed it, 666, and just try, they said, computing the phrase "Mark of Beast"---you guessed it, 666;*

(4) Again using the English language and giving numerical values to the alphabet of A=0, B=6, C=12, D=18 and so forth until Z=150, both W. J. Clinton and Bill Clinton add up to, *gasp*, 666---and so does “anti-Crist”;

(5) Utilizing the newly-discovered so-called “Bible Code” and applying it to Daniel 9:27 (Check out the text for yourself!), the secretly coded message “Bill 666 U. N.,” a total of nine letters, goes up from the bottom to the top of the matrix and connects to the base code “U.N. Crist,” and the text for Daniel 9:27 runs right through “Bill 666 U. N.” and the coded “William.” Also found equidistant spaces around Daniel 9:27 are “from USA,” “Billy Blythe,” “appointed time,” and “Yr. 5762 (Check out the Hebrew calendar!).

The ardent proponents of all this mumbo-jumbo numerology never let a few facts stand in the way of a good yarn so they were not deterred, of course, when they discovered that all sorts of people and names add up to 666 under one code or the other, including Henry Kissinger, Ronald Reagan, Bill Gates, the Pope, the word “computer” (ah, hah, the Mark of the Beast finally revealed, an implanted chip, no doubt, that the Illuminati and Bilderburgers and Freemasons, and Papists and Clintonistas would insert into each of us so that we might buy and sell), and they were not even deterred by the fact that Santa Claus himself added up to the infamous 666, not surprised at all because after all he has been masquerading for centuries in plain sight, has he not, with that red suit and red-nosed reindeer and lives, as everyone knows, near the North Pole in Soviet Siberia, so he is clearly a Red Communist and probably a 666 cohort of the Beast himself, right?

Moreover, the right-wing kooks asserted, there is further countervailing evidence: “Waco, Texah” adds up to 666 under one of the codes, and everybody knows that the Clinton goons took down those religious zealots, and incidentally a number of women and children in the process, just to preserve what this splinter of Seventh Day Adventism was about to reveal about the president: that unlike the Seventh Day Adventist interpretation of scripture to the effect that the Roman Catholic Pope is the Beast (the numbers add up to 666, do they not?), the American president is the beast, and they had the proof (same as discussed above) to back up their assertions.

Also, the right-wing nuts, took issue with the left-wing nuts who said the BHM referred to Jack, but they could not agree, however, among themselves, the pill-popping Bush Limburger taking one position and blonde bimbette and femi-nutz Hanna Moulter championing another, whether the BHM on Jack’s license plate meant “Bill, His Mark” or “Bill & Hillary’s Mark,” so they simply propounded both theories as gospel as they crunched their numbers and gleefully hunched over in front of super-computer while calculating the number of the Beast, 666, but try as they might the wackos at both extremes could never get Jack Clifford or or Jack E. Clifford or Jackson E. Clifford or J. Elbert Clifford or Jackson Elbert Clifford of J. E. Clifford to come out to 666 or, for that matter, to what they called the good number, 777, so they argued that he was either the master of disguise and was in fact the Beast—which come to think of it, accurately

describes the Father of Lies, does it not, and so militates in favor of this view?---or simply a top apostle of The Other so that in either case the Bug Tussle Beast connection had been firmly and unequivocally established, especially after the dispute was submitted to the Rev. Gary Foulwell, who previewed the film and who then prayed over the matter, and concluded---the jingle of money in his ears not being a factor at all in his decision you understand---that the case for the second Clinton Chronicles blockbuster was even stronger than the first.

So the film was produced, released, and promoted as the 2008 general election approached and premiered in the Beast's lair at the Mott Springs Documentary Film Festival (Mott Springs being the lair for both Bill and Jack), Hillary being the Mugwump nominee with Osama Barack as her vice-presidential selection, this Gary Foulwell-hawked and Pat Marciano-produced blockbuster and expose (or piece of trash, Jack thought, just like the original), "The Clinton Chronicles II---The Bug Tussle Beast Connection." Of course, the 666 BHM Arkansa lawyer's license plates figured prominently in the opening scene accompanied by ominous music that resembled a cross between "Onward Cristan Soldiers" and the theme from "2001: A Space Odyssey" with occasional forays into the music from one of the "Mummy" movies. Its schizophrenic not to say paranoid premise was that the Beast is right now in the world somewhere, hovering around and probably in possession and control of Jack Clifford or maybe The Other, take your pick, and it did not really matter which, because each of them were ilk and spawn of the same hellish origin anyway.

The right-wing film competed head-to-head with the Larry and Cindy Bloodsworth Thomas-Mitchell Amore co-produced blockbuster (piece of trash, Jack thought, just like the two originals), "Fahrenheit 666: The Haunting of the President," which also premiered in the Beast's lair at the Mott Springs Documentary Film Festival, the new premise of which was that the conspiracy to take out the Clinton presidency, including the inevitable and soon-to-be Hillary presidency, had Nazi or at least fascist roots, perhaps going all the way back to Hitler himself (check Hitler's number, that recurring 666!). This film was also released that same weekend in October, 2008 that "The Clinton Chronicles II---The Bug Tussle Beast Connection" premiered.

Believing as they had in the 1992 election that Jack was the center of the web of the vast right-wing conspiracy, the head honcho conspirator of the plot, this latest plot, to take down Hillary and deny Bill access to the Oval Office that he loved and in which he loved so well, the left-wing zealots' new "Fahrenheit 666: The Haunting of the President" film---so called to distinguish it from the first "The Hunting of the President" expose---prominently featured photographs of the deceptively disguised swastika Navaho rug and the (truth is the best disguise) Japanese rising sun flag in the Mott Springs' lawyer's office, and in an opening credit pastiche the producers also featured gory and gruesome scenes from Auschwitz (the 666 inherent in the coded letters slipped by the producers---do the math: Auschwitz =666) and Treblinka interwoven with a scary and ominous music score reminiscent of nothing so much as "Casper the Friendly Ghost" and maybe the music from some "Alien" sequel or re-run intermixed. The producers briefly considered using the music from "Deep Throat", but cooler heads prevailed (even

if it was Hillary running and not Bill), and the musical blow from that job was never delivered but instead was ejaculated and splattered all over the cutting room floor.

However, because Rev. Foulwell hawked “The Clinton Chronicles II---The Bug Tussle Beast Connection” so vigorously on his tax-exempt “Old Timey Gospel Hour”, claiming with a straight face no less even as he pocketed “The Lord’s” (his words) “donations” (his words) that it was “religion” (his words) and not politics and was fundamental to his fundamentalist belief system, it edged out “Fahrenheit 666: The Haunting of the President” by a narrow nose in the weekend box office ratings.

“Enough of your digressions, Retep,” Susej commanded. “You are getting too far afield. Let’s get on with the Woo-Woo story. Where are you going with this? You’re about as fixated on this other creature as these right wing folks, or are you just as obsessed with him as those left-wing folks, or both?”

“Your wish is my command, Most High One,” Retep submitted, not answering. “I’m showing you Woo-Woo because she occupies such a central place in Jack’s life.”

“How so?” inquired Susej.

“Well, for starters, she was his second mother in a very real sense,” responded Retep. “In fact, in many ways she was more of a mother to him than Annie was in these first three or four years, especially after the birth of the next child, Roskus, when Annie had her hands full with a real little, bottle-sucking, blanket-clutching brat.”

“Yeah, I know that wise men of Harth have stumbled upon what they call the Oedipal thing, and it would be normal---with the birth of a second child---for the older child to cling to another mother figure and reject the real mother, would it not, particularly such a playful, fun-loving woman as Woo-Woo?” Susej asked.

“Absolutely!” Retep replied, “And it would be normal for the real mother, Annie, in turn, to sense that rejection and to react to it in subliminal ways that the boy would pick up, sensitive creature that he is, and interpret as her rejection, if not abandonment.”

“Which, of course,” Susej continued, “would only result in the child clinging to and bonding with the second mother figure even more---”

“Thereby leading to the real mother’s---Annie’s---even greater sense of rejection that in turn would be reflected back to the boy as rejection if not abandonment,” Retep interrupted and finished for him.

“Precisely and cogently put,” Susej praised.

“And so, if I may be so bold as to speak my mind, and I mean no disrespect at all to you or to the Great Ruler DOG (“May His Name be forever praised!”), I wonder why

you are programming this one for so much early rejection and abandonment.” Retep’s voice took on an obsequious tone, knowing that he was over the line with this question.

“That’s not for even you to ask,” replied Susej sternly. “We, the Great Ruler DOG (“Praise His Name forevermore!) and I have our purposes, and they are beyond your need to know and even your ability to understand, just as they are beyond him and shall remain beyond him until the day he is extracted.”

Bowing in apology but mentally shrugging in perplexity and still determined to show Susej the results of his programming, Retep zoomed in the horus-scope to two almost identical and almost parallel scenes, for he knew that Susej was not without compassion---in fact, truth be told, he was compassion incarnate in Retep’s view---and he thought,

“If I can only get Susej to view, to experience firsthand, the pain that he is inflicting on this one and The Other, maybe he will permit me to adjust the programs.”

He brought the parallel holograms into focus.

On the left swirled a picture that Retep could only describe as cataclysmic, so utterly devastating that not even a sliver of a memory remained of that time in the boy’s mind but was repressed and buried deep in some desolate chamber where the little Jackson slunk off to find refuge when Woo-Woo told him that she was marrying Clete and leaving for the house in far-away Maldoon, in the few moments that seemed like eternity before and as she walked out that door, memories buried there with all the desolation and abandonment and unspeakable anguish and loss that, so his Harth-parents told him, kept him for days standing at that closed front door wailing out his impotent and useless rage and fury and despair to an unhearing and uncaring universe, demanding impotently, furiously, fist raised and shaking at the merciless heavens, just as the Hope lad in the right hologram was doing, that God or the gods or someone or something or anyone answer the question “Why? Why must she abandon me?”--- only to have utter silence reverberate back at him from the empty heavens, standing there totally lost, lost in the true meaning of the word, lost as in utter isolation and aloneness and abandonment, his whole being reduced to the lowest common denominator: the primitive id crying out, wailing forth, flailing about without words mute and beyond coherence its primeval and primordial scream of despair and pain and anguish, a memory repressed so deeply that only in Harth-time 2002 when Jack, not Jackson for almost forty years, would be fifty-six years old, on the night before Woo-Woo’s funeral, did the three-year-old child from that long ago time permit himself to come out from that dark abyss where he had slunk off for safety, for survival, and on that night for the first time in over half a century he allowed himself once again to see that image: that image of the child he had been and in some part of him still was and would forever be, a child transfixed and crucified in time, wailing impotently before that door in incomprehensible pain and anguish, abandoned and lost, utterly alone.

On the right swirled the second holographic image: The Other, a mere boy of three, standing---lost, alone, and abandoned as well---on that desolate, wind-swept railroad track some forty miles southwest of Bug Tussle's hardscrabble DeCoq Hills at a hopeless place called No Hope, a plastic smile plastered on his face, waving bravely to his mother as the long, black train chugging and bellowing slowly receded off into the hazy distance on its way to some city called N'Orleans where she could complete her anesthesia training, understanding intellectually why she had to go (she had explained it to him), but intellectual understanding sometimes simply does not, cannot, span the vast schizoid chasm between the intellect and emotional need nor bridge the incalculable light-years between the brain and the heart, demanding impotently, furiously, fist raised and shaking at the merciless heavens, just as the Bug Tussle lad in the left hologram was doing, that God or the gods or someone or something or anyone answer the question "Why? Why must she abandon me?"--- only to have utter silence reverberate back at him from the empty heavens, standing there totally lost, lost in the true meaning of the word, lost as in utter isolation and aloneness and abandonment, his whole being reduced to the lowest common denominator: the primitive id crying out, wailing forth, flailing about without words mute and beyond coherence its primeval and primordial scream of despair and pain and anguish, a memory repressed so deeply that only on his deathbed would he permit himself to come out from that dark abyss where he had slunk off for safety, for survival, and on that night for the first time in over half a century he allowed himself once again to see that image: that image of the child he had been and in some part of him still was and would forever be, a child transfixed and crucified in time, wailing impotently on that desolate and lonely railroad track in incomprehensible pain and anguish, abandoned and lost, utterly alone.

Sighing deeply, Retep wiped at something that, had he been on Harth or another planet in the vast creation, would have borne a suspicious resemblance to a tear, but since everyone knows that there are no tears in Nevaeh, such could not possibly be the case, and as he sneaked a glance over at the gentle and compassionate visage of Susej, he simply could not believe what he saw: the moisture on Susej's cheeks, moisture that must have come from the cloudless sky in this land of the unclouded day because it could not possibly have fallen from Susej's eyes, and he knew then that Susej also felt what he, Retep, was feeling but not saying, "Wow, I can only take so much of this stuff at one sitting. This creation/un-creation stuff really cracks me up."

There was, however, no change in either of the programs so events would play out as pre-ordained along the pre-selected space-time axis subject only to the power vested in The Other to escape the programmed circuits and change the pre-ordained.

And having worked on this creature's insertion for the equivalent of six Harth hours, Susej suggested that they rest from their labors on the seventh hour.

At so it was/is/will be.

Bug Tussle's Janus: The Glenn Hill Story

"You know the first thing they teach you in law school, don't you? They teach you to have no respect for yourself and no respect for anyone else." Glenn Hill to Jack Clifford, 1969

Back from their rest, Retep queued up the horus-scope back in time to the scene in the chapter from the unpublished book, already viewed, where Woo-Woo and Jackson walk hand-in-hand out to Glenn Hill's house, the nearest neighbor, to fill pails with cool clear well water. Caitlan is singing on the back porch, and they watch her as she washes her hair in a wash basin full of foamy suds.

Caitlan, this beautiful teenage girl, is intermittently singing the words and then humming some plaintive hymn, singing and enduring what I not then but later knew went on in that household. Glenn, an ordained Baptist preacher, owner of a country store, and itinerant peddler, was an intelligent and politically knowledgeable man, at least for Bug Tussle, a Mugwump Justice of the Peace at one time, on whose porch I would later spend innumerable sultry afternoons discussing Orvel Fortis or Cid McLathe or Dewayne Eisenhauer or James F. Canady or the damned Know Nothings or, when politics tired, switching to our second favorite topic, religion. More than anyone, he instilled in me an interest in politics and things political, and when in 1976 I announced as an Independent candidate for Prosecuting Attorney for Big Rock and environs, I gave Glenn Hill the credit that he deserved as I spoke, proudly, of the mentoring that he had given me.

Moreover, Glenn was a person of deep religious faith with in-depth knowledge of the Bible and various religious denominations and fringe cults. He and I, when not discussing politics or the latest international, national, or state news, would wander off into esoteric philosophical discussions about this or that belief, and he would challenge me to defend my position on a matter, thereby making it permissible for me, a mere boy, to challenge and contradict him, something that in retrospect I find quite remarkable, because I came to learn that this freedom, this right, Glenn did not grant to his own children, who were compelled by the omnipresent threat of force to acquiesce to his point of view. Consequently, I have often wondered:

"Why me? Why did he permit me the freedom that he denied to his own flesh and blood? Why did he choose me to mentor and to encourage and to motivate?"

And I think I know the answer to that question: Glenn saw in me a kindred soul, a person who loved, as did he, the life of the mind and the imagination. He saw in me a person who---though bound by the strictures of time and place into a culture and society that really never valued learning or questioning or doubting, a culture that enforced uniformity and conformity by the threat of ostracism and shunning or labeling as oddball or worse---chose, like him, to march to my own drummer, many times against the wind or the current (It is no coincidence, I think, that one of my favorite songs is Bob Seger's, *Against the Wind*.).

Finally, I think he saw in me the opportunity to succeed, to escape and to move beyond the prison of Bug Tussle, an opportunity that he never had. To me, he gave

permission that he, a product and prisoner of this time and place and the inheritor not of a mother's love but of her terrible hate and anger, to go where he had never gone, and I know that as I succeeded in college, traipsed off to Oxford, and later went to Michigan Law School that part of his life was wrapped up in me, calculating the return on the investment that he had made in me during all those lazy afternoons and evenings on his front porch.

In short, I know without doubt that Glenn Hill, Bug Tussle's Janus (the Roman two-faced god as you shall see), believed in me, and I know one thing more: Glenn Hill was proud of me! And I affirm here, despite all the truth-telling about him that must follow, despite all his shortcomings and faults, despite this man's two-sided nature (for we are all two-sided and double-faced to some extent, are we not?), that I am proud of him, and I thank him for the positive influences that he had on my life.

However, I came to see that Glenn was a man of two aspects, one public and the other private, or at least as private as one could get in the Bug Tussle of those days, where privacy was not a right to be cherished but an invitation to invasion, particularly if the private matter was "juicy" or sex-related. Publicly, he was a preacher, a farmer, and a proprietor of a country store at one time with its saw-milled lumber sides and its sawdust aisles running between rows of bins and barrels of groceries and fruits and vegetables and staples---even some hardware items and toys---stuff that I as a small child could not name and could not afford but could only long for, while privately Glenn peddled his groceries and goods to women whose husbands were away at war or unemployed, women with small kids who were hungry for food, women whose desperation drove them to trade for favors. In this way, he would beget at least one son, and some said several of them, who looked in many respects almost identical to Will's oldest son, Durrell.

Yes, I came to see that Glenn was a man of two aspects, two faces, a Bug Tussle Janus capable of good but a slave to evil, as would be others in my life, *as indeed are we all to some extent*, an ordained Baptist preacher who proclaimed the love of God from the pulpit on Sunday but practiced it not, at least at home, during the week, who instead succumbed to the Servatt temper that he came by honestly via his mother, Trixie, a Servatt who mauled Glenn's father, poor old blind and pitiful Mal Hill, mercilessly with pieces of stove wood even after the law in the form of the Swamp Gas High Sheriff Tom Fincher intervened and arrested her not once but several times, battered him until his face would be one bloody mass of crimson and purple.

One time she even dumped Mal bruised and bleeding into a patch of blackberry briars beyond the pond dump, after beating him so badly that she had to load him on a wheelbarrow to take him home, and my father Elbert had to go across the dusty road, pull Mal out of the briars, and wheelbarrow him to our house where my mother could clean his wounds. As I, a then innocent child, looked on, I wondered,

"How can she get away with doing this to this man? What is there in this woman that makes her the way she is?"

But then I later witnessed, when I would go to visit, how Trixie treated Mal at home, starved him and deprived him of water “*because he shits and pisses in the bed*” she said. Mal, blind and sick and bedfast, would take advantage of my presence to ask in a pleading voice,

“*Trixie, will you bring me a drink of water?*”

Or, pleading even more now, almost whining his submissiveness,

“*Trixie, can I have a biscuit?*”

And then if she would bring the water, usually only a half glass, he would gulp it down his parched throat, or if she would bring the biscuit he would wolf it down like some perishing feral creature, and she would admonish him:

“*Now, don’t you piss or shit in that bed! Do you hear me? I am sick and tired of cleaning up after you! Do you hear me?*”

And he, answering meekly, obsequiously, submissively, “*Yes, Trixie, I hear you. I hear you.*”

So, yes, Glenn Hill had the proper training for his demonic pursuits even if he did not inherit such in his Servatt genes. Searching for an explanation, I wondered if perhaps Glenn as a child had been on the receiving end of Trixie’s sticks of wood and her broad razor strap, so maybe his behavior was simply that: learned behavior, which does not excuse but might at least explain. Maybe these demons of anger and bitterness that compelled Glenn to beat his wife, Eulah, and his children black and blue and to do so habitually took up residence when he crawled into bed long ago, a mere child then, bloodied and hurting and hungry from lack of food.

But where do we stop at this explaining? Do I now picture Trixie, herself a child, flogged and bloodied, crying at her mother’s, Moreland’s, feet, or do I picture her bereft of a father’s influence and love with the loss and the hurt metamorphosing into bitterness and hatred after her father, Nicholas Servatt, a Confederate veteran, died about a year after Trixie was born in November, 1885? Or do I go back in time to search for the grandfathers and the great-grandfathers of those bullfrog-demons who lurked and croaked and fornicated around Glenn Hill’s pond? Or do I simply chalk it up to “Servatt temper” and let it go at that? Where did this madness begin, and, more relevant, where does it stop---and where does responsibility begin?

Told around Bug Tussle as the gospel truth, the story goes that upon Trixie’s death on July 16, 1968 and burial a few days later she was so mean that “*she kicked the casket sideways in her grave.*” Ironically, her tombstone, a double with poor old Mal who died on October 19, 1962, has an epitaph, selected by Glenn no doubt (perhaps more in remembrance of his father’s suffering than anything else) that reads: “*Harth has no sorrows that heaven cannot heal.*” However, while Mal Hill’s sorrows may have been

assuaged and even his blinded eyes opened on October 19, 1962, the averted gaze and blinded eyes of the good people in the community continued to overlook what everybody knew had gone on in the Glenn Hill household, even though the tongues as usual tittered about it in private, as if the tongue, and the tongue alone among all the sense organs, was capable of enfolding within itself any comprehension of this incomprehensible evil.

If Glenn had been Pennecostal or Apostolic, instead of a Baptist and a Baptist preacher at that, he might have benefited from a visit to one of Brother Comer Hotton's revivals where the toad-demon or even the bullfrog-devil himself that no doubt possessed him could have been cast out, but nobody knows if such a visit would have been any more successful than the exorcism of Sister Smittie Clifford, and, anyway, for Glenn, a Baptist preacher, to admit publicly that he had a problem, well, that was just not gonna happen. Maybe I did sense after all what was incarnated in all those frogs croaking and mating down at Glenn Hill's pond but just would not admit it to myself: the devil incarnate occupied this home!

This brutality, it was an open secret in Bug Tussle, the kind that the community was good at keeping hushed and pretending not to know even while whispering about it all the while. Finally, members of the KKK in the nearby community of Partway, where Eulah's folks, the McDougals, lived---in perhaps one of the few good acts they ever did---got involved. They heard enough, and they had enough. When their burning cross warning caused no change in Glenn's behavior, they came to his door one night, hooded and cloaked in mystery, torches flaring, and compelled him to go with them, and they marched him down into the darkened woods where they spread-eagled him over a fallen log, ripped his Sunday-preacher overalls to his knees, and vigorously administered a corrective tonic of dogwood branches to the same behind that he had already, in his public affront to all decency, exposed to the entire community. And as the son of one of the participants recalls, not only did they whip Glenn mercilessly but also a Baptist preacher, Thomas Steve it was, was present, and when the whipping stopped the preaching began and when the preaching stopped the whipping commenced again, alternating with the homespun remedies, in the belief that one of them, or perhaps the creative combination itself, just *had* to work.

Even after this unforgettable lesson, however, and even though everyone knows that a Baptist cannot backslide, Glenn proceeded to backslide on his promise made that night, *screamed* that night, to the KKK, promised that night to fellow Baptist man of the cloth, Thomas Steve:

"No more, I beg you, no more! I won't do it again! I promise!"

He backsldid because after some time the KKK became politically incorrect, passé, and defunct, and it would not rear its ugly head, at least in Bug Tussle, even when in 1957 Harth-time Orvel Fortis, in a futile rear-guard action to elevate Arkansa' rednecks to the level of its black citizenry, caused the Big Rock schools to be shut down.

So with no KKK to worry about Glenn had nothing then to fear, and he knew it, and so he began again to exercise the demonic power over his family that he could not, would not, exorcise, and I---young and marveling---at the whack-whack-whack of the leather strap or belt on bare skin, hearing each sickening smack a hundred yards or more away, and groaning to myself at the moaning and crying and hopeless beseeching of pretty Caitlan, thinking not then but later when I saw that holly tree by the spring behind the field that Glenn Hill worked and tilled north of the old Mel Servatt place as a mere boy where he had scratched, etched, somewhere around 1924 or maybe 1925 I calculated, a heart engraved so deeply that it endures to this day, a heart transfixed for all time with the initials "GTH +REM"---"Glenn Thomas Hill loves Razzy Eulah McDougal" she whom he took as a wife, who bore him four children, and who toiled beside him in the fields, one of the gentlest and kindest women I would ever meet, my mother's best friend, Glenn no doubt loving her to whatever extent he was capable of loving at the time when that sentimental but now forgotten heart was scratched out, etched, for eternity on that holly tree, a transient emotion perhaps, superseded by that terrible Servatt temper-demon that demanded release onto the once-loved and tender flesh that would bleed its tribute to his dominance if not his masculinity.

Across the dirt road I am thinking how nothing is forever, not even love, the greatest force in nature, but all things change, all relationships are transient and ephemeral and subject to the vicissitude and caprice of God or fate or out-of-control genes or perhaps even the choices that people make, wondering even as Glenn told me what he thought of lawyers when much later I shared with him that I was going to law school---"You know what the first thing they teach you in law school, don't you? They teach you to have no respect for yourself and no respect for anybody else."---if perhaps this man had not himself been to law school, or perhaps preachers were taught the same thing in ministerial training even in the correspondence course from the Missionary Baptist Seminary that would have been the most, if that, training that Glenn Hill had ever received as a preacher, because he sure as hell did not respect either himself or his family when he leather-strapped them in blood to his will.

However, there was, there had to be, a limit, an end, to this violence, and it happened one summer night after dark, about eight o'clock it was, when Glenn's son, Durrell, drove up in front of the gate, coming to get his mother and take her away from this man, his father. And we, Roskus and I, listened for we could not have *not* listened so loud was the exchange between father and son:

Durrell: "*I've come to get my mother.*"

And Glenn: "*Go away! Go away, I say!*"

And Durrell: "*I can't do that, Dad. I've come to get her.*"

And Glenn: "*No! You can't take her. She's my wife, and she's staying here!*"

And Durrell, voice rising, that terrible Servatt temper welling up in him, too: "Stand aside, Old Man, I don't want to hurt you, but I will if I have to."

And Glenn: "Don't you come inside that gate, you hear? You hear me, boy? You obey me!"

And Durrell: "I hear you, Dad, but I'm coming in. Now step aside!"

And Glenn: "You step inside that gate, boy, and I'll shoot you with this here twenty-two rifle, I will. I will! I swear it! Don't you dare come one step closer!"

And Durrell: "Then you'll just have to shoot me, Old Man, because I'm a-gonna come in and get mother, do you hear me?"

And Glenn: "I've already told you. You cain't have her. She's mine."

And Durrell: "Not anymore she's not! I'm a-gonna take her to Coy McJoseph, and she's a-gonna divorce your sorry ass!"

And Glenn: "Divorce, you say? Divorce? Divorce me, me, a Missionary Baptist preacher?"

And Durrell: "Don't matter you're a preacher, and I'll tell you this, and I want you to hear me good: you're a sorry preacher, a sorry husband, and a sorry father, and she IS gonna divorce your preacher ass!"

And Glenn: "Now, we'll see about that, won't we, boy? Come on and git her, and we'll just see how long it takes her to come a-slinking back home all a-whining and a-begging me to forgive her and take her back!"

And Durrell: "She wouldn't come back to you if her life depended on it, and it does. If she doesn't get away from you, Dad, you're gonna kill her for sure!"

And Glenn: "I ain't never laid a hand on her but what she deserved it for sassing me or taking up for one of you kids when I was a-trying to instill good Cristan morals and values into you with my belt."

And Durrell: "You're right about one thing, Old Man: she did take up for us when you were trying to beat us to a pulp, but I'm here tonight to tell you that those days are over, you hear me, dammit? No more beatings!"

Glenn, whining a little now, begging for understanding: "Why I ain't never whupped y'all or Eulah, either, like my mama whupped me!"

And Durrell: "Maybe she shoulda whipped you more, whipped that devil or demon or whatever it is right out of you!"

And Glenn, begging now: “*Don’t you know, Durrell, that I love you, and I love your mama, too, and Ina and Caitlan and and J. C.! If I didn’t love all of you, then why would I try so hard to see that y’all go down the straight and narrow, tell me that?*”

And Durrell, softening a bit: “*I know, Dad; we know, Dad, that you love us in your own way, but you sure gotta a helluva bad way of showing it, now don’t you?*”

And Glenn, self-pitying, whining: “*Truth be told, don’t suppose I’ve been much of a father to you kids or a husband to Beulah, either.*”

And Durrell, stating the obvious: “*And the truth will be told, you hear! You cain’t keep this or anything else quiet and hushed up in Bug Tussle. Why, the whole community knows!*”

And so they did. They knew. The whole community knew as indeed did all the people in not just Bug Tussle but in all the suburbs of Possum Trot. They knew, but they didn’t tell, at least in public. And so I am. I am telling. I am telling the truth about what we heard that night so long ago, Roskus and I, two little boys with big ears, listening raptly to what would later be called a soap opera unfold right across the dusty road, an exchange, a story, worthy of the Gary Stringer show, and I wondered:

“*How can this man, this preacher, this mentor whom I admire in so many ways be like that? How can he be so good to me and yet so evil to his own family?*”

Still not knowing the answers to those questions, years later I heard that Glenn had died alone with a half-empty whiskey bottle by his side on the bare floor of that lonely, filthy trailer on a down-in-the-dumps trailer park just off Central Avenue in Mott Springs where he lived after marrying and beating and being divorced by several other women, first the one up toward Truman, Arkansa where he moved for a spell, then the one up U.S. 66 between Maldoon and Glynn Rose, and, finally, Gothilde Melcher, Uncle Wilt’s widow, who wrongly thought upon Uncle Wilt’s death that if she could put up with the sex drive of that old man that Glenn Hill would be a patsy, a push-over, but Glenn was not. When Gothilde displeased him she would come over to our house squalling and moaning and sporting, if she was lucky, merely a black eye and bloody nose, and she would talk of leaving him, which she finally did when she, like Eulah and the others, came to their senses and finally said “*Enough is enough!*”

One woman Glenn chased, however, he never caught, Pearlie Hanston, from Hartford, Arkansa, who took Eulah’s place as my mother’s best friend. They, my mother and Pearlie, would talk when they got a chance when Pearlie was down from Hartford visiting Glenn, and then they would write letters back and forth. It did not take long for Glenn Hill himself to be the prime topic of conversation, and fortunately when Pearlie finally understood how Glenn had treated Eulah, she terminated the relationship, at which time Glenn took up with the woman from Truman, and then the one from Glynn Rose, and finally Gothilde.

For one other thing I give Glenn Hill credit: absent his determination and foresight and without his contribution and efforts to improve Bug Tussle's educational opportunities, I might never have gone to Lyon College, received a Fulbright Scholarship and a Woodrow Wilson Fellowship, studied at St. John's College, Oxford, or graduated with honors from Michigan Law School. You see, at the time of my birth the one-room Bug Tussle school would not last for long. In just a couple of years or so consolidation would be forced upon the community, and its voters had to decide Bug Tussle's future. Led by the progressive and forward-looking Baptist preacher, Glenn Hill, Bug Tussle citizens picked Maldoon. Glenn was nothing if not persuasive in this three-pronged cat-fight for Bug Tussle's children, arguing forcefully that annexing to Maldoon rather than to rural Bisquick or Washita (even though the Bisquick school district line was only a quarter mile west and the Washita line about a mile down the Saginaw road beyond the Nalen Hill and going to Maldoon would entail a long hour and a half bus ride over backroads and sometimes flooded bridges, the bus having to leave well before daylight on those short, cold, winter days) was best for the children of Bug Tussle and for the future.

Even though Glenn had very little formal education himself, he was a self-taught and learned man, a leader in the community despite all the unspoken bad he did, and so Bug Tussle elected to join the Maldoon School District with its elementary school for this area being located at Social Heil, the new school there having four rooms but only three of which were used as classrooms and, marvel of marvels, two *inside* toilets, the first that I had ever seen except for those at Woo-Woo's house in Maldoon there simply being no inside plumbing in Bug Tussle in those days.

Unable at last to find another wife in Possum Trot and environs and perhaps remembering that nearby Mott Springs was known to one and all as "Sin City," where anything or anyone could be had, at least for a price, Glenn finally sold his place at Bug Tussle and moved into a trashy trailer park on Central Avenue where he lived for a few years alone, no one including family or friends seeing him for months on end, and I wondered how the devil---maybe *devil*, the bullfrog kind, not the mere toads, that's the answer---this *man of God, this preacher*, spiraled down to the utter finality and futility of this time and place, an old man lonely and alone in a bedraggled trailer park, unloved and forgotten by his children, until finally he would be extracted and returned for whatever reward, if any, or penance or punishment, if the books of Harth are to be believed, that could perhaps teach even the KKK a thing or two beyond mere dogwood switches applied to his preacher-behind.

Hearing the news of his death a few years later on May 27, 1982, I am thinking that *this* was one aspect of his nature, the violent beatings of his own, but there is also the other, *the other aspect* that encouraged and challenged and mentored and even inspired, the other who almost single-handedly insured quality education for Bug Tussle's children, the other who shared knowledge of world and national and state events and home-spun, not-too-bad philosophy, a man of the mind who reveled in his tutelage of me, a mere boy from across the dusty road, who swayed back and forth in that squeaking swing on his

front porch, the south breeze blowing cool and fresh, the four-o'clocks in bloom at the porch's edge, the martins flitting and whirling about, new vistas opening with every visit, from this man whose other nature could only violate and abuse and destroy but who perhaps in compensation, in remuneration, *in penance* (even if good Baptists would reject that word) of that nature chose to befriend this man-child and help propel him out of and beyond Bug Tussle.

And I thought:

"How so terribly sad that this bad-good good-bad man went to his death and doom in such a lonely way remembered now only by me, that boy, now a man, because his own children and all others have long ago given up on him."

And I thought it ironic and tragic that Glenn's lone and lonely tombstone alongside Trixie's and Mal's double headstone (in the Upper Bug Tussle Cemetery) was but a single, his once-beloved Eulah being buried at the Nabors Cemetery at Partway and each of his other beloved/abused wives also choosing to go her own way both in divorce and in death, and I could only hope and pray, perhaps futilely, that his epitaph---"Beyond The Sunset Is Eternal Joy"--- held some scintilla of truth if not for Glenn Hill then for all the others, myself included, whose demons sometimes shackle if not vanquish the angels of our better nature.

And so I, perhaps more in remembrance than in doubtful faith or faithless doubt, prayed for my friend, my mentor, Glenn Hill, the Janus of Bug Tussle:

"Oh, most merciful and loving God, let this man's Janus soul find mercy with You rather than the justice that he may well deserve, and let the good that he did, the good that to this day lives on in and through me, be given some weight, however slight, on the mercy side of Your scale."

Chapter 14 Cristmas Eve, 1963

*"Twas the night before Cristmas,
And all through the house,
Not a creature was stirring,
Not even a mouse."*

Cristmas Eve night, 1963 and the few months that followed would prove to be a time of major transition for me, similar in import to the time when Woo-Woo walked out that door, leaving, but not just leaving, leaving me, a child of three, *leaving me completely unattached, detached, from my mother and my father*. Compared to Woo-Woo, my parents were strangers to me. No wonder throughout my lifetime I sometimes, out of alienation and estrangement, thought that I was a stranger, even perhaps an alien, in a strange land. Children, however, have a great capacity to adapt; they have a way of dealing with things, even devastating things, and while psychologists tell us that repression and denial are not the most healthy ways to cope, sometimes they are the *only* ways, so I survived and pushed down that dark time to some abyss in some unknown

canyon of my mind. However, throughout life with each rejection, abandonment, or loss (and we all have these, do we not?) the carefully constructed and preserved façade would threaten to crumble; it takes a tremendous amount of energy to suppress the eruption of pain that is pushed down and buried in the remote recesses of one's soul.

Now as Christmas, 1963 approached I was poised to graduate high school in a few months and go off to college, leaving behind my childhood in this time and place, Bug Tussle, and these peoples whom I had known and about whom I have written here. Once gone, I sensed without reading Wolfe Thomas, that I could not, or at least would not, come home again. In short, I was about to change in a major way, and I knew it. What had been would be no more; what was to be, well, with some pre-cognitive sense I could see that, too, and thus place myself in a future of money and success but still with a longing, a tugging in the soul, to return *home* to Bug Tussle once again.

Earlier that year in 1963 I had penned my feelings, my foresight if you will, down in a poem for Mrs. Olivia Cale, my English teacher, a woman whose mastery of language and love of literature I absorbed, and I share with you this poem. I recall how I compiled a notebook of vocabulary words from the voluminous books that I consumed, how one of my friends, Barry Autwell, found out and shared this with Mrs. Cale, and how she praised me and encouraged me to continue expanding my database of words. Also, I recall Mrs. Cale's sad, brown eyes, and I knew with my paranormal intuitive sense that there was tragedy there in her life, pain and loss and despair that still devoured her, and I regret that I, even if but a mere student and a Bug Tussle one at that, never reached out to her as she reached out to me, regret never saying to her:

"Hey, you in there, I see you, and I know you. You are not alone, for I am here with you, and I know your pain and I feel it, and you are better for the sharing of it."

However, I did no such thing, and Mrs. Cale died without my ever knowing what burden she bore, and I regret to this day my failure to reach out to her. I did, however, share this poem about myself with her:

Return of the Wanderer

*The cares of life hold me today,
Though I had as a youth a carefree way.
But now I've wandered far astray
From the forests and fields I once did play.*

*But o'er the years a call has come
To return to the land whence I came from.
Yet some inner self resists that call,
Resists the forests, the fields, and all.*

What good is money when unhappily spent?

*What good is life with the heart not content?
When deep in my heart so tenderly
The forests and fields still beckon me?*

*With a carefree mood and hearts all gay,
With a cheerful gladness on harvest day,
The people's laughter seems as close today
As the forests and fields I once did play.*

*Some day soon, I must return,
For that place my heart does yearn,
For the cool, deep forests and fields of clay
I used to roam in my childhood days.*

*I guess the streams will ever flow,
I guess the trees will ever grow,
But my life will soon pass away,
Yet my heart will forever stay
With the forests and fields I once did play.*

Precisely what was it about this time and place, the Bug Tussle of my youth in the 1950's, that had such an impact on me that I yearned, literally via a written poem, to return to before I had ever left it? How is it possible to be nostalgic for a time and a place that existed in the present? I pondered these questions often and also asked myself,

“What is there about the concept of home that so universally tugs at the human soul? Why do we all, in the end, seemingly want to go home again?”

I had not, of course, at that time seen the movie *Comrade Cain* nor read Wilhelm Falkner's “*Tomorrow*” short story nor seen the movie by the same name starring Robbie Duvell nor seen the haunting movie “*Trip to Bountiful*.” They all strike the same familiar chord: the importance of home and what home evokes. In the end as we exit this mortal coil what is important is what was important in the beginning: *home* with all that entails--- the inextricable and immutable ties of pain cemented with laughter, love and hate, tragedies and comedies, in short, the plethora of shared experiences that are mute but implicit in that simple four-letter word: “*home*.”

As I considered my future on that cold, bleak day before what was to be my last Christmas at home in Bug Tussle, the weather outside matched my mood: gray, scudding clouds, spitting snow mixed with some sleet and freezing rain, not enough to cause problems yet, but the temperatures and the wind chill were both falling fast. The warmth of the cast iron wood stove radiated into the living room, bravely but futilely fighting back against the wind that seeped in around the windows and the doors and through the cracks in the walls. As usual, I was bundled up in insulated long-johns, a sweater, a coat, and a cap with ear flaps as if I were already outdoors on that coon hunt planned for tonight. In a sense I was outside; it was almost as cold inside as outside. As much as I

liked hunting---and I liked it a lot at the time in denial and disregard of my first grade teacher's, Mrs. McDonnell's, gentle teachings---I had some doubts about the wisdom of going out on this night, but my cousin Arlon "Checkhimout" Hollison wanted to go, so Roskus and I had agreed to go with him and one of his friends, Rommie Stales, to the Taler Creek Bottoms east of Maldoon down toward Poine.

It would be a decision that I regretted. There had been other Cristmases before and other coon hunts, but this one would be different. On this night, Cristmas Eve, 1963, my childhood would end, and I would do the last hunting that I ever did, and when my childhood dog and best friend, Shep, died a month or so later it would truly be both childhood's end and childhood's rend. I get ahead of myself, however, because Shep was alive and well and in good form on this cold, wintry day and night. Shep was part chow, not exactly a hunting dog, but he was intelligent and trainable, and he loved to please his master. Being part chow, Shep had loyalty to only one master. Shep at one time belonged to my cousin, Harlon Dodge, but Harlon had another squirrel dog, Shadow, and he preferred him to Shep. However, when Harlon gave Shep to me---I think I was maybe in the third grade then---a period of real mourning for Harlon ensued before Shep transferred his loyalty to me. But when he transferred it, he was mine with all his canine heart!

We were inseparable, Shep and I, as he would watch dolefully as I boarded the school bus each morning to go off to school, and he would be waiting for me each afternoon when the bus rolled to a stop, bouncing and cavorting about with doggyish anticipation of our hitting the woods to squirrel hunt. As a non-hunter now, it is with an admixture of nostalgia, joy, and, yes, regret that I recall those hunting trips. While it was a part of the culture of Bug Tussle, I was never completely comfortable shooting or trapping animals, even though God knows we never wasted anything, the meat or the hides, so this was not sports hunting, something that I do not relish and, in fact, soundly disdain.

Why did I feel this way? I can only say that I sympathized with the animals, and I bled with them when they bled from my inflicted wounds, although I maintained outwardly, of course, a stoic face. I certainly know the law of nature, the predation of higher species upon the lower, the survival of the fittest, but I have never understood why it has to be this way, and now that I do not have to hunt for survival I reject hunting (and fishing) altogether, and in theory and sympathies I should be a vegetarian. Instead, I am a hypocrite, buying and consuming bacon and fillets and salmon and chicken, and relishing them, repressing in the process both my feelings and my knowledge about what goes on in those killing houses---the cattle who are stunned with a blow, their throats slit, the blood flowing knee deep or more, and the chickens strung on the wire, throats slashed, moving toward the boiling water where some, still alive, are scalded to death. Yeah, I can't think about all this much; it's bad for the appetite. My daughter, Lenox, feels the same way. This last summer she announced, with my support, that she was going to be a vegetarian. It didn't last, however, because she is like her dad: she loves the smell and taste of meat too much to deny herself the pleasure, so she, like me and like many non-vegetarians, is a hypocrite.

If I were God, so I tell myself (why cannot I forego, escape, such blasphemous musings?), things would be different, so you fundamentalist can just go ahead and work me over for my blasphemy because that is the way I feel. Don't you folks, even in your dogmatic adherence to a literal reading of the Bible, ever ask yourself how a just and loving God can permit suffering and pain in the world, for human beings, if not for animals? Don't you ever ask yourself why in the Old Testament God approves, indeed orders, the slaughter of perhaps untold hundreds of thousands of innocent men, women, and even children for the base purpose of "cleaning the land" for "His Chosen People"?

And your literalist God is not even content with killing the children, is he now? He also orders the mass destruction of all the "enemy heathen's" goats, sheep, cows, oxen, etc. because they, the wretched animals, are somehow tainted by being owned by the heathen clan of folks as opposed to the holy tribe and are, therefore, an "abomination" in your God's sight, yea, even a stench in his nostrils. Amen, brother! Am I preaching it like it is? Even with a literal reading of the Bible, this is the God you serve, and I for one simply do not understand him (small caps), and I for one feel free to exercise my God-given right to question and to doubt him or even Him (big caps) about such things as the Holocaust, the genocide of Native Americans, the enslavement of Black Africans, and a hosts of other happenings in our strange and imperfect world.

I digress, however, as I have the bad habit of doing, so I want to take you back with me to that cold Christmas Eve night in the Taler Lake bottoms. We arrived after dark in Arlon's truck, Shep and other dogs in kennels in the truck bed, and we exited the vehicle and fired up our carbide lamps. We had flashlights, too, but the warmth of the burning carbide was a welcome comfort on this night, even if the shine from the carbide was not very bright regardless of how much I might polish the reflector. Rommie released his coon dogs, and we released ours, and we followed them as they rushed off into the darkened woods. Our boots feet crunched on the icy ground, the frozen limbs and grass breaking with loud popping noises under our feet.

Arlon had a compass and, so he assured us, he knew how to read it, but I should have known better. He never did know either his proverbial (or even his literal) ass from the proverbial hole in the ground, so why should he be able to read a compass? Only, later, however, when we became completely lost did I come, in despair, to accept that he had no more idea how to read a compass than how to find that hole in the ground, and I pointed out to him that the moss on the tree was on what he and his compass claimed was the *south* side, when every fool knew that moss grows on the *north* side where it is sheltered from the sunlight.

However, I get ahead of myself again. Maybe I don't want to re-live what I am about to tell you? Maybe if I try hard enough I can warm up the story a little or conjure up some other interesting digression to tell, some other pig trail to wander down before I have to confront the frozen horror and utter lostness of that long-ago night.

Far away in the darkened woods an owl called, and another from across the highway. Clouds blanked the stars but a partial moon sometimes peeked from between scudding clouds as we moved deeper and deeper into the unknown woods. We were bundled up in heavy sweaters, coats, insulated underwear, and double pairs of pants against the biting cold, and as we walked we talked, as do most hunters, about other hunts and traded stories, bragging rites really, about the prowess of this or that dog that we had owned, and I told Rommie about Shep, how he was not a hound and all and so not a "proper" coon dog, but how for me he would find the last coon in this Taler Lake bottoms and do it well ahead of any of Rommie's dogs, too. In part at least, bragging is what hunting is all about, isn't it?

Finally, one of Rommie's dogs bayed a mournful sound, whoofing out his signal that he had struck the scent, the trail, of a raccoon, and we moved deeper into the woods as we followed the dogs. I carried a chopping axe to be used if we had to cut down a tree to get to a coon, my gloved hands already numb around the handle of it. I would switch hands every few minutes to give the frozen hand a moment of warmth on the carbide lamp. We trudged on deeper into the woods and ultimately came to an ice-covered creek. It was about fifteen feet across, not a big creek, but it appeared in looking at what water was free of ice to be fairly deep. We looked for a way to cross until we finally found a log that seemed to be big enough to hold our weights. Arlon crossed first, swaying a little and even slipping once on the icy log, but he made it across without incident. Then Roskus crossed, followed by Rommie. That left me, and I have never liked heights. Never!

As I made my way out on the log I tried to balance with the chopping axe and did my best not to look down at the icy waters below. About half way across, however, I slipped, frantically tried to regain my balance, and then tumbled headlong into the dark waters, submerging over my tobogganed head. I came up into the frigid air, coughing and spitting out water, and shivering in what now seemed to be air that was at least one hundred times as cold as before. I scrambled out the other bank, sans the chopping axe, but with my darkened carbide lamp still in my hand. Reaching the other bank, I removed my soaking coat and squeezed out all the water I could. Arlon re-lit my carbide lamp, and I clutched it to myself for warmth. A discussion ensued as to what to do, and all parties agreed that we had to re-cross the creek and get back to the warmth of the truck as soon as possible, hopefully before I died of hypothermia. We would, of course, have built a fire, but it had rained the night before, and all the sticks were not just wet; they were soaked, sodden, through and through.

As the coldest person there by far, I was assigned to go back across the log first, a mistake, because the water on my boots had already frozen solid, and ice on ice is a slippery bet anytime, but this time I managed a few more flailing seconds (it seemed like an eternity) until the darkened waters once again closed over my head. Coming up for air, I crawled as best I could up the icy, muddy bank to the car-side of the creek. When the others made it across the log without incident, Arlon checked his compass and took off with confidence "toward the cars," so he claimed.

Why I trusted a man who could not distinguish between the top of a pine tree and a fleeing deer (he shot out at least three pine tops that I know of) I do not know. If he could mistake a pine tree for a deer, how could he read a compass, but I was too chilled to even think that we were wandering around in circles, lost, in those frozen woods. Finally, when I discovered that we were crossing our frozen footsteps in the icy ground for a *second* time Arlon conceded what everyone at Bug Tussle already knew: he didn't know his ass from a hole in the ground, and I had followed this miserably incompetent cousin around and around in circles. We were lost, utterly and completely lost, and the sad reality, the sheer hopelessness, of my situation began to sink in. I was going to die that night out in these Taler Lake Bottom woods. I knew it. So did everyone else.

By this time my coat, wrung out a second time as it was, was ice-encrusted, and my pants and insulated underwear crunched and creaked with ice as I walked. Thick icicles hung down from my elbows almost six inches, and I had begun to shiver and tremble uncontrollably. If we didn't find the car and truck soon, I would go into shock, and it would then be too late. It was at this point that I took charge, telling Arlon to put his compass "where the sun don't shine," which considering that his head was already there was a difficult thing to do, and marched off in what I, a self-taught woodsman from my youth, knew from the moss had to be due south. I would sight a tree in the far light and march to it, line up another and march to it, and so on, knowing that ultimately we had to intercept the highway. An eternity later, we did come out on the highway, but we knew not which direction to go---left or right---to get to the cars, so we split up with instructions for the one who found the cars, assuming he had the keys, to come pick the others up. Fortunately, I was with the group that found the cars *and* had the keys, and before long the heater began to fill the truck cab with its welcome warmth. We drove to Maldoon, where Arlon stopped and bought me several candy bars and some hot coffee. Nothing before or since has ever tasted so good!

Arriving back home, I stripped off my sodden clothes, donned a dry pair of long-johns, and slipped beneath the several quilts and blankets into the comfort of the feather mattress. As I prayed that night, I thanked God for my survival and for that feather mattress, and I told Him that I had learned my lesson for life: I would foreswear hunting from then on. I did not, however, foreswear fishing, and I continued this hobby until much later in life, cold-blooded creatures not evoking nearly so much empathy from me as the warm-blooded variety.

With my hunting days over and high school graduation approaching, it was perhaps appropriate, however painful, that Shep, the best friend that I had since Woo-Woo left me, died. He would have died without me, anyway, because his life centered around me and mine around him and our forays into the forests in search of squirrels. Bug Tussle's poverty struck its final blow: Shep developed pneumonia, and there was simply no money for a veterinarian, or even over-the-counter medicine, so my daddy treated him with some home remedy. Just as with people, home remedies did not usually work with animals, either, so Shep's fate was assured. I have always regretted that I did not, somehow, rescue my best friend.

Needless to say, I was devastated, but I held it inside. Country folks are good at not expressing emotion, and I am one of the countryest of country folks. I did, however, deal with my grief by writing a piece that I entitled "The End of the Trail." From my present perspective, it is sentimental and maudlin, but a part of me still shares and relives those words. I will share only a few of them with you. Come with me into my grief and let yourself see *and feel* the picture that I now paint for you with words that I penned long ago:

A full, blood-red moon had risen in the eastern sky, and the sunset had faded, leaving only a faint tinge of red on the western horizon. The evening star pursued the moon on its eternal journey across the night sky. Several other stars began to twinkle indistinctly in the murky twilight sky. A tree frog chirped a lonesome melody from the darkening woods. From somewhere across the distant woods---toward the sluggish, meandering creek---an owl called. Another answered from the eastern woods, and a lonesome whippoorwill called from the sage across the murky field.

The boy did not know how long he remained standing there, a lonely figure in the shimmering moonlight. Time had ceased to have a meaning. The stars thickened overhead. A few clouds scurried across the sky from the west. The full moon illuminated the lonely scene.

He stirred, coughed, strode dejectedly by the grave. Pausing a few steps beyond, his face lifted to gaze at the blood-red moon. The words he murmured were those uttered by millions of grief-stricken people across the countless centuries:

"The Lord giveth, and the Lord taketh away. Blessed be the Name of the Lord."

Then he added as so many others have done, "Why, Lord, oh why? Why? Why? Why? Why?" His voice subsided, and he walked away.

The dark woods swallowed the boy as he shuffled stoop-shouldered up the dim trail. The field was again left bare. An inquisitive rabbit skipped from the darkened woods, examined the strange mound of new Harth that had invaded his domain, and then scurried suspiciously back into the woods. An owl hooted as gathering clouds promising the coming of rain scudded across the moon. The twinkling stars began to flicker and then succumbed to the encroaching clouds.

The restless wind blew across the hill, sighed through the trees, and then whistled off on its eternal journey through the infinite spaces.

With Shep's death and with this paean to his loss, my childhood came to an end, and it was the man-to-be, not the child, who made it through the last couple of months of high school and on to California that summer with my cousin, Ralphie Eason, but in my heart in California that summer and beyond, at Oxford or wherever I might be later in life, a part of me, the biggest part of me, remained with those forests and fields where Shep, my best friend, and I once played. Shep's death was, like Woo-Woo's leaving me,

another childhood rend that would forever haunt me, the seminal event that separated, cleaved, Jackson the child from Jack the man.

Chapter 15

Elrod The Slob

“Hello, Jackson,” he said, “This is Elrod.”

“*Elrod who?*” I asked, although I knew only one Elrod, and when anyone asks for “Jackson” as opposed to “Jack” I knew it had to be either a relative or someone I knew before Lyon College, where I metamorphosed from “Jackson” to “Jack.”

“Elrod Clifford,” he said, “Your cousin, Elrod.”

“Oh,” I replied, “Elrod! How are you, Elrod?”

“Not too good, Jackson,” he said.

“Why not, Elrod?” I asked. “What is wrong?”

Elrod “I’m in jail, Jackson.”

And I: “In JAIL, Elrod, where are you in jail?”

Elrod: “In Batton, Jackson, they picked Cleta Sue and me up and put us in jail.”

And I: “Whatever in the world for, Elrod? You ain’t never been in jail, have you?”

Elrod: “You know I ain’t, Jackson, but I’m in here now, and so is Cleta Sue.”

And I: “What are you and your fiancé both doing in the Sabine County jail, Elrod?”

And he: “Don’t know, Jackson, they just picked us up. Said they didn’t want the likes of us hanging around Batton.”

And I: “What does that mean, Elrod? The ‘likes of you’?”

And he: “I don’t rightly know, Jackson.”

And I: “Have they charged you with anything, Elrod? They can’t just put you in jail for nothing! What are you and Cleta Sue charged with?”

And he: "Don't know, Jackson. No, they ain't charged us with nothing, not that they's told me at least, but Jackson---"

And I: "What, Elrod? Just tell me!"

And he: "That ain't the worst of it, Jackson."

And I: "Not the worst of it, Elrod? There's more you're not telling me? What is it, Elrod? Just go ahead and tell me!"

And he: "Well, they picked us up and throwed us into two different PO-lice cars and then when we got to the jail they put us in separate cells, so I can't be with Cleta Sue no more, Jackson, and it's just killing me. You know I love Cleta Sue, don't you, Jackson?"

And I: "I do, Elrod, I do know how much you adore Cleta Sue, but why in the world do they have you and your fiancé in separate cells? Maybe they just have separate cells for women and want to keep her away from other men in your cell. You do have other men in there with you, don't you, Elrod?"

And he: "No, Jackson, I'm in here by myself, and Cleta Sue is in a cell by herself. They wouldn't even put her in with the other women."

And I: "Why not, Elrod?"

And he: "Well, you see, Jackson, they strip-searched us when they brought us in. They made us take off all our clothes, and guess what, Jackson?"

And I: "What, Elrod? Just tell me."

And he: "Well, they tell me that Cleta Sue isn't a woman. She's a man. You don't think she is, do you, Jackson? Cleta Sue cain't be a man, can she? I mean, we're engaged to be married, and she has been selling Avon products for years now. You've seen her, Jackson. Do you think that Cleta Sue is a man?"

And I, dumbfounded: "Well now, Elrod, I couldn't rightly say, but you're the one engaged to her. Have the two of you had, er—"

And he: "Sex, you mean? Oh, my, yes, Jackson, and it's the very best in the world."

And I: "Well, then, Elrod, there you have it. You oughta know. Is Cleta Sue a man or is she not a man?"

And he: "I always thought she was a woman, Jackson. I mean, I never saw anythang that looked like a man to me, you know what I mean, Jackson?"

And I: "Yeah, I know what you mean, Elrod. But did you look, Elrod, or did you simply not know where, er, you were putting it?"

And he: "Well, we always did it in the dark, Jackson, so I cain't rightly say."

And I: "Elrod! Elrod! Elrod!! You DO know which, er, hole is which, don't you?"

And he, offended, "Of course, I do, Jackson, I ain't exactly dumb, you know."

And I: "No, you're not dumb, Elrod, only sometimes a little naïve."

And he: "What's those word, 'nigh eve', mean? I ain't been nigh no Eve. Her name is Cleta Sue, not Eve."

And I, sighing: "Never mind, Elrod, just forget what I just said about Eve. Let me make a few phone calls and see if I can't get you and Cleta Sue out of there."

And so I did.

I phoned the Sabine County Jail and inquired about Elrod Clifford and Cleta Sue and the charges. There were no charges, I was told, except "loitering," which every lawyer worth his salt knows is the police codeword for discrimination against whatever person or persons they deem to be riffraff at the time, and so it was in this case. These zealous mayberries simply could not turn a blind eye to Cleta Sue---this transsexual or transvestite or whatever the word---and her activities, what with him parading all over Batton as a her and doing irreparable harm to the moral fabric of society by pretending to be a woman and even selling Avon products to Batton's upper-rust women and the society ladies in other Sabine County towns such as Bright near the Polaski County line.

Of course, the final blow, it appeared, came when my cousin, Elrod, took up with Cleta Sue and asked him/her to marry him, and the two of them---Elrod and Cleta Sue---drove in Elrod's old garbage-littered pickup down to the Sabine County Clerk's office to take out a marriage license. Since Elrod at the time worked as a garbage man, a profession that Elrod loved and that was a natural for him, as you will see shortly, it became an insult to the City of Batton to have one of their employees consorting with this transvestite, so the mayberries took action and tossed both of them in the clink, where suspicions of everyone (except innocent Elrod, who refused to accept the truth even when shown) were confirmed upon the PO-lice finding extra appendages plopping into view when Cleta Sue was strip-searched.

Sometime after my phone call, the authorities released Elrod and Cleta Sue, but they were not content to just let them go. Even with me, a Big Rock lawyer in the picture, they drove Elrod and Cleta Sue out on Interstate 32 down toward Delphia, dumped them out of the police vehicle, and then beat both of them mercilessly, inflicting some rather severe injuries. Of course, even in provincial Arkansa such behavior was out-of-bounds,

even if an Eastern Arkansa high sheriff did have the pickled gonads of Waymon Drummond, who was castrated by persons unknown after allegedly raping a distant cousin of Bill Clinton, on his desk for display, at least to other “good ole boys” like him, the High Sheriff. So---back in Sabine County now--- the FBI and the Department of Justice got involved, interviewed Elrod and Cleta Sue, and heads rolled, prison sentences were meted out, and justice prevailed. Elrod was avenged, but he was no doubt deeply scarred and hurt by the entire episode. I never knew, however, what happened to Cleta Sue, who in turning back into a man blended so well with the male population of Sabine County that the former Cleta Sue could not be found.

Of course, I had not known that Cleta Sue was a man, either, because she presented a right comely appearance, what with her Avon make-up and all and with Elrod’s parents, Dalton and Ferny, proudly introducing her at Founder’s Day at the Bug Tussle Assembles of God Church as Elrod’s “fiancée.” And I had even spent a night or two with Elrod and Cleta Sue when they lived at Bug Tussle and then at Possum Trot, and I still did not know that Cleta Sue was a man, but I did have a suspicion how they had managed to rile the Batton powers-that-be because I had heard them speak similarly of Maldoon and its mayor, “Rooster” Southcott and other high-and-mighty folks such as Rooster’s friend and cohort, “Banty” Harme. Invariably, the conversation between Elrod and Cleta Sue on Maldoon business fascinated me since it clearly reflected a great deal of the nativist sentiment of Possum Trot and its environs toward Maldoon and its attempts to expand, modernize, and provide decent services. I recall several of these conversations, and I share them with you for three reasons: to provide you an insight into the mind and thinking of Elrod and Cleta Sue; to demonstrate the acrimonious thinking, at least to some extent, of other residents of Swamp Gas County living outside Maldoon, i. e. the inherent tension and uneasy relationship between Maldoon’s city folks and the rest of Swamp Gas County; and, thirdly, to graphically show you the real love and affection between Elrod and Cleta Sue, which was, admittedly, before Elrod finally, even if much too late, discovered in the Sabine County Jail at Batton that Cleta Sue was not a woman. One conversation, which was about nothing in particular, just their attitude toward Maldoon, comes to mind:

Elrod: “*Wake up, Cleta Sue, time tuh rise-n-shine. Thuh rooster’s crowin’.*”

Cleta Sue, snappily: “*Lemme sleep, Elrod, yuh got roosters on thuh brain.*”

Elrod: *But, sweet pea, I gotta tell yuh---*“

Cleta Sue, coming awake, and joking with Elrod: “*Yuh wanna act like a rooster when we go ter bed, but yuh jest wanna talk ‘bout ‘em when we git up.*”

Elrod, feigning attack on his masculinity: “*Now, Cleta Sue, I ain’t too old ter---*“

Cleta Sue: “*I ain’t sayin’ y’er too old, sugar plum. Now whatcha wanna tell me?*”

Elrod: "Well, I bin thankin' 'bout how that there "Rooster" Southcott and that there "Banty" Harme bin runnin' Maldoon, and it's got me a passel riled up."

Cleta Sue: "Why do yuh keer how those clucks run Maldoon, Elrod? Case yuh fergit, we 'uns live at Possum Trot."

Elrod, angrily: "Yeah, I know, I ain't stupid, you know, but thuh way thaze bin tryin' to annex all that territory, they'll be after Possum Trot next."

Cleta Sue, coquettishly: "Now calm down and hop back in bed, sugar plum, and I'll make yuh fergit all 'bout them there roosters."

Another morning after I had spent the night at their house while they lived at Bug Tussle, I heard Elrod all riled up about the increase in water rates that the high-and-mighty Maldoon officials had foisted upon Swamp Gas County residents. The conversation---which conveys the paranoid suspicion and xenophobic thinking of many residents of Possum Trot, Bug Tussle, and other communities on any issue or matter arising in Maldoon---went, as best I recall it, something like this:

Elrod: "Wake up, Cleta Sue, time tuh rise-n-shine. Thuh rooster's crowin'."

Cleta Sue, groggily: "Go away, Elrod, lemme sleep."

Elrod: "But, Cleta Sue, yuh ain't gonna believe whuts in thuh paper. Maldoon's done gone 'n doubled thuh water rates fer county residents."

Cleta Sue, coming awake: "Whut! Doubled thuh water rates! Yuh gotta be kiddin! Air rates are too high awready!"

Elrod: "Nope, no joke." Then pausing, thoughtfully, suspiciously, "Cleta Sue, yuh don't s'pose this is a sneaky way fer county residents to pay fer Maldoon's new water treatment plant, do yuh?"

Cleta Sue: "Sugar plum, air yuh talkin' 'bout that there new water treatment plant Maldoon's gonna build on that land it jest bought from that Harme feller. Yuh know, that there ole worthless gravel pit out by thuh river and thuh Interstate 32, the land that Senator Hoskins, the lawyer for Maldoon Waterworks, heped buy from that Harme feller?"

Elrod: "Sweet pea, that's Alder man Harme and Senator "Curious George" Hoskins, thank yuh!"

Cleta Sue: "Yuh mean thuh Alder man Harme who's rootin' round all that there dirt out by thuh Interstate 32?"

Elrod: "Yep, same Alder man."

Cleta Sue: “*Ain’t Alder man Harme’s hunnerd acres out by Interstate 32 right next door to---“*

Cleta Sue and Elrod, in unison: “*---thus new Maldoon water treatment plant!!!*”

Elrod, pausing: “*Yuh don’t s’pose doublin’ air water rates’ll hep pay fer thuh new water treatment plant and increase the value of “Banty” Harme’s land, do yuh?*”

Cleta Sue: “*Fergit it, Elrod, even those clucks wudn’t be that dumb---“*

Cleta Sue and Elrod, in unison: “*---wud they?*”

On a third occasion I over-heard a conversation between Elrod and Cleta Sue when they were bent out of shape about Maldoon’s new library tax, which voters passed after the old library burned, and the building of a new Senior Adult Center, both badly needed improvements for the city if Maldoon is ever to escape the time-warped 1950’s in which it is perpetually trapped, but sometimes it is simply impossible to span the vast chasm between progressive Maldoon’s civic pride, desire for betterment and growth, and the need for improvements and the rest of Swamp Gas County residents’ backward attitude. Let me be kind by simply saying that many Swamp Gas County residents look upon goings-on at Maldoon with a provincial, jaundiced eye, always looking for the worst or coming up with some wild conspiracy by which Maldoon’s elite, its bluebloods, are trying to “skin” or hoodwink country residents. As you shall see, both Cleta Sue and Elrod had very strong feelings about taxation without representation, although they did not exactly use these words. The third and final conversation that I will share with you went sorta like this:

Elrod: “*Rise-n-shine, Cleta Sue, thuh rooster’s crowin’?*”

Cleta Sue: “*Ifen yuh don’t lemme sleep, Elrod, I’m gonna rise yer shine.*”

Elrod: “*Cleta Sue, I cain’t hep it. When that darn rooster crows, I jest start thankin’ ‘bout all that there mess goin’ on over at Maldoon.*”

Cleta Sue, grumpily: “*Awright, body cain’t get no rest nohow ‘tween you and that darn rooster, so yuh might’s well tell me what yer thankin.*”

Elrod: “*Well, sweet pea, I bin thankin’ how Maldoon, it don’t wanna do bidness with county residents atall, right???*”

Cleta Sue: “*Yeah, I know that, sugar plum, “Rooster” Southcott said so.*”

Elrod: "But that ain't jest whut's disturbin' me, sweet pea. It's thuh way Maldoon keeps passin' taxes without lettin' county residents vote on 'em."

Cleta Sue: "Watcha mean?"

Elrod: "Like thuh liberry tax. I mean I wud've voted fer it 'cause a good liberry's good fer larnin, but it ain't right that we 'uns all trade in Maldoon and thuh liberry, it's s'posed to be a county liberry, but only Maldoon residents got ta vote on thuh liberry tax."

Cleta Sue: "Don't seem fair, do it, Elrod, when we 'uns payin' thuh tax, too?"

Elrod: "And whut rilly roast ma goat is last year's tax fer thuh new Senior Adult Center that we 'uns 'll be payin' fer without gettin' ter vote."

Cleta Sue: "Tax ain't thuh wurst part, Elrod. Didja know that Perlie (a small town adjoining Maldoon) offered over \$200,000 and five acres land fer that there new Senior Adult Center, and those roosters turned it down flat---jest soze they cud raise taxes?"

Elrod: "Ain't makin' no sense tuh turn down \$200,000 free money jest tuh raise thuh sales tax, do hit? What with Maldoon havin' a burned liberry and no good jail?"

Cleta Sue: "Well, I do heer that thuh folks who give Maldoon thuh land way out inna boondocks, they gonna build a buncha 'partments fer ole folks clustered rightcha round thuh Senior Adult Center."

Elrod: "You mean them there polecats 'll have a taxpayer-bought-and-paid-fer recreation center and cafeteria right nexta their 'partments?"

Cleta Sue: "Yeah so it seems, and thuh streets ain't paved now neither, and ain't no water or sewer neither I unnerstand, but Maldoon taxpayers gonna take keer of all this, too. Must be somebody right smart powerful tuh git all this done!"

Elrod: "Now, Cleta Sue, yuh cain't go blamin' 'Banty" Harme this time. I uz curious, so I checked it out myself at the Courthouse, and "Banty" Harme sold out his partnership inerest in this here land back in 1997."

Cleta Sue: "Elrod---(Pause)---- yuh did say partnership inerest, didn't yuh?"

Elrod: "Yeah, partnership, joint ownership, whatever."

Cleta Sue, showing both her paranoia and her ignorance: "Didja ever heer of a silent partnerships or them buy-back deals, Elrod?"

Elrod: "My lands, Cleta Sue, yer getting' more s'picious ever day!"

Cleta Sue, not giving an inch: "Well, oughta be 'vestigated, whoever owns it, 'long with all thuh resta thuh mess at Maldoon. Yuh jest cain't tell whut them roosters 'll do next, can yuh?"

Whatever one thinks about Cleta Sue, or whether you think of her at all, as do I on occasion, I will say this: she was a character, and she had a real impact and, despite her gender, enriched Elrod's life. While I lost contact with Cleta Sue, Elrod, however, was a different matter. It seemed that I simply could not escape from Elrod no matter how far away I went or how much time elapsed, for Elrod looked up to me in the way that an affectionate but abandoned and bedraggled cur dog looks up to anyone who will extend a dollop of human compassion to him. Who with any heart whatsoever can resist such an entreaty? The next phone call I received from Elrod, a year or so later, he was again in police custody, picked up under an overpass in North Big Rock, cold (it was freezing then) and hungry. He had been hitchhiking, so he said, from somewhere to somewhere, and knowing Elrod, I suspected that he had hitchhiked from just the other side of nowhere *toward* just the other side of nowhere because it is hard, if not impossible, to go *somewhere* if you don't know at any given moment where you are.

You see, Elrod's life lacked direction and focus, and his mind lacked direction and focus. It was not that his father, Dalton Clifford, my father's first cousin, had lame-brained him with a two-by-four the way Old Jim Fitzgibbons had lame-brained his son, Lurdevell. No, Dalton had beaten Elrod, true enough, and beaten him quite viciously with his belt, because Elrod even at an early age was an unkempt and rebellious sort who would not heed his mama, Ferny's, pleas to "wash up" and who would steal his daddy's tobacco and simply would not go along with authority. Elrod lived in a house about a hundred and fifty yards west of ours, so he was one of my regular play pals as a kid, and many a time Dalton would come down the road with his belt to retrieve his tobacco that

Elrod had stolen, and he would whip Elrod, yelling and screaming, all the way home, only to have Elrod the next day or maybe the next week do the same thing all over again. Today, we might diagnose Elrod with ADD---Attention Deficit Disorder---but then, at Social Heil and later at Maldoon, well, Elrod was just plain "stupid," and one thing is true today as it was then: if you tell a child over and over and over that he is "stupid" long enough, he will internalize it as part of his self-image, and no amount of psychotherapy later will repair that damaged self-image.

When Elrod went to school, although several years older than I, he always managed to end up in the same grade with me, sometimes even in the same classroom. One example I remember was in Mr. Will Sucker's science class in the seventh grade, which is the last year Elrod attended school. Mr. Sucker had us lined up alphabetically, and naturally Elrod and I sat right next to each other. Throughout the year, Mr. Sucker belittled and demeaned Elrod for being "dumb"---he flunked about every test---and, knowing that Elrod and I were Clifford cousins, he simply seemed unable to understand how I aced every test. The verbal insults moved into the physical when Mr. Sucker would come around and, too often, single Elrod out and smack him with his ruler or a book in his hand.

One day Mr. Sucker simply could not resist including me in his Elrod obsession and child abuse. After smacking Elrod, he moved back to my desk and took the yard stick that he was carrying (that had been broken off to a point) and dug it painfully into my leg, wanting me perhaps to beg him for mercy or acknowledge his power. I ignored him, and he dug it down more forcefully, trying to compel me to acquiesce to his cruelty. I ignored him. After a painful interval, he simply gave up and walked away, but he never bothered either Elrod or me after that time. What caused him to lump me with Elrod? We were both poor as church mice, denizens of Bug Tussle, and he knew it. He took advantage of our powerlessness, but my passive resistance, my standing up to his bullying, seemed to work. When Will Sucker ran for and later was elected State Representative, it was, obviously, without my vote.

Because of this incident and others, I always had a warm spot for Elrod and felt that it was my duty to take up for him, to protect him, to provide for him, even.

And so I did.

When the officer called about the hobo hitchhiker under the North Big Rock underpass who claimed, the officer said, to be "a cousin" of a big Big Rock lawyer, I acknowledged that I was, indeed, Elrod's cousin. So I took him in, installed him rent-free in one of my apartments, even paying all his utilities, gave him a part-time job doing some yard-work for me, assisted with getting him Social Security disability, and otherwise sought to keep Elrod, the slob, out of harm's way. Yes, I knew that Elrod was a slob when I put him in my apartment, but there was no one else to take care of him. His sister, Janis, refused, and his parents had already died, so Elrod was alone in the world. Even though throughout my life he had always been just about the dirtiest person I knew,

Robert Eason possibly being the sole exception, I did *not know just how big a slob Elrod really was*. I was soon to find out.

But I get ahead of myself because there is more to Elrod than Elrod the Slob. Elrod was also Elrod the Scrounger. One of his favorite pastimes was to go to the back of Croger late at night after the “dated” milk and other products had been tossed into the garbage can and rescue or liberate these groceries and bring them back to my apartment, where he now lived. He rescued all sorts of other junk as well from other trash containers, and soon my apartment was looking worse than the junkyard in *Sandiford and Son*. No doubt Elrod had learned what valuable things Americans throw away during his years as a garbage man in Batton, and he was at least one of Mrs. McDonnell's students who took to heart Ben Frank's saying, “*Waste not, want not.*” Elrod referred to his trash bin forays as “finding things.”

In particular, I recall the time that Elrod came into my law office one morning, and Anne was my receptionist/secretary at the time. Here is the conversation that ensued:

Elrod “*Hey, Anne, you'll never believe what I found last night.*”

Anne: “*What, Elrod, what did you find?*”

Elrod: “*I found twelve gallons of good milk out behind Croger. How many of them do you want?*”

Of course, Anne did not want any gallons of discarded milk, but it was nice of Elrod to ask and seek to share, was it not? So Elrod stayed in my apartment until the time that I arranged for a doctor friend and client of mine, Dr. Justice Jim, now deceased, to remove fatty lumps or carbuncles from Elrod's back. Medically, I do not recall what the lumps were, but they were benign, only God-awful to behold, especially since he had maybe thirty or forty of them, some as big as an egg. To remove the growths, Dr. Jim had to hospitalize Elrod for a day or two, so I arranged for that, too, and the operation proceeded apace.

However, Elrod ended up staying longer than anyone expected, so I went over to his apartment to make sure everything was okay. I walked in the door, and the stench assaulted me, and for a moment I thought the carpet and walls were alive, *because the whole apartment, everywhere I looked, was moving*. When the surreal melded into the real, I saw a quadrillion cockroaches scurrying about over the food dumped everywhere on the floor, the food left in pans on the coffee table and the kitchen table and filthy sink, and everywhere else I looked. They were even in the refrigerator, which was thick with green and black mold.

What was I to do? I resorted to mass cockroach genocide, sprinkling several quart cans of boric acid everywhere in the apartment. When I came back the next day, it looked like a killing field, cockroaches feet by the millions pointed heavenward, but other lucky

souls---millions more it seemed---still scurried about, so I ripped out all the carpet and put it in my truck to haul away and bombed the place again with more cans of boric acid. Of course, the cockroaches were plentiful in the carpet I ripped up, so I rushed out to Bug Tussle and went down in the field where my cousin, Harlon Dodge, a bulldozer operator, was building me a pond, and I got over next to where he was pushing dirt, dumped the carpet, intending him to cover it up.

Before I could leave in my truck, however, Elrod the slob bedeviled me again. As I turned to drive away, a frayed end of carpet caught in my differential under the truck, and then a whole piece of carpet, cockroaches and all, wrapped around it. The truck ceased to move; it simply would not budge, so I got out to look. There under the truck Elrod the slob, even while confined in his hospital room, had struck again! It took Roskus and me several hours to cut away Elrod's carpet from the differential so I could drive away. Harlon just guffawed about the incident then and later, kidding me that:

"You are never gonna get away Elrod, are you, Jackson?"

Naturally, I *was* about at wit's end with Elrod by that point, so I called his sister, Janis, and told her that Elrod was her brother, not mine, though I seemed to have taken him to raise, and it was about time for her to step up to the plate. We actually got into a little bit of a cuss fight before she relented and said she would see what she could do. Soon thereafter she helped Elrod find an apartment in Batton near where she lived, but Elrod simply would not stay there on a consistent basis. He bought himself an old station-wagon, rigged it with a mattress in the back, installed a Coleman hot pad for cooking, and moved down to a used car lot in Batton, where, he said, the proprietor permitted him to live in exchange for Elrod's keeping watch over the place at night. Later I learned that this used car dealer had somehow gained access to Elrod's Social Security Disability check and, probably with Elrod's consent, was depositing it into his account and paying Elrod what little cash he needed or asked for out of these monies. I never begrudged whatever part of Elrod's Social Security checks the car dealer kept because he could not have kept enough to compensate him for tolerating Elrod the Slob.

Whatever Elrod's faults, there is some of him in me, as indeed there is a part of everyone we meet in us. Elrod the slob was a slob, and I, too, can be a slob, even though most people think of me as a perfectionist. There is great liberation, freedom, in giving oneself permission to be a slob, and maybe this is something that the wise Elrod understood that the rest of us do not. And Elrod the scrounger, yes, there is some of him in me as well. There is nothing I love more than 'scrounging' in a "junk-tique" shop or browsing through the sometimes exotic goods, many from overstocked highbrow stores, in the so-called dollar stores or discount outlets. I share Elrod's joy when I, to use Elrod's terminology, "find" things.

One thing, however, I did *not* learn from Elrod: unlike him I *do* know the difference between a man and a woman! And, believe me, I did *not* find out the difference the way Elrod found out about Cleta Sue!

Chapter 16

Odus The Oddball

*"The feet of the rats scribble on the door sills;
 the hieroglyphs of the rat footprints
 chatter the pedigrees of the rats
 and babble of the blood
 and gabble of the breed
 of the grandfathers and the great-grandfathers
 of the rats."*

Carlie Sandburg's "Four Preludes on Playthings of the Wind"

The old log, dogtrot house is empty now, its tin roof glinting and shimmering in the cold, frosty December moonlight of this late evening when I have come back to my ancestral home, a pilgrimage to my past, my roots snaking deep into my own postage stamp of Harth, into both the ideal and the reality of a community called Bug Tussle. The house is shadowed and still in the moonlight, empty and forlorn as only a house long vacant can be, an emptiness that reaches out and clutches at me as I contemplate the souls to whom this house, built in the last century around 1880, has given succor over the years.

It has been vacant now since Odus, my half-uncle, died here on May 4, 1984, alone in a sagging bed not so different from the one wherein he was born, in this very room, on September 9, 1934. A youngish (from my present perspective) fifty-two years old, Odus apparently had a heart attack---he received no health care of any kind---from clogged arteries choked with Vienna sausages, his favorite meal, or perhaps as some said---given the look of anguish on his face and what appeared to be significant swelling about his neck and face---some snake, a poisonous copperhead perhaps, other than the ubiquitous chicken (black) snake had slithered through the floor and into his bed and thus ended all that Odus had ever known of life.

In the very room where Odus died my father was born on November 17, 1901, the third of a veritable brood of fifteen Clifford offspring, male and female, who would somehow be born, and more awesome still, live in this two-room dwelling that passed for a house with its unfinished and unenclosed lofts where at least some of the fifteen kids *must have slept*. I should have asked my dad before he died, but I have never understood, and do not now, how *seventeen* people can possibly live in a two-room house, but I suppose that people do what they must do: the migrant workers and illegal aliens of this and bygone eras often crowd into minuscule city apartments or tilted country shacks in much greater numbers than a mere seventeen.

Our house sits geographically about half way between the home of Elrod the Slob and this one, the only home that Odus the Oddball ever knew, and many in my family believe that I either inherited or at least absorbed by osmosis many of the characteristics

of Elrod, my third cousin, and Odus, my half-uncle. I cannot say that they are entirely wrong, and if they are right, then I am proud of those traits, however much they may seem to others to be odd, and I here affirm that part of them that I incorporated into my own life and took beyond Bug Tussle to the outside world.

Odus was the next to youngest child of my Grandpa Hart Clifford and Clotilda Eason, Old Matt Eason's daughter, and like his uncle, Robert Eason, Odus always had trouble with formal schooling. In retrospect, he probably had dyslexia, but nobody knew that term in those days, and if they had known its meaning they would not have had a clue as to how to address it, so Odus quit school after the second grade and went back to the old log dogtrot house where he lived with his mother and father and his sister, Beulah May, and J. T., his younger brother. When Grandpa Hart became too much of an invalid to farm, Odus continued the profession, for there was really no other job open to him at Bug Tussle, and so he subsistence farmed for several decades until his feet, like his Uncle Daniel Eason's, developed bunions that prevented him from working. Odus, however, never gave up---even when they went out of vogue---the farmer's overalls, which were the only clothes that I ever saw him wear.

After his mother, Clotilda, died and Beulah May married and moved away and J.T. joined the Navy to see the world, Odus, a hermit now, continued to live in that century-old log dog-trot house, having no company whatsoever, not even a small dog or a passel of cats like his uncle Robert Eason. Only the rats and the lizards and the spiders and perhaps more than an occasional snake that slithered its way through the many cracks kept Odus company, but Odus did not despair in his aloneness. Odus, you see, unlike his Uncle Daniel Eason, whose despair drove him to become the first spaceman of Bug Tussle, was an optimist, and he always had a smile on his face, despite whatever he may have been feeling inside. It was a child-like optimism and, like that of my father, a mute acceptance of and acquiescence to his "lot in life."

A community character, Odus for years wandered about Bug Tussle on a bicycle and sometimes in his wagon to which he hitched his old mule, and he would come visit about every day to our house because his mail was delivered there and, also, he knew that my mother would provide him a hot meal to supplement the cold cans of Vienna sausage, or beans, or whatever else Odus survived on for years, tossing the empty cans carelessly into the cluttered yard so that upon his death Roskus and I had to haul away four or five pickup loads of cans and other junk littered about the place.

Like all of us, Odus wanted and needed attention, but for a person with his socio-economic and mental handicaps, they were hard to find, so Odus---much like his wampus-cattin' uncle, Robert Eason---resorted to the preposterous, the absurd, the surreal, adopting a caricature of himself that he presented to the world, a façade that fooled those who never knew the real Odus. For example, one year he would shave his head so as to appear completely bald, and the next year he would let his unwashed and tangled hair flow down his back past his shoulder blades, and, moreover, he took pleasure out of flaunting his *uniqueness* and in flouting the conventional hairstyles of this community. I recall that one time he even had a "Mohawk," and perhaps in his mind went

around pretending that he was a savage Indian. What he always had, however, regardless of the hairstyle, was a mustache, and this led to his nickname: "Whiskerbill," a moniker that he kept until the CB craze of the early 1970's hit. Although Odus never had a telephone, he derived great pleasure from his CB, and truckers going up and down Interstate 32 over the DeCoq Hills toward Friendsburgh kept up a constant chatter with "Paul Bunyan," Odus's CB handle, and appropriate it was, because Odus bore an uncanny resemblance to this bewhiskered folk hero known to most school children all over the Harth.

Despite an innate optimism, there was a void, a hole, in Odus's life---indeed, as there are voids in each of us---that he never succeeded in filling. You see, Whiskerbill's lifelong quest was to hook up with a woman, any woman, any kind of woman, from any place, not even that *special woman* that all men and even idiot's like Odus' uncle Robert Eason crave and seek. Where he got the women's names and addresses I do not recall, if I ever knew, perhaps from some "lonely hearts club" somewhere in all probability, but he corresponded with a slew of women. Since Odus could neither read nor write, he enlisted Honey Sarter to write his letters for him, and he trusted *only* Honey to read to him those letters he received back, but one day I tried to change all this. Odus had just received in our mailbox a very special letter from his favorite woman, and it was freezing cold with a deep snow on the ground. Honey Sarter lived almost three miles away, and since Odus was without transportation that day, three miles was quite a distance. So I, quite generously I thought, sought to help Odus out:

I: "*Odus, it's a long way down to Honey's house, and its freezing cold outside, what with the snow and all. Why don't you just let me read the letter to you.*"

And Odus: "*No, no, I can't do that.*"

And I: "*Why not, Odus?*"

And he: "*Cause you'd know what it said.*"

And I: "*What difference does it make if I know what it says? Honey knows what your sweet pea says when she reads the letters to you, doesn't she?*"

And Odus: "*That's different.*"

And I: "*How's that different, Odus?*"

And he: "*It jest is. I ain't letting you read no letters cause you'd know what she says to me.*"

And I, sighing: "*Okay, Odus, if you don't want me to know, I'll make you a deal.*"

And Odus, skeptically: "*What's that?*"

And I, demonstrating for visual effect: “*Well, Odus, I’ll take this here cotton, and I’ll put it in my left ear, and then I’ll take this piece of cotton and put it in my right ear?*”

And he: “*So? What difference does that make?*”

And I: “*Well, with the cotton in my ears, I can’t hear a thing I say.*”

Odus, smiling, knowing I’m just joshing, just trying to pull one over on him: “*You’d still know!*”

And I: “*But, Odus, how could I possibly know? I’ll even let you check the cotton in both ears.*”

Odus, still smiling: “*Don’t matter. You’d still know. Ain’t gonna let you do it.*”

In short, Odus was a good sport, and he actually liked for me and others to tease him, even at his expense, and he would play along with the joke, laughing perhaps because there was not much else other than jokes to laugh about in Odus’ world, but Odus never gave up hope of finding a woman. He adorned his room with what for the time were scandalously clad women on pinup calendars, women that he could gaze upon as he huddled there in that cold room, perhaps contemplating, as did his Uncle Robert Eason, another life wherein he was not bereft of a woman’s love. One woman, however, Odus would have nothing to do with, and he could probably have done it all, anything, with her, as did any man who came to her place. Her name was Josephine Burnham, sister to Robby Burnham who married Odus’ sister, Beulah May, and she lived on the old Burnham place across the DeCoq Hills beyond the Bug Tussle township line in the remote edge of the Haney Community. The story was that she was an insatiable nymphomaniac who would bed any man, but Odus knew that Josephine was not only promiscuous but also not blessed with a full deck of cards, and so when I or others would tease him about Josephine he would, unlike his normal good-natured response, get quite angry at times.

One of my last images of Odus, and one of the saddest, involved my mother-in-law, Shirley Drinkwater. The time was early May, 1983, and we had come out to Bug Tussle for Decoration Day at the cemetery. With its veritable cornucopia of foods, Decoration Day always attracted Odus who, like his Uncle Robert, always knew where he could cadge a free meal. A trim and pretty woman even now at seventy-nine, Shirley was then only fifty-nine years old, and Odus had just turned fifty-one, and he was immediately smitten, captivated, by this good-looking, nattily-dressed Big Rock woman, so he attached himself to her at the cemetery, and then when we adjourned up to my mother’s house, he insisted on coming along. He wanted a photo of Shirley and him, and as Anne prepared to take the picture, Odus wrapped his arm around Shirley’s shoulder and pulled her to him. The moment is transfixed there in time, transduced in this photograph that captures the abject longing, the unsatiated need, of this man-child for female companionship if not love. It is not a look of despair, for Odus did not despair, but one of optimism, even of hope, that he, Odus the Oddball, could somehow, magically,

have this gorgeous woman whom he now held in the arms that for his entire life had been empty and devoid of a woman's love.

I am ashamed of what I say next, and I do not recall who said it, but someone in the family, perhaps Roskus wife, Remus, said something inside about Odus liking Shirley, and she or they or whoever laughed, and Odus heard not only the comment but also the laugh, and I recall him still: shuffling off out of the yard, shoulders sagging, walking down toward the church and the lane to his house, glancing over at us as we drove by on our way back to Big Rock, pain and hurt and rejection and dashed hope splattered on his child-like face, and my heart reached out to the pain in this man for the pain was my own and the pain is yours, a universal pain that emanates from the aloneness in each of us that strives to reach out for "connection" to another soul so that the loneliness---in which we, you and I and Odus alike, the bright and the not-so-bright of this lonely world called Harth dwell in our disconnected states---might somehow be assuaged.

Like Elrod the Slob, Odus the Oddball was a scrounger and a "keeper." He never discarded anything, and even to this day there is a sense of a frozen 1950's time in this house: a 1950's or perhaps even late 1940's console television; corn cobs and macaroni sacks of shelled peas between the logs in the hall, rocks and pieces of uniquely shaped wood that Odus picked up somewhere scattered about the floor; old plows, gee-whizzes, and corn planters stuffed under the front porch; and most poignantly calendars from 1951 through 1967 hanging, layered one on top the other on the wall, the now not-scantly clad women staring down from a bygone age, marking down the days and the months and the years of Odus' shortened life.

Unlike Elrod the Slob, however, Odus was not a dirty person, at least comparatively speaking. While he never took a shower in his life and he never took a bath in a bathtub, Odus kept himself reasonably clean, relatively clean, with a "sponge bath" now and then, and his frayed overalls never smelled of urine and excrement like those of his Uncle Robert Eason. In the summer, Odus---who could not swim---would mudcrawl about the Rob Ball hole at the Plains Bayou Creek, pretending to swim, while soaping himself in the cool waters.

Yes, there is a sense of time and timeliness about this place on this cold December evening, a feeling of time mute and stopped and immobile and yet swirling backwards to all those moments in my memory or, if not in my memory, in that shared memory resident in the stories my father passed down to me about this place, my roots: how my father and his brother, Luther, as kids will do got up on the chicken house and, using sling shots, dropped several chickens to the consternation of Grandpa Hart, who could not figure out what was causing his chickens to fall over and flop about the yard; how Luther, only about sixteen years old then in 1919, was chasing a hog out of the garden when he fell over, dead, from a heart attack, Luther whose youthful face during my childhood stared down at me from an old round tintype photo hanging in my bedroom and whose presence now I intuit, feel, as a tingling chill racing down my body from the top of my head to the soles of my feet, Luther, lonely, trapped here for all these many years, seeking

companionship, pursing release; how the influenza visited in 1921 and Grandma Ellie, nursing her ailing children, fell sick and died almost overnight; how my uncle Hillie Clifford around 1912 or so saw smoke billowing from across the woods at the Old Thomas place and raced to the house and dragged Old Mr. Thomas, too late it turned out, from the flames; how the towering red oak tree that now must measure at least twenty feet around was a mere sapling when my father was born, its then slender trunk captured on a photograph of my Grandpa Hart and Grandma Ellie around 1905, a photo in which they---reminiscent of the American Gothic painting---stand behind a large cow lying on the ground, their docile eyes not much different from the bovine eyes, all staring straight ahead, placidly, into the camera.

And then there are my personal memories of this place: the shiny dark-green wild citrons in my father's field behind the house; my peeling billets with my father and his brother, Uncle Klade, around 1955; my Grandpa Hart bouncing me on his knee, his hair and mustache white as cotton, telling me laughingly that if I laughed as "the horse eats the corn off the cob" (he used his hands to "munch" on my leg right above my knee) that this was a sure sign that I had a girlfriend; Roskus and our cousins, Clifton and Bobby Joe (Uncle Comer's boys), climbing into the opposing lofts overlooking the dogtrot hallway and shooting peas or stretchy berries at each other across the hallway in a fierce blowgun fight; how we, the four of us, dug out a hole on the little branch so enough water could accumulate that we could immerse ourselves in it and cool off, only to be frightened off forever by a huge water moccasin who took over our mudhole; how Roskus and I, as kids of seven or eight or so, would bat at the hovering bumblebees around the old log barn, even though I always felt sorry when I hit one; and my earliest memory of this place: it was around 1948 or 1949, and I was only two or three years old when the mud-and-straw chimney on the west side of the house was torn down and a more modern convenience, a wood cookstove, was installed in the kitchen there.

Why do I affirm this place? Why do I affirm these people? Why did I in 1993, I think it was, when *People Magazine* wanted a photograph to accompany an article that they were publishing about my, Jack Clifford's, "nemesis" or "arch-enemy" role in the Bill Clinton election, insist that my photo be taken, squatting by the huge oak tree, the old, log dogtrot house sagging forlorn in the background? The answer is simple: this is *home* with all this loaded term implies, my own postage stamp of Harth where I and all who follow me originated, in a time and a place that exist now, if at all, only in my memories and in the shared memories of others whose lives were shaped and molded by not so much what we endured here as what we enjoyed and appropriated to ourselves from whatever the meager possibilities that this time and place offered.

Since Odus the Oddball and the other misfits I've written about herein never stood a chance of rising above and beyond this place and time, I did what I have done in life, at least in part, for them, for each of these little ones whose lives were bounded and enclosed and imprisoned in this uncaring time and place but who, each of them, in some dim part of their consciousness perhaps, affirmed the part of me that remained with each of them at Bug Tussle and took joy at the part of them that traveled with me as I, the

ultimate misfit, tried vainly to escape a place that I yearned for even as I left it: this old log, dogtrot house; our shanty a half mile removed; my Bug Tussle; my *home*.

Chapter 17

The Misfit Pit: Jack London's Way Out

*"I would rather be ashes than dust!
 I would rather that my spark should burn out in a brilliant blaze
 than it should be stifled by dry rot.
 I would rather be a superb meteor,
 every atom of me in magnificent glow,
 than a sleepy and permanent planet.
 The proper function of man is to live, not to exist.
 I shall not waste my days in trying to prolong them.
 I shall use my time"*

Jackie Lundon (1876 - 1916)

From my earliest days I was always consumed with an insatiable need to know, to learn, to expand my horizons, being intensely curious about everything and everyone in my world and having a strange yearning for the mysterious worlds just beyond my grasp or knowing and especially those worlds that I could access only through the realm of the imagination via oral or written stories of far-off places and adventures and exotic and strange branches of knowledge.

Several people and things stimulated my excitement about learning. There was my mother, of course, who would praise me for bringing home “a good report card,” and my father who, when I was only three or so, would read to me out of the Bible, him not needing glasses then, reading his favorite chapter: Genesis 1, and I tried even then to imagine what the words were telling me, what was not said, what was lurking just beyond my sight *between* the words of this majestic tale of creation, thinking how great must be this creature that the Bible called God to do all that he did in Genesis 1, not then even knowing or suspecting the enormity of what I came to believe about God, a creature, a being, a force---call it or him what you will---outside time and space and yet infused with them, and so I came to explore vistas, to think thoughts, that were unknown then or at least unacknowledged in a child’s mind,

And my father told me stories---he was a great storyteller, and a most graphic one! To this day, I hear him now in the faint light of that old flickering coal oil lamp, see him closing the Bible and commencing his story about the sinking of the Titanic, a seminal event in his young, teenage life, a tale that took on moral and class and religious connotations, a myth really more than an event, where the common folks who could never have booked a berth on that giant ocean liner but who fully understood the dimensions of the tragedy could talk about the hubris of the rich and the powerful, the way the builders mocked God himself by bragging that this ship was “unsinkable,” and the way the fat-cats of America and Britain trusted these words and partied and drank and

danced the night away to pre-flapper tunes as the unsinkable ship moved relentlessly through the frigid waters of the North Atlantic on its way to its destiny, and how as the ship sank the band played on, only now acknowledging the God that they had shunned and challenged in their hubris and disbelief, and as the music changed to “Nearer My God to Thee” they continued until the piano itself slipped down the canted deck and under the waves.

No, there’s nothing in the movie “Titanic” that I have not heard and seen in my mind many times and lived really, especially in 1968 when I boarded the oceanliner *United States* on my way to England and Oxford and we ran smack dab into a hurricane, all of us confined to our bunks as the ship tossed and turned with the wind and the waves, sea-sick with a vengeance, and as I lay there my dad’s story haunted my thoughts:

I am on the ice-glazed deck of the Titanic/United States, and everywhere people are running about, screaming, hysterical, oblivious to the shouts of the ship’s officers pleading for calm, trying to organize the women and children, tearing them at times away from their husbands and fathers to place them in the few lifeboats that remain. I know that I am not a woman nor a child, so there will be no berth on those boats for me. The deck is already tilted at a forty-five degree or so angle, and I must cling to the railing to keep from sliding down the entire length of the ship to where its prow is already dipping under the freezing waters. Everywhere about me the fierce winds howl, and I see numerous ice flows nearby. Perhaps, I think, if only I can swim to one of them and scale its slippery sides, perhaps then I can curl up there until rescued, not admitting to myself the thought of hypothermia, the mind being a strange place at a time like this when its very existence is threatened, when it madly seizes on any hope, however hopeless and remote and impossible, to sustain hope itself on which survival depends.

“Nearer My God to Thee” wafts over the night air, taking me back momentarily to that small, white, clapboard church at Bug Tussle where, prior to my departure, my friends and my relatives had a parting service where that song and others played hauntingly, one in particular coming to mind now, its refrain in my skittering mind interwoven with the words and music of “Nearer My God to Thee,” the words and music seeping through, my mother and my father and my Woo-Woo all singing it then, now, back at that little church:

“If we never meet again this side of heaven,
I will meet you on that beautiful shore.
Where the precious roses bloom forever,
And where separation comes no more.
And If we never meet again this side of heaven,
I will meet you on that beautiful shore.”

Clinging here now to that icy, frozen railing, I am not ready to be any nearer to my God than I am now, and even as I slip down the deck despite my best efforts to hold back, I had rather be where I am than in the numbing waters, the waves washing over me, sucking down that last gasp of life-giving air, my head bobbing under and then

popping up from beneath the cold waves, brine and the cold water now into my lungs that futilely try to function with, to utilize, this unfamiliar substance, to extract the life-supporting oxygen from it, trying gallantly until the lungs fill and burst and the heart ruptures and explodes, bringing blessed oblivion and surcease of pain, all that in this world is left of me drifting and twisting on my spiraling way down to the darkened abyss.

Of course, it did not happen this way in this timeline, this universe, for I am here on Harth, am I not, writing about it, but that other timeline, that other universe where it *did* happen is just beyond the horizon of my mind so that I can intuit it darkly as I plug into its swirling, dark energy and let it percolate through my mind as I write, remembering something that never happened but *did happen*, for it happened in my father's memory, or at least his imagination, as he told me, a mere child of three or so, of the *Titanic* slipping beneath the cold waters of the North Atlantic, and it happened in my memory as I sat there beneath the glow of the coal oil lamp, imagining the horror of it all, and it happened again as that fierce hurricane battered and tossed the *United States* around the North Atlantic like some puny and insignificant piece of jetsam or flotsam dredged up from the deep, perhaps the *Titanic* itself reincarnated and transported through time and in the present harthlings call 1968 there transmogrified into the *United States*, where I lay in my berth, sick and retching with sea-sickness (only three passengers made it to the dining room for three days, so bad was the hurricane), with hunger, and most of all with fear as I re-lived over and over and over those times when my daddy told me that graphic tale.

And, of course, there was Woo-Woo, who instilled in me the joy of "doodling", a very playful if primitive learning, and who fostered that joy with her unstinting praise and her delight in my performances, but the formal schooling began at Social Heil and I, having already lost Woo-Woo-mother, was petrified at being left by Annie-mother, to whom I had re-attached as best I could under the circumstances, and as the time came for that first day of school, its inevitability was known to me, a cold dread and agonizing anxiety seized me, and I became paralyzingly terrified of that place. That's when kindly Mrs. Ellen McDonnell, my third harth-mother really, came into the picture, and she lifted me out of my panic and showed me a world of knowledge and books and imagination of which I had only dreamed up to that time.

So on that fateful day when the law said that I simply *must* go to first grade, my mother went with me to school---I don't recall how we got there, because we had no automobile, but we may have ridden with Lucy Spence and her kids, Ryan and Brenda, who would be in my class---and she tried to leave me there on the first day of first grade, only I would not be left but taken home, so distraught was I at being abandoned. I recall to this day how that all-encompassing and over-powering sense of abandonment and lostness overwhelmed me, and I clung to my mother, crying inconsolably, probably on the verge of being back in front of that door where Woo-Woo left me.

Crying uncontrollably, I recalled, *relived*, other times when my mother had gone away, particularly the time that she went with another of my aunts, Aunt Fern, to the Jack Mountain to pick wild blueberries, and I can recall standing at that north window looking

at the distant mountains toward Mott Springs and feeling this utter emptiness and panic that my mother was so far away, or the time that my mother and I went to Mott Springs and we were in a department store where Ina Hill, Glenn and Eulah's older daughter, worked, and I became separated from my mother, dwelling in the lostness of hell until Ina found me and took me to my mom. Yep, do not tell me that childhood trauma does not scar and, even when healed or dealt with in some way or the other, it finds a way of oozing out at the least expected moments, so I was there at the little school at Social Heil and I was with my mother only I was *not there* and it was *not* my mother, but Woo-Woo and the place was *not* the school but *that door* through which she, my Woo-Woo, had gone and left me in my pain and lostness, and I screamed in my mind,

*"No! No! **NO!** **NO!** I can't! I won't! Please! Don't make me go to that place! Any place but in front of that door! Please! NO! **NO!**"*

The kindly Mrs. McDonnell could not, of course, have known what was happening with me in my mind, but she was a loving and perceptive woman, and she had pity on me, and I came to consummate the first of many negotiations in my life and struck the first of innumerable bargains. Our exchange went like this:

Mrs. McDonnell *"Jackson, if I let you go home today, will you promise me that you will come back tomorrow?"*

And I, a stricken and forlorn child but not being completely bereft of cunning, calculated the odds before answering in a quavering voice,

"Yee---ssssss! I promise! I promise! Just let me go home! I promise."

In fact, I would have promised her anything that day so as to be able to go home with my mama, and like a shady lawyer who promises something just to buy time, to postpone the inevitable, some would say, I had no intention of honoring that promise. Why should I? It was made under duress, was it not, and should not be binging, should it? I simply could *not* deal with or accept that I would be away from my mother, but my feelings the next morning surprised both my parents and even me. You see, I kept this promise, made under duress as it was, and I arose bright and early the next morning strangely devoid of dread or any sense of abandonment at all, ate my breakfast of sugared and buttered oats and hog jowl, stood waiting patiently and even eagerly in the breaking dawn, the cloyingly sweet smell of honeysuckle and roses all mixed up in it, waiting for that school bus to chug up the road, and I not only went back the next day but went back eager to learn and to explore the myriad branches of knowledge and wisdom set down by the great thinkers and philosophers and scientists and creative writers of Harth in tomes so multitudinous that whatever I learned it would be but a smidgen of what there was to learn.

To Mrs. McDonnell and Mr. McDonnell I owe my life-long battle against that abyssal ignorance, trying, futilely, to conquer, to banish, it until that day when I am called home. Yes, the joy---the sheer delight---and the insatiable black-hole-like *need* to learn

and explore---was sparked by all three of my harth-mothers, my biological mother ("You can succeed! You can do it! I believe in you! I'm so proud of you!") and also the two, Woo-Woo and Mrs. McDonnell, whom I adopted---or maybe it was they who adopted me? Whatever the case, all three made a real difference in my life, not just in learning, but also in their faith in me and their encouragement and their unconditional love.

Mr. McDonnell, a stern and God-fearing Methodist disciplinarian, also took me under his wing. In fact, as early as the third grade he permitted me to come into his classroom to check out the "big kids" books, and they literally enthralled and transported me to another time and place. Among those that I read over and over were the Great American Adventure series of books about American heroes, particularly pioneer legends like *Wild Bill Haycock*, *Daniel Boon*, and *Chief Black Hawk*. Another of my favorites in this series was *Fur Trappers of the Old West*. Recently, I have purchased two complete sets of these books on Ebuy for my two daughters' children. I have also purchased childhood favorites, *Goodbye, My Lady*, a real tearjerker of a dog story, and *Boy of Old Quebec*. Many of these early books stimulated and nurtured my interest in history, my college major and emphasis at St. John's College, Oxford, before I turned to law. However, I want to take you back with me to Social Heil School and back in time to 1952. I paint for you this scene:

Huddling around a circle scratched in the ground, a group of boys in bibbed overalls plays marbles---some overalls patched to the point that patches seemed to be all that could be seen, because "making do" is more than an expression in Bug Tussle and Social Heil and Saginaw and Partway and the Possum Trot hills where these boys live, it is a necessity, and when Mrs. McDonnell shares with them that Ben Frank said "*Waste not, want not*" or Mr. McDonnell, the school principal and the teacher of the 5th and 6th grades, added to that with "*A penny saved is a penny earned*" neither had to explain it to these kids.

Years later when I, no longer a young impoverished Bug Tussle lad, but now a grown man and a multi-millionaire father, spoke the latter of Ben Frank's sayings to my daughter, Lenox, only updating it for inflation and humor ("*A hundred dollars saved is a hundred dollars earned.*"), she instinctively grasped it, because I had told her of the patched, bedraggled hand-me-downs from my cousin Dean Box in California. I told her of the feed sacks and flour sacks that came in bright colors and from which my mother made shirts for Roskus and me. I told her how I picked blackberries in the summer and sold them, mostly to Woo-Woo, for a dollar a gallon, and how I built rabbit gums and hunted and fished, not so much out of the love of it, but out of necessity because protein from beans alone was not satisfying.

Further, I told her how the country bacon and hams and shoulders would not last through the spring, and then on the rare occasion that my father came home from "trading at town" (as it was called) not with bacon (because that was too expensive) but with bacon ends and bits, perhaps bought with saved up Green Trading Stamps at Piggly Wiggly, how my mouth salivated for the food. I told her how we could not afford medical and dental care and how the government did not provide for the poor as it does now and

how as a result I have filling in most of my teeth today (well water, of course did not have fluoride either) and how horrified my friend, Barry Autwell, was in Mrs. Janes' ninth grade Algebra class when I showed him an aching molar with the *entire* inside rotted into one huge cavity, a tooth that had to be extracted.

I told her about arriving in Maldoon, a country bumpkin, for the seventh grade and how free lunches were not provided, for this was the Eisenhauer age of social unconcern, but how Mac Gattis, the principal, told me when I did what my mother instructed me and asked about the possibility of free lunches that I could work in the lunchroom in exchange for my lunches, but how I never accepted this offer, not because work was not appealing to me, but because working there stigmatized me as poor, which in retrospect was a totally absurd decision given that I went hungry for six years to get my education, with only a nickel or a dime per day, which was even so more than my parents could afford, to buy a candy bar at the little store.

Certain things, however, were too painful and too shameful to tell her, but I tell her, and you, now. I never told her how during one bus trip home from school I was plopped down in the seat, sick and headachy with hunger, and there under the seat in front of me was half a Snickers bar that someone had dropped in the dirty floor and how I sneaked it into my mouth after brushing off the dust and devoured it like a ravenous animal. I never told her of the sense of alienation and estrangement I had, the sense of not belonging, the sense of being different, that settled on me like a heavy cloak every time the noon lunch bell rang, and all the kids, except me, headed off to the lunchroom, and I wandered out into the schoolyard, trying to pretend that other kids did not know that I was too poor even to afford lunch, but they must have known, had to have known, because my clothes told it all, for regardless of how much my mother sewed or washed or ironed, they were still bedraggled hand-me-downs.

Also, I never told her of how kind Mr. McDonnell, as I lingered in the door of the Little Store at Social Heil, looking longingly at the brightly wrapped candy would say to me,

“Jackson, why don’t you try out this grape sucker for me and tell me what you think?”

And how even knowing what he was doing, the charity of it, but wanting, desiring, it, I put my pride aside and accepted. I never told her about my cousin, Noella Barks, telling me in the third grade:

“When I had a dime to spend at the Little Store, you had a penny, and now that I have a quarter, you have two pennies.”

I did tell her of how I worked my senior year as a carhop on the weekends at the Dairyette by the Maldoon City Park, hitching a ride with my cousin, Henry “Hub-Bubba-Huh” Clifford, and how I used this little money and tips to buy better clothes and some more food at school but still “made do” and saved for college, even from these measly

earnings, having as my total estate---as evidenced by two tiny, yellowed scraps of paper that I still retain whereon are penciled in my youthful scrawl the progression of my wealth:

| | |
|-------------------------------|-----------------|
| <i>October 13, 1961-----</i> | <i>\$43.03</i> |
| <i>June, 1962-----</i> | <i>\$49.07</i> |
| <i>September, 1962-----</i> | <i>\$62.00</i> |
| <i>December 25, 1962-----</i> | <i>\$65.50</i> |
| <i>April, 1963-----</i> | <i>\$70.00</i> |
| <i>May, 1963-----</i> | <i>\$71.65</i> |
| <i>July 3, 1963-----</i> | <i>\$106.50</i> |

Almost seven years later on May 27, 1970 with a college degree and a year of Oxford studies behind me, my vast estate from which I had the audacity to contemplate the expense of law school consisted (per my Bank of Maldoon Acct. # 1942) of only \$988.65 which, when balanced with my college loans, left me with what then seemed like a large negative net worth.

Of course, my "net worth" did not include the first two dollars I ever owned and still have, a 1922 and a 1923 silver dollar that Walton Stainbridge gave me as a three-year old, or my 1900 Indian head penny. My estate in 1963 may sound like so little now, but to me at the time it was a fortune indeed; it was a lot of money because it about equaled a month's AFDC (Aid for Dependant Children) welfare benefits. I never told Lenox how ashamed I was to be on welfare, how it dehumanized me, deprived me of dignity and pride (a poor exchange for a few measly dollars), and how I told no one of this, although most of the kids at school must have known anyway.

Moreover, I never told her how the kindly Mr. Fillips, our welfare officer, called me after I became a lawyer to ask me for some legal advice and told me that he was "proud" of me and that he considered me to be "one of my successes" and "one of my own," and I thanked him for his kindness and for the pittance that was all he could dispense in those days except for the commodities (government surplus groceries) with which our pantry was stocked. I never told my daughter of the pride that overrode my demanding conscience to the point that I baldly lied on a financial questionnaire that the school passed out, stating that my father's income was \$2,000 per year, when it was not \$2,000 in ten years, not even \$200 in ten years perhaps (neither he nor my mother in all their life filed a tax return), a subsistence farmer making no money at all or, if so, only enough to pay off the bear-trap \$25 or \$40 at most seed-and-fertilizer mortgage to the Bank of Maldoon. I never told her of the shame and the humiliation I felt, not just for the poverty but for the feeling that I *must* lie about it, even as I did what my pride said I had to do: lie, and I never told her that to this day I can even now call up the cold, sinking, empty feeling as I read that question inquiring about my family's income and can feel, still, the clammy sweat coursing down my shamed face as I lied through my teeth on that form.

Also, I have not shared the third seminal event of my childhood with my daughter, and it is difficult to share it now, this childhood rend that like the previous two caused me such pain for years. My subconscious left it out of the first draft of this section because our minds have a way of skittering away from the painful, do they not? Yet, it is an event, if your no-need-for-RSVP'd invitation into my mind is to be complete, that I must share. The year was 1960; the place is Big Rock; and I am in the ninth grade, attending a National Junior Honor Society Convention at the Clarion Hotel. We are staying, however, at the Lafitte Hotel several blocks away. To this day I can recall the awe of the crowds, the shiny merchandise in the many stores, the bustle, the high-rise buildings (none was over twelve stories high), and the feeling enshrouding me: that of a minnow out of water. It was my first trip to downtown Big Rock or to any "big" city, and it simply overwhelmed me with its activity and strangeness, so I was feeling somewhat alienated and estranged even before the incident that I am about to describe to you. Can I describe it? Dare I? I don't know.

She, Andrea Crafton, was not so much a person to me as an ideal: one of the two people in our class, who along with Patty Dicks (a doctor's daughter) gave me serious competition for the valedictorian slot. For the record, Andrea and Patty had 4.00 GPAs and were co-valedictorians, and I had a 3.94 GPA (two B's in math) and was salutatorian. Anyway, not so much Andrea as my image, my creation, of her had coalesced in my pubescent mind to enthrone her as the "ideal girl." After all, it was a time that the hormones were stirring; childhood games were being put behind; kids were pairing off, male and female, and I, the ultimate outsider and misfit, also wished to belong, to pair, so as not to be "different."

So I picked Andrea as the object of my attention, but I was too shy to do anything about it. After all, she was a "city girl," and she "had money" (her father worked at Runnel's Metals, a union-wage job!). In turn, I, one of the denizens of Bug Tussle, had no money, shabby clothes, no automobile or access to one, no experience with expressing emotion to members of the opposite sex, and little hope of changing any of that. Thus is the prison of the impoverished and downtrodden kids and all others who are misfits for whatever reason---whether race, color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or whatever---in our society: the community and peer disdain and rejection that they have internalized, and having internalized now *feel* to be real parts of themselves, make it nearly impossible to rise above their "lot" in life, so we have a continuation of misfits generation after generation.

At this convention, however, I resolved to break out from this bondage, to cast aside the shackles of despairing alienation that imprisoned me, and to connect with my ideal. So, as kids do, I hovered about trying to screw up my courage and looking for the "right moment" when I could find Andrea alone and talk with her---not that I would say anything *that revealing*---I was not stupid---but just have a "real" conversation with her. Finally, my opportunity came as she went down to the Lafitte Hotel bar to have a coke, and the bar stool next to her was vacant, so summoning up courage I did not know I had I sat down next to her and said "hi." Her response:

“Jackson, you can’t sit here. Kay is coming down in a minute.”

An automaton, I mumbled some reply that must have sounded vaguely coherent and surrendered the stool, moving down a few places to the left. Between Andrea and me now was a businessman, perhaps a lawyer for he seemed hassled and weary as he stared into the swirling depths of his amber drink, only occasionally taking a sip, and I stared into it as well for I had never before in my life been in the presence of someone drinking liquor of any kind. *“Another bourbon and coke”*---whatever that was---I heard the man re-order, and when the bartender asked me what I wanted, for the first time in my life I wanted to say, *“A bourbon and coke, please.”* Of course I could not, despite the sudden intensity of the longing for the forbidden drink that, I intuited, held the promise of some sort of relief (if only sweet oblivion for a time), so I ordered a coke, downed it quickly, and then went back up to the room where we were congregating.

Our convention room was on the eleventh floor, and the window was open; there was no screen, and there were no bars, so I sat in the window---alone and miserable and steeped in rejection and abandonment---the cacophony of voices, happy voices of other students, swirling about me, and looked down eleven stories to the street and the automobiles bustling by below, and all of a sudden I was in a place that terrified me, panicked me, because it was dark and I was alone and I was outside myself and yet inside myself at the same time, my feelings both detached and cold and yet strangely super vibrant and searing, not knowing then what I know now: *that for a brief moment I had crashed through all my carefully constructed defenses, those of denial and repression, and I was back in front of that door where Woo-Woo left me, where I wailed out my despair to the uncaring heavens*, and so I sat on the window ledge and for the first time in my life, and me only a young boy of fourteen or so, contemplated my non-being, my death, how it would feel to launch myself through that window and spiral down to that hard concrete sidewalk and “splat” into blessed nothingness against its immovable surface. Perhaps now you can see why the Daniel Eason suicide scene that I so graphically illustrated for you earlier was so easy for me to write!

This thought was, of course, fleeting and not serious for I am, if anything, a survivor and not a quitter, and even more than a survivor someone who perseveres and ultimately triumphs, so I sucked it in, dealt with my feelings of rejection and abandonment and alienation and estrangement as best I could. That night as we rode back to Maldoon on the bus I sat up front with a teacher, Mrs. Roza, I think it was, and I was quiet and withdrawn, not joining in the revelry going on toward the back of the bus, not a part of it, not a part of anything or anyone, only myself, more accurately my *Self*, but affirming that, loving that, as best I could even in all my pain, and as I laid my head down on the pillow at my Aunt Fern’s later that night, I was finally free at last where the pent-up tears could torrent down my cheeks.

And as I futilely tried to sleep, I spooled over and over in my mind that scene in the Lafitte Hotel bar where another childhood’s rend was seared and branded into my being. Andrea never knew any of this, I suppose, the impact of her uncaring and unthinking remarks, because she did not mean for them to be uncaring, and she did not

mean to be unthinking, and I have never told her what an impact she had on my life: *never told her that from this incident stemmed a great part of my resolve to bootstrap myself out of the misfit pit, and for her contribution to my success, I thank her now. Thank you, Andrea, for so graphically showing me that I, and indeed anyone else from the Bug Tussles in all Harth's lands, have to be "better" in order to belong, to be accepted.*

Much of what I did tell Lenox, however, I told her because I feared that “making do” and “getting by” were values that her generation did not and could not comprehend because to them to sacrifice, to persevere, to endure, or to postpone instant gratification is to have to settle for Reboks instead of Air Jordans or for Old Navy over Banana Republic. I wanted to instill in her a social conscience that treated all people with tolerance and dignity and respect regardless of the pigeonhole in which society or culture or religion placed them, but I wanted her to go beyond even this: to affirmatively seek out the kids who are misfits or oddballs or slobs or lamebrains or idiots because of poverty, race, religion, sexual orientation, excessive weight, lack of mental acuity, or other stigmas that the herd mentality tends to label and demean and thus dehumanize, no, it is not enough not to discriminate against them, no, more is required than merely that: affirmative action to *befriend and encourage and inspire them* to rise above their circumstances and disregard, even bludgeon, the walls of the pigeonholes where society has consigned and confined them and rise, as did I eventually, from Jack London’s social pit.

Knowing from experience that kids can be crueler than adults, I wanted her to pass on the kindness that some kids always showed to me, kindness that I shall never forget. I will name neither these kids nor the others who taunted and belittled and marginalized me, because I would leave someone out, and, besides, they know who they are, for good and bad, and the ones know my gratitude and the others---well, maybe they know my pain and maybe they do not. I am happy to report that my daughter has internalized my feelings and values, and she has been more than active in seeking out those (potentially, at least) estranged and alienated kids in her circle of influence.

For example, her best, little friend in “Blue Birds” was Faisal Al-Jaburi, an Iranian, and her best friend in the next year of kindergarten was Dana Hepstein, a first generation Israeli émigré. Then in later years she “adopted” and mentored and befriended an assorted melange of kids, including Jonnie Grubbs, her half-Filipino boyfriend in high school. At Pomona College her first year her first “crushes” were on a Guatemalan followed by a Brazilian followed by an impoverished West Virginia kid, and in Arkansas Governor’s School her best friends were Debra, a first-generation Chinese-American, and Nadia, a first generation Indian Muslim. Her best friend in her junior year at Pomona College is a Black lesbian whose Pentecostal family condemns her sexual orientation, and in her sophomore year she befriended an Indian Hindu transgender girl, whose sexual identify is confused and even sometimes militant.

My daughter, Lenox’s, friendships make me proud!

The one I cherish most, however, is the girl who told her, in writing, what Lenox had meant to her during high school. You see, Katy Lynnette Reith was an LDS (Moroni) girl, the only Moroni girl at Lake Hamilton, and her family was not “rich” like Lenox’s and, in fact, was quite impoverished. Katy was also a tad overweight and self-conscious about it. Also, since many mainstream Cristan faiths view Moroniism as a cult, some kids scorned and belittled Katy for her faith. In short, Katy Reith knew firsthand what it meant to be “different.” On graduation night, when Lenox was valedictorian and gave the address to the graduating seniors Katy was salutatorian which, despite her best efforts, was her accustomed spot. You see, throughout high school she had competed with Lenox for the number one spot in the various classes but had bested her only in one, chemistry.

After the graduation ceremony, this little Moroni girl handed Lenox a letter that showed more grace, a state that LDS members supposedly do not attain according to fundamentalist doctrine, than the most devout Baptist. As we drove home, my daughter read this remarkable letter aloud to us, almost blinded by the faint glow of the overhead light and her copious tears. Also, Anne, my wife, cried. I cried, too, not only for the words and sentiments articulated with such compassion and love and grace, but also because I knew at that moment just how much my values had taken, and I cried because what had been done to me a half century ago now, all the shame and ostracism and feelings of inferiority and estrangement and alienation and despair that poor kids and kids of color or kids of unconventional sexual orientation or kids of any kind who are “different” from the herd experience and endure from their peers, was that night by that simple and loving letter expurgated from my soul for I, via my daughter, had returned good for bad.

Katy’s letter reads as follows:

Dear Lenox,

18 May, 2003

You got on my nerves so much when I was younger. I mean, you were practically perfect. Not only did you make good grades, you were beautiful, could afford nice things (believe me—compared to my life, you were rich), and possibly the worst feature---you were so kind. I mean, if you were mean, hateful, and snobby, I could’ve been fine. I could handle that---after all, most everyone was like that. But not you.

I remember one day in particular---it was in ACE, and I was having a bad day. My friend’s dad had recently passed away and---to make a long story short---my friendship with some of my other friends came into jeopardy. I was sitting on a table across the room from everyone else, thinking about these so-called “friends” of mine when you appeared.

You came over and sat next to me. Believe me, I was in total shock. You asked what was wrong, so I explained the situation to you. We talked for a while, and you gave me your phone number, in case I needed someone to talk to. I don’t think I ever called, but that moment has always been with me.

You cared enough to ask me how I was doing---of all people! Me! I was nobody! How did I warrant compassion from you, Miss Perfect (in my eyes)?

So you see, you have not been merely “competition” or even only a “friend.” You have become more. You not only keep me on my toes, you help me remain grounded. You are someone I can depend on, someone who has formed a special place in my heart. My sometime-excessive study habits were put into perspective, and I learned how to relax and have fun. You’ve helped me become a better person.

I know that at times my goal of becoming a housewife would make my school-work seem so superfluous, but I was in school to better myself, not necessarily to excel in this world. A part of me wants to do that, but at this point, I can’t see it as a need.

If nothing else, I believe I will be satisfied in your accomplishments. I want to see you succeed. I believe that there are limitless opportunities for you, and I want to see you reach them.

If nothing else, win it for my sake as well.

You’ve become really special to me. To fully express your impact in my life would transcend words. Thank you.

Love,

Katy Lynnette Reith

More than anything, however, I cried because I did not have the maturity and the grace at the time, all those many years ago at Maldoon, to deal with the pain and the degradation in the manner that Katy Reith exhibited so well. Why had I harbored to myself all these years that which only hurt me instead of letting it go and extending forgiveness to those who wronged me? I thank Katy for showing me, who should already have long ago known, the path to true freedom, which lies only in complete relinquishment and absolution. I have digressed again, however, and I must return to Social Heil School.

The boys huddle and chatter around a circle etched in the bare dirt under the sprawling, capacious bowls of the oak trees, the girls squealing and giggling and talking in their high-pitched voices on the nearby swing set and merry-go-round and silver slide polished to a slick gloss by a piece of wax paper and doing their best but not quite succeeding in not looking at the group of boys, much less acknowledging them or the pre-pubescent stirrings in their loins that attracts and repels them at the same time, and in the circle a group of cateyed marbles perch on little humps of dirt, their ownership now uncertain, at risk, awaiting to see which boy can knock them beyond the drawn circle, because these boys---unknown to Mr. McDonnell who frowns on gambling of any kind and who, had he known, the boys knew, would march them into his closet where the two-foot-long paddle with its drilled marble-sized holes would leave marbled imprints on

their posteriors---are playing “keeps,” playing keeps despite the fact that not one of them has any marbles to lose, playing perhaps because it is forbidden and the forbidden fruit is always the sweetest---is it not?--- and on the fringes I stand watching mutely, watching, not participating unless vicariously thinking of what it would be like for me once to say “To hell with the rules! I’m gonna commit the sin of gambling!” is participating but even then knowing that I would not do it not for fear of Mr. MacDonnell’s paddle but because that was not my way---to risk foolishly that which I cannot afford to lose in order to gain what I merely want but do not really need, at least more than the other boys need them.

Besides, I think then as I do throughout life, “*Why do folks always believe that it is better to swim with the flow rather than turning upstream, or why is it more acceptable to blow with the wind rather than to straighten one’s back and strain against it?*”

Much later, I, this kid, now a man, would hearken back to this schoolyard imagery at a particular moment in my life when I found myself, alienated and alone, contemplating the Siren tug of self-abnegation or even self-immolation and so set down my feelings in poetic form in a simple paean to all those who at one time or another huddle there on the fringe, an outsider by choice or design or color or genetic disposition or whatever while the cacophony of the loud world swirls and dances around and over them, a simple little verse that I titled just as simply:

Marbles

*Rough and smooth and in between
Red and blue and brown and green
Colored with the shadows of time
Smothered by those fears of mine
I’ll—take my marbles and go home
No, thank you, I’d rather play alone.*

*Laughing and joking and cleaning a spot
Patched pants, shaggy hair, gritty school lot
Circles scratched on the muddy ground
Childish elfins kneeling round
I’ll—take my marbles and go home
No, thank you, I’d rather play alone.*

*Small boy, huddling on the fringe
Eyes brown and dark like a rusty hinge
Sagging with the burden of realization
Scorched by a cat-eyed imitation
I’ll—take my marbles and go home
No, thank you, I ‘d rather play alone.*

You see, I’ve lost too many before

*To gamble by lurching through that door
 To offer my soul in abnegation
 To a spark, a flash, a conflagration
 I'll—take my marbles and go home
 No, thank you, I'd rather play alone.*

Inside the classroom, the motherly Mrs. McDonnell took me under her wings. She was one of my mother's friends and classmates at the Friendsburgh School, and, already, now in her mere thirties, has a cotton-white canopy of hair and a crinkled face. A woman who absolutely adored children and who loved teaching and loved nature, she taught the first and second grades, both grades together in one classroom so that each student actually went through each grade twice as was also the case with the third and fourth grades and the fifth and sixth grades, a valuable experience for one such as I who not only gobbled but slurped down knowledge, absorbing it seemingly by osmosis as the hot desert sands sucks up the last, lingering moisture from a vanishing oasis.

She was a kindly woman who imparted not just learning but the love of learning in the simple "Dick and Jane" books ("Run Spot, run. See Spot run.") and even the "Little Black Sambo" book in the days before, even though it never used the "n" word, it was considered racially insensitive, and thus banished from the classrooms, in the same way that a Seminole football mascot became offensive to Native Americans or the Confederate flag became not so much an historic and nostalgic anachronism and memento to a time and way of life that never was but an affront to current sensibilities.

This kindly woman, who years before had gone to school with my mother and who was known to my mom simply as "Ellen," was someone with whom my mother trusted her son because between them was the shared bond of learning not just the three "R's" but learning the joy of learning from Malvin Hughey or perhaps Caddie Reith or whatever other teachers taught in those long-ago one-room country schools, each in his time, imparting as do all great teachers not mere facts or information or even ideas but the *quest* for knowledge and the *thirst* for ideas.

Please do not make the mistake of pitying me this three-room country school or clucking about the one-room country schools where my mother and Ellen McDonnell attended because the *thirst* for knowledge and the *joy* of learning are not unique to the huge metropolitan gifted and talented schools or the private academies of the old-moneyed Eastern Establishment. That excellence can and does arise in any venue was driven home to me when, years after I had attended St. John's College, Oxford as a Fulbright Scholar (the first Oxford scholar from Bug Tussle I---along with everyone else---assumed), I found out about Charlie Reith. Indeed, as *Ecclesiastes* says, there is "*nothing new under the sun.*" In 1907 Charlie Reith, a student at the University of Arkansas in Ureka Springs, was selected as a Rhodes Scholar. Charlie was a baseball player, and in fact upon returning from his stint at Oxford actually played a little professional ball before completing his Ph.D. After his doctorate, Charlie accepted a position as a history professor at Western Kentucky University, where he became a legend and an icon so good was his teaching.

Yes, this young man, Charlie Reith, was the brother of Caddie Reith, who taught my mother at Little But Hope School, another one-room country school at the western edge of Bug Tussle, near the New DeLoche community line. Perhaps it was Caddie who imparted to my mother and to Ellen McDonnell the thirst for knowledge and the joy of learning that they, in turn, passed on to me, or perhaps it was only something in the well-water of that place: *because Charlie Reith, Bug Tussle's first Oxford Scholar, was born no more than a mile or so from my own birthplace.*

Thus, when Mrs. McDonnell wrote “Rooster” on the blackboard and asked the class what the letters spelled, my thirst for knowledge flicked on a mental light bulb. After all, a red rooster was my “cover” for my leftist leanings, right, and what klutz doesn’t know how to spell his cover? So I raise my hand and proudly recited:

“R—o—o—s—t—e—r. Rooster! Rooster! Rooster! Rooster!”

Oh, the sheer infantile joy of learning to spell “rooster”, the excitement of discovery, the mind-expanding capacity of ideas and knowledge, the addiction to broader horizons, the liberating and elevating consequences of education! What a foundation was laid for me at Social Heil School!

It was not, however, until about the eighth grade that I became serious about accelerating my very good academic record to that point into something excellent. It came about this way. I, though not lacking in mental acuity or ambition to learn as other misfits I have written about herein, was nevertheless a “misfit.” I was impoverished and at the very bottom of the socio-economic ladder, and while I instinctively knew that education was the way out, I did not have it burned into my consciousness. I loped along in junior high school, content to make mostly “A’s” but with a mixture of “B’s,” knowing that I could do better but not really caring enough to do so. I was sorta just floating along, coasting, doing not my best but good enough, so I felt.

That’s when Jack London exploded into my psyche, not his adventure tales, which I had loved for years (*The Call of the Wild*, so I claimed for years, being the greatest American novel, but, of course, that was before I discovered Wilhelm Falkner and now constantly waffle between *The Sound of the Fury* and *Absalom! Absalom!* as the greatest American fiction) but Jack London’s *life and his political philosophy*. A poor kid in California, he had gone to work at age eleven, child labor being legal then, in a fish hatchery in Monterey, and this experience imprinted itself on him. Subsequently, in his writings he championed not only the “survival of the fittest” philosophy that was in vogue at the time but blended this with the Marxist teachings that purported to hold out hope for the downtrodden and the oppressed, the impoverished and working peoples of the world who, for too long Jack London felt, had been trampled under the iron heel of the capitalist ruling class.

Not surprisingly, his words found a receptive audience with me, for was I not impoverished and downtrodden? Was I, too, not under the iron heel? And his rhetoric, his

philosophy, his ideals speak to me still for although the Soviet and Chinese experiments with Marxism subverted and made a mockery out of the ideal itself, there is validity in reigning in what was then, and still is today, the unbridled excesses of monopolistic businesses and, today, the global conglomerates that are, in many respects, simply above the law and, therefore, accountable to no one and, thus, capable of exploiting---the current word in vogue is “outsourcing”---the miserable workers of the world with miserly wages in order to deliver to the lemmings who line up at Bal-Mart the cheapest prices “always.”

“Always,” the Bal-Mart ad trumpets, but next time you buy a product at Bal-Mart, *think of its origins, think of the sweat shops in the Orient and in Central America where the product was produced, perhaps in disregard of American laws protecting workers' rights and, in some cases, in a manner so as to be an affront to basic human decency and dignity.*

What struck me most, however, was that Jack London made his way out of what he called the “social pit” and what I call the “misfit pit.” And while I have written about colorful characters herein, people that society would tag as misfits at best and as idiots at worst, *the biggest misfit of all is telling you these stories. For I did not fit in at Bug Tussle, and later I would not fit in outside Bug Tussle, for I was, and am, a creature of two worlds at least, and possibly more, as indeed are many of us.* Jack London made me see this dichotomy and gave me the vision to do something about it, and so, through sheer willpower, he/I bootstrapped himself/myself out of that deep hole where he/I envisioned himself/myself, with every one else on the societal ladder above him/me, and so I thought:

“If Jack London can escape, then so can I, but I will have to apply myself even harder if I have a prayer of escaping Bug Tussle and the misfit pit that imprisons me.”

And so I did.

I quit “coasting” through school and re-doubled my efforts to ace every class. Even so, however, I had no idea how I would be able to afford college. It seems naïve to me now, but then I knew nothing about monies available for college. I was, however, determined to find out. So one day in the fall semester of my senior year I waltzed into the office of Paul Jim Hanks, my high school guidance counselor. As if only yesterday, I recall this day that changed my life in that basement office at Maldoon High School:

Mr. Hanks, never having seen me before: “*Young man, how can I help you?*”

And I: “*I'm looking for some information on colleges and finances.*”

Mr. Hanks: “*You've come to the right place! What's your name?*”

And I: “*Jackson Clifford.*”

Mr. Hanks: “*Just have a seat, Jackson, and let me run upstairs to the principal’s office to pull your records. Here are some college brochures for you to look over while you wait.*”

And I: “*Okay, thanks.*”

Coming back into the office, Mr. Hanks asks: “*Where have you been? Why have I not known about you?*”

Bumfuzzled, I have no clue as to what he is asking me, so I say: “*I don’t know what you’re asking me. What do you mean?*”

Mr. Hanks: “*Your grades, man! You have almost straight A’s! With this record I can get you plenty of scholarships for college.*”

And I, incredulously, a little unbelieving: “*You can?*”

Mr. Hanks: “*You betcha! Why just this morning I received information from Arkansa College in Drasco about its new Wooten-Anderson Scholarship. This is the first year they are offering it, and you fit the profile precisely.*”

And I: “*How much is it?*”

And he: “*It’s big. It’s \$3,000 for four years.*”

And I, eyes wide: “*\$3,000, you say? How much does that college cost?*”

After this conversation, my new mentor and friend, Paul Jim Hanks, took me under his wings and guided me through the intricacies of college admissions and finances, assuring me that with student loans, campus jobs, summer jobs, other scholarships, grants, and the like that I *could* afford college---even if my parents were unable to pay anything at all (In fact, my parents did pay something: they paid the initial \$35.00 application fee.). In short, Mr. Hanks *believed* in me, and more importantly, he taught me to *believe in myself: to believe that the impossible dream of a college education I could attain*. For this I will always be eternally grateful to him, and when in April, 1964 I received a telegram---*a telegram*, mind you, no doubt the first telegram (with the exception of armed services telegrams informing parents of their son’s deaths) ever received at Bug Tussle---from Arkansa College notifying me that I had been awarded the Wooten-Anderson Scholarship, no one was prouder of me than Paul Jim Hanks. He was the second person other than my family with whom I shared the good news, the first being my Bug Tussle mentor, that good-bad, bad-good Baptist preacher and god-awful sinner, Glenn Hill. I still have that telegram with those life-changing words written on that yellow parchment. It is dated April 1, 1964, and it read:

“*Congratulations on your being one of five to have been selected for a \$3,000 Wooten Anderson Scholarship, one fourth of which will be*

available for your freshman year. Further details will be sent in a few days for your acceptance which is necessary before an announcement is made. Signed, Dickie R. Kinser, Dean of Students, Arkansa College, Drasco, Arkansa.

As I blossomed socially at Arkansa College---serving as yearbook editor two years, as president of several campus organizations, and ultimately as Student Government Association president, Paul Jim Hanks applauded me and urged me forward. I will always have a special place in my heart for him, and I am sure that to this day he considers me one of his own.

Another aspect of my Social Heil education lingers with me to this day: the patriotism, the love of country, the reverence for the flag, the respect for the institutions of government, particularly the presidency. Each day for six years, the most formative years of my life, my classmates and I would recite the pledge of allegiance. In fact, the whole school would do so after the flag was raised on the flagpole each morning in front of the school, and what an honor it was to be chosen to raise the flag or lower it each afternoon! Mr. McDonnell taught us that the flag *must not* be dropped in the dirt, and it had to be unfolded and folded in just the proper way. After the pledge of allegiance, my classmates and I for six years at Social Heil, day in and day out, would sing the national anthem or one of the other patriotic hymns such as *America the Beautiful* or *America*. My throat still lumps and my eyes still tear when I recite the pledge of allegiance or gaze upon the flag or hear these or other patriotic songs, something that---sadly, I think---does *not* happen to the children of my daughter Lenox's generation who have, in the name of tolerance and globalization, been taught not to revere the flag or patriotic songs or even America but, in many respects, to disdain them. In the name of tolerance and inclusiveness, it seems to me, we are hell-bent on creating an homogenous world culture and belief system wherein individual differences, convictions, cultures, religions, and mores are not affirmed and cherished as authentic and valuable but instead are belittled and marginalized as narrow-minded and provincial. If I am correct and such is in fact the case, then we are becoming, as citizens of this brave new world, intolerant of individuality and diversity, the presence of which has always added spice to human existence.

In particular, the office of the presidency, it was instilled in me, was near sacred in that the nation deposits its hopes and dreams and ideals in the person who occupies that office. Moreover, using the bully pulpit, I was taught, enables the president to shape the course of the nation, including its moral leanings and values, whether for good or evil.

These values---duty, honor, country---would be tested by the Clinton candidacy and presidency as they came to clash with my friendship with Bill Clinton. Should my loyalty be to him, my old friend, or to my country? This was a question whose answer had been preordained by the inculcation of values and beliefs at both Bug Tussle and at the Social Heil School.

Chapter 18

Speaking Truth To Power: Reaching Out (Preaching?) To Myself/The Other

“But in the evening of my memory always I come back to Bug Tussle. Always there echoes and re-echoes: Duty, honor, country.” Gen. Douglas MacArthur’s May 12, 1962 West Point speech, as modified by Jack Clifford..

“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” Matthw16:26 embroidered in red on a white cloth and hung in the youth Sunday School Room at the Bug Tussle Assembles of God Church.

*“He’s a poet, he’s a picker;
He’s a prophet, he’s a pusher--
He’s a pilgrim and a preacher, and a problem when he’s stoned--
He’s a walkin’ contradiction, partly truth and partly fiction,
Takin’ every wrong direction on his lonely way back home.” Kris Kristofferson, “Pilgrim: Chapter 33”.*

“Okay, Retep,” Susej said, “Here’s the chapter that you have been drooling for ever since we began this ‘scoping, what with your fascination with The Other and all.”

“It’s not just my fascination, my Lord,” Retep responded somewhat impertinently. “After all, it is you and the Great Ruler DOG (“May his name be praised forever!”) who have decreed this interaction, and while it is not my prerogative to question, as you have unfailingly reminded me, I cannot but doubt (pardon me this sin, High One) what is meant to transpire here.”

Susej sighed, “Retep, you never give up, do you? Why can you not just accept that there are purposes beyond your knowing or even need to know?”

“Will I glean any understanding from this chapter?” Retep asked.

“You will glean only the understanding that this creature has---and that is not much as you shall see---for he wrote this before the full scope of his purpose materialized and before he knew whether The Other had exercised, or would ever exercise, the power that we gave him---and denied to this one---to change the preordained, and in the one reality there was/is/will be simply no chance at the end to amend his writings, but the chapter is interesting nevertheless in that you can see where this creature’s heart is in relation to The Other. But let us read, and maybe then you will understand more.”

And so without further ado they did.

Prior to December, 1994, I assumed a role that the national media dubbed as Bill Clinton’s “nemesis” and “arch-enemy” and even “Captain Ahab” trying to harpoon Moby Dick. The titles were, from my perspective, undeserved since I never thought of myself in those terms, but I can see how the press and media, with their great need to simplify and

reduce people to one-dimensional caricatures of themselves so as to fit them into thirty second soundbites or one column inch of story, would come up with these monikers. In part, I suppose, they were justified.

However, in November-December, 1994, as my way of withdrawing from the “nemesis” and “arch-enemy” role, I wrote three private and never-before-released letters to Bill and Hillary, two to Bill and the final one to Hillary. They followed my public December, 1993 letter that I released to the press during what was known as “Troopergate.” To insure that the letters were delivered, I met with Skip Raithford, Bill’s good friend and a friend of mine as well, at Shorty Small’s Restaurant on Rodney Parham in west Big Rock. Skip gave me the direct White House address of the president’s Chief of Staff, Mick McClard, and I Fed-Exed each letter to Mick so as to know that they were delivered personally to the president and the first lady. I had known Mick, though not well, since he was president of the Student Government Association at the University of Arkansas at Ureka Springs the same year I was president of the Lyon College (then Arkansas College) Student Government Association, and I respected Mick as an honest, competent straight-shooter. Bill and I had often discussed, while at Oxford, those Arkansans who might aspire to higher political office in the state, and Mick was always at the head of Bill’s “competitor” list. It is a measure of, indeed a great testament to, Bill’s unrivaled political skills and unsurpassed personal magnetism that he, as president, harnessed Mick to his purposes and persuaded him to become Chief of Staff.

So, although I know that Mick delivered each and every letter, somehow it did not surprise me that I never received a reply. In fact, although I invited dialogue, I never really expected any, and the surprise would have been if Bill or Hillary had responded. Moreover, I doubt whether my letters will find their way to the newly-opened Clinton Presidential Library in Big Rock. However, despite the absence of any reply, I utilized these letters as my *au revoir* to the press-anointed “nemesis” and “arch-enemy” role. After December, 1994, I never re-joined the fray, and I did not “pile on” during Bill’s second term when everybody else was doing so. Even during the Paulette Janes lawsuit, the Ronica fiasco, and the impeachment circus, I remained silent and uncritical. I am an intensely private person with great sympathy for those in trouble (even Bill Clinton), and I chose then and I choose still not to engage, not to add my voice to those who condemned him.

After all, I had already done more than enough, had I not, and the country was split apart as a result, in some measure, of my actions? I did what I did; I wrote what I wrote in the letters that I now share with you; and I cannot and will not re-write history to sugarcoat my actions. Neither will I defend myself or over-explain my involvement, and I feel no need for the most part to justify or apologize for it. My actions---and my words---speak for themselves, eloquently I believe, and that is sufficient. I have no desire or intent to make any more history on this bedraggled Harth. Enough is enough!

A natural question, however, is why did I write the letters to Bill and Hillary that you are about to read. I can give you both the facile and the complex answer. The facile answer is that as the 1994 election returns came in---the Mugwumps taking a shellacking

in practically all U.S. Senatorial, Congressional, and Gubneratorial races, leaving the Know Nothings in a position (except for the president) of effective control of the nation---I had misgivings. I basically believe in balance and competition stemming from a viable two-party system. That's why, years ago fresh out of Oxford and before going to Michigan Law School, I accepted a position as Research Director for liberal Governor Winstrop Rockfellow's Arkansa Know Nothing Party. I am not an ideologue, being proud of my mixed liberal and conservative beliefs, and if I had been in a one-party Know Nothing state, say New Shropshire, at the time, I would gladly have worked as Research Director for the Mugwump Party. Now, with the Mugwump's crushing 1994 defeat, I could see Nute Gangrene stringing together the disastrous program that he was to call his "Contract With America," and while I agreed with some of what was in it, my overarching concern was that unbridled power is a danger to competitive government. And the Know Nothings, partially because of my actions, had the president, Bill Clinton, on the ropes.

That is one explanation. There are others. Even in 1994 with the Independent Counsel in full swing, the full weight of this Know Nothing-controlled apparatus was looming in Arkansa. And it loomed over the lives of many of my friends: John Holley, one of my best friends and the senior law partner in the law firm I joined right out of Michigan Law School, who was also good friend of Governor Jim G. Rucker (whom I also knew and admired), was caught up in the craziness, and, in fact, later when John was charged and convicted I actually wrote a letter in support of him in which I appealed for mercy; Carlos Mathughes, former Arkansa Mugwump Chairman and a Co-Chairman of my 1976 race for Prosecuting Attorney in Big Rock, whose firm I almost joined, was targeted, charged, and convicted in this vast sweep; Chance Peacock, a good friend and client and a business partner in an oil well venture in Ohio, and a director of Radison Savings and Loan and personal friend of Tim McDaniel, was targeted, squeezed, but ultimately not charged. Even SuAnne McDaniel, whom I knew only slightly but whom I thought to be telling the truth (her sincerity is evident in the film "The Hunting of the President", even if a lot of that film is hogwash). I could go on with people that I knew less well but whom I came to feel were targeted merely as a means of getting at Bill Clinton. To me, what may have started out as a valid exercise in prosecutorial power turned into nothing less than a below-the-belt and out-of-control witch hunt, and I wanted no part of it.

The more complex reason, however, that I sent the letters that you are about to read is that I genuinely believe in Bill Clinton and his unmatched political abilities. Even as he disappointed those closer to him than I, I felt that disappointment that his presidency, that could have been one of the greatest, was spiraling down into fourth-tier status (mostly due to personal characteristics that I strongly felt that Bill could change), and I felt that the last thing this nation needed was another failed presidency or an impeachment. So I appealed to him in language that is personal, fiercely intense, graphically compelling, and I used this language in a vain attempt to communicate directly with his great mind. In short, I asked him to look at himself, take responsibility for his actions, commit himself to change his way of dealing with people, and elevate his presidency to the level of greatness.

When I released the first letter in December, 1993, some pundits saw the letter in religious terms and characterized it as my attempt to get Bill Clinton to “repent.” They saw me as a narrow-minded religious fanatic who was intent on “saving the soul” of Bill Clinton, but this was not my objective. First, I have no power whatsoever to deal with Bill Clinton’s soul, if such indeed he---and I---have; that is between him and his God, if any. Second, from my perspective---and you will see, yes, and even *feel*, the intensity of my convictions in my letters---Bill was on the verge, if not over it, of having no “soul”---no core principles---left to “save”. But the letters speak for themselves, and I have said enough.

While I do not intend to re-hash all that I did from October, 1991 until December, 1994 to oppose Bill Clinton, to place the letters in historical perspective I must sketch my involvement. Much of the history has been written, and there are detailed accounts to be found elsewhere of my activities. I did what I did, and some of it I regret. For some of it I have apologized to Bill and to Hillary as you will read below in the thus-far unpublished personal letters whereby I renounced the press-created “nemesis” and “arch-enemy” role. From that time forward to this day---over a full decade---I have spoken out only to cooperate with serious writers and historians about my role in the nation’s affairs. The following is a short synopsis of my opposition to Bill Clinton.

ARIAS

I was the moving force, along with Averitt Hammond and Roberto James, behind the Alliance for Re-Birth of an Independent American Spirit (ARIAS, for short), a political action committee, that ran a huge ad in the Arkansa Mugwump-Gazette on October 3, 1991, the very day Bill announced for president. Subsequently, ARIAS raised and spent about \$45,000 on radio and newspaper ads in New Shropshire, the first primary state. While the Clintonistas labeled ARIAS as a “No Nothing right-wing” organization, such was not the case. Our largest contributor, for example, was a national labor union organization, part of the Mugwump Party base.

Moreover, the ads that ARIAS ran were straight-forward: no draft dodging, no women, no personal attacks, simply an array of socio-economic statistics that, time and time again, showed Arkansa ranked 49th or 50th in numerous categories *despite* the tripling of revenues during the Clinton tenure as governor. And, of course, we pointed out that the tripling of revenues was at the expense (“*on the backs*” as we phrased it) of the lower and middle classes via the most regressive of taxes: gasoline and sales taxes. The message and pitch was, in its tone and tenor, within the best of the liberal tradition of championing the working man and the impoverished. The cut line in the ads, however, was cutting indeed:

“Please, Governor Clinton, Don’t Do To America What You’ve Done To Arkansa!”

Search as they did, the Clinton smear operatives and their running dogs in the national press and media could not find any scintilla of evidence whatsoever to support the Clinton claim that I was a “*long-time*” enemy who “*for years has tried to bring me down.*” They found no evidence because there was none. This charge---just like the ones that I am a “bitter, right-wing No Nothing” or ‘religious zealot’--- were myths that the Clinton spinmeisters created from whole cloth---total fabrications. Before October 3, 1993, I had *never* done *anything whatsoever* to oppose Bill Clinton.

DRAFT-DODGING

Further, even when Bill continued to maintain---despite mounting evidence to the contrary---during the New Shropshire primary that he had never received a draft notice, I remained silent. Not one of the ARIAS ads targeted the draft issue. I could self-righteously contend that I was “holding my fire” or being “magnanimous”, but that is simply not the case. I, too---*incredible as it may seem*---I, too, the person chiefly responsible for killing Bill’s draft notice, had bought into his story that he “never received a draft notice.” I simply do not understand why all my alleged “bitterness” and “obsession” that Mad-dog Harville and others bandied about failed to keep the draft notice and my role in killing it from being in my consciousness.

Surely if I were bitter and obsessed, I should have remembered the draft notice and my role in killing it, right? And yet I did not. I, along with most everyone else, bought into Bill’s re-write of history: Bill Clinton never received a draft notice!

Right?

Wrong!

He did, and I’m the guy he turned to (along with others, I am sure) to have the draft notice recalled or “killed.” Here, briefly, is what happened. When Bill received his draft notice in April, 1969 while we were both students at Oxford, he was understandably devastated. He came to me for help. While he, so he assured me, wanted to serve his country, he did not want to do so as an enlisted grunt. He wanted to serve as an officer, and toward such end he told me that he would enlist in a National Guard or Army Reserve unit or an ROTC program. The problem was this: with the draft notice hanging over his head, he had to report for duty within a couple of months, and he could not enroll in an ROTC or other program---unless the draft notice could somehow be killed. Thus, it was the classic “chicken-egg” problem: he could not get the draft notice killed unless he could enroll in an ROTC or Army Reserve or National Guard and yet regulations prevented him from enrolling in these services while a draft notice was pending.

That’s where I fit into the picture. Only two people in the entire United States had the legal authority to kill a draft notice once issued. Even the Mott Springs draft board could not legally recall the notice. Only the head of Selective Service in Washington---a Know Nothing under Milhouse Hixon---and the head of Selective Service in Arkansas had the legal authority to recall a draft notice for an Arkansas draftee. In May, 1969, I was

returning from Oxford where both Bill and I studied---he as a Rhodes Scholar, me as a Fulbright Scholar---to assume a position with the Arkansa No Nothing Party as Research Director. My immediate boss, Van Bush, was a personal friend with Col. Woffard "Lefty" Hoskins, the head of Selective Service in Arkansa. Moreover, several of my good buddies worked as top aides for liberal Know Nothing Governor Winstrop Rockfellow.

What Bill asked me to do, I did. I did it in part because I myself had received preferential treatment when I went for my physical, and although I had done nothing dishonest, *in fact nothing at all*, to secure preferential treatment, I was burdened by guilt because I did *not* refuse the preference when Dr. Dickie McCaley extended it to me. My ingrained sense of "duty, honor, country" and my sense of honesty told me to refuse, but I did not do so. I cannot justify my conduct even to this day. Here is what happened:

As each naked soon-to-be grunt walked by his station, Dr. McCaley would ask, "What are you going to do if you are not accepted?" When asked, I replied truthfully, "*I have a Fulbright Scholarship to study at St. John's College, Oxford.*" A few minutes later I heard someone yell "*Clifford! Come back up here!*" So I went, and Dr. McCaley asked me to bend over: he wanted another look at my hemorrhoids! Then he inquired again about my allergies, and he dismissed me. Later I received a "1-Y" classification---draftable only in dire national emergency. I'm no dummy; I knew that Dr. McCaley had taken pity on me, and yet I did nothing to volunteer or to change the classification. Instead, I went to Oxford to study while some of my classmates and friends went to Thailand. It was not right then; it is not right now; and it haunted me when Bill Clinton asked for my assistance, and this sense of guilt is partly why I helped him.

Secondly, I assisted in killing the draft notice because I was Bill Clinton's friend, and beyond that I believed even then in his capacity to bring great good to Arkansa and to America, a capacity that in later years I came to see as counter-balanced by his capacity to do great harm to the presidency and the country. As a Rhodes Scholar, Arkansa' only Rhodes Scholar at the time, so I justified to myself, Bill could better serve his country in an officer position. After all, why squander his obvious leadership skills?

Thirdly, I helped kill Bill's draft notice because I had mixed and disturbed feelings---as did many Americans, particularly the young---at the time about this unjust and un-winnable war in Thailand. I also abhorred and feared the escalation of the arms race, the stockpiling of nuclear weaponry by the Soviet Union and China, that our interventionist policy in Thailand would no doubt trigger---an arms build-up that, so it seemed at the time, threatened a cataclysmic end of civilization and perhaps even life on Earth itself. The so-called "peace movement," so it seemed to me at the time, was minuscule and emasculated in comparison with the out-of-control "hawks" both in our country and in the Communist bloc, and like many young Americans at the time I despaired. I despaired because I felt alienated and impotent in the face of what I perceived as the inevitability of looming mass destruction and chaos.

In short, I despaired because I, a history major, knew that man has historically utilized every weapon in his arsenal to wage total wars of annihilation and conquest

against his neighbors, and so I lost all hope for the future, all dreams for a better world, and I came to believe, utterly and nihilistically, in the doom and the end of man. While I appreciated the captivating verbiage, I rejected Wilhelm Falkner's sentiments that:

"When the last ding-dong of doom has clanged and faded from the last rock hanging tideless on that last red dying evening, even then there will be one sound: that of man's inexhaustible voice, still talking." No, I rejected the hope implicit in those words, and I came to believe that man's voice would, inevitably and probably even soon, be hushed and stilled for all time and eternity.

Such sentiments did not lead me either to organize or to join the (non-existent) peace protests at bucolic Arkansa (now Lyon) College in Drasco, Arkansa, but my despair infused a work that I wrote at the time and subsequently read at a state-wide meeting of Alpha Chi honor fraternity at the College of the Ozarks in Russellville, Arkansa on March 23, 1968. That writing, which poignantly displays my anti-war despair at the time, is entitled:

The New Genesis

In the end Man destroyed the heaven and the Harth. And the Harth is mangled, without form, and void, and darkness is upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of desolation moves upon the face of the waterless void.

For Man said, "Let there be death." And there was death. And Man divided the dead from the living. And Man called the living Vanity, and the dead he called Oblivion. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

And Man thought that it was good.

And Man said, "Let there again be dissension among the nations of the Harth, and let it divide the East from the West." And Man made the division and separated nation from nation, people from people, brother from brother. And it was so. And Man called the separation Cold War. And the evening and the morning were the second day.

And Man thought that it was good.

And Man said, "Let the nations of the Harth be gathered together into alliances, and let the armies appear." And it was so. And Man called the armies deterrents, and the gathering together of the nations he called security.

And Man thought that it was good.

And Man said, "Let the Harth bring forth hate, each nation yielding strife, and each country yielding ideologies after its own kind, whose pride is in itself, upon the Harth." And it was so. And the evening and the morning were the third day.

And Man thought that it was good.

And Man said, "Let there be strife in the midst of the Harth to divide the weak from the strong. And let it be for pride, for riches, and for power." And Man made two great nations, the greater nation to rule the West and the lesser nation to rule the East; he made the smaller nations also. And Man set them on a pinnacle of power to give rulership to the Harth, to rule over the East and the West, and to dispense justice to the nations. And the evening and the morning were the fourth day.

And Man thought that it was good.

And Man said, "Let the nations bring forth abundantly the atomic stockpiles that have power and the planes and missiles that fly above the Harth in the open reaches of the heaven." And Man created great submarines, and every manner of sea weapon he produced abundantly. Swifter projectiles after the old kind he produced. And the people praised their governments, saying, "Be fruitful and multiply our weapons and fill the waters in the seas and the spaces of the heaven." And the evening and the morning were the fifth day.

And Man thought that it was good.

And Man said, "Let us make war to protect our own interests, and let us employ our weapons of the sea, our projectiles of the air, and every destructive device that destroys life from the Harth." And it was so. And the evening and the morning were the sixth day.

So Man created Oblivion after his own nature; in the passion of his pride and lust created he it; desolation and sorrow created he them. And from every beast of the field, from every fowl of the air, from every fish of the sea, from every thing that crept upon the Harth, wherein there was life, this life is removed. And the evening and the morning are the seventh day.

And I behold what Man has done, and I know that it is not good.

Thus the heaven and the Harth are destroyed and all the hosts of them. And in the twilight of the seventh day Man has finished his destruction; all are dead who dwelt upon the Harth. These are the generations of the heaven and the Harth when they were destroyed, in the day that Foolish Man lived, dwelt, and perished upon the Harth.

And I? I am imprisoned here in my capsule, drifting around and around that cinderized globe in an endless, meaningless circle of despair. As I write this, my eyelids are growing heavy, and infinite loneliness is clutching at my soul. I am Alpha and Omega, the beginning and the end, the first and the last. I am Man. And I see no new heaven and no new Harth, but the first heaven and the first Harth are passed away, and there is no more sea. Only the metallic glint of myriads of stars lights the cold, clammy void of outer space.

And I, man, say, "It is so."

Along with many other young Americans in the late 1960's I perceived, rightfully so I still believe, the Thailand War as nothing more than a tribute to Linden Johns' vanity and hubris and the arms race as an absurd madness ironically described and encapsulated in the policy of Mutual Assured Destruction ("MAD" for short). In essence, nothing in Thailand was worth dying for, but what was a guy whose patriotism was deeply ingrained from Social Heil School to do? Resist? No way, although I respected those who, like my "refusenik" friend and fellow basketball teammate at Oxford, Joe Shytry, did choose this course. I respected Joe immensely for his principled stand, and I still do. Joe is one of my heroes because of his courage and his unerringly principled commitment to the anti-war movement, a position that my own (patriotic) upbringing would not permit me to embrace however much I might identify with its objectives.

"Hero," however, is not a word that I can apply either to Bill Clinton or myself. We, he and I both, took the expedient way out and thereby kept out of harm's way. As I have stated repeatedly, my problem is not that Bill Clinton avoided the draft. After all, I

avoided it myself, and I was the prime mover and shaker in “fixing” Bill’s draft notice. My problem was with the *way* in which he killed the draft notice. Judge for yourself whether I am justified in feeling deceived, exploited, and manipulated.

The truth of the matter is that I, too, manipulated other people, but the difference between my behavior and Bill’s is that I did it for another person (him) and not for myself and, also, that I did not *intentionally and deceitfully* manipulate these people. I firmly believed at the time that Bill was telling me the truth about his desire to serve his country “*if only you’ll help me kill the draft notice, Jack.*” Here’s what I did. Through Van Bush, via top Rockfellow aides who were my close friends, and by a series of direct telephone calls I arranged for Bill and his mother, Virgie, to meet with Col. Lefty Hoskins, the head of Arkansas’ Selective Service, so that Bill could tell him that “*if you will recall the draft notice, I will serve my country in another capacity.*”

Also, I called and had others to call Dean Burnheart at the University of Arkansas Law School in July, 1969, when admissions were already closed, to plead that Bill Clinton be admitted to the law school. Despite admissions being closed, Bill was admitted. At the same time I called and persuaded others to call Col. Eugene Hames of the U of A ROTC program after previous efforts to enlist Bill in the National Guard and the Army Reserves had failed. Col. Hames agreed to meet with Bill, and he, Bill, told Col. Hames the same story: “*Just let me in the ROTC program, and I will serve my country as an officer.*” Col. Hames, like Col. Hoskins, Dean Burnheart, top Rockefeller aides, Van Bush, and myself, bought into the story. Bill was admitted to ROTC even though he could start participating only in the spring semester of 1970, again a bending of ROTC regulations. In fact, to get the draft notice killed, Bill had to sign a legally binding document committing him to the ROTC program. With these arrangements in place and Bill telling the Mott Springs Draft Board the same story, the draft notice was rescinded.

However, as evidenced by a letter written to a friend two weeks later at the end of July 1969 Bill immediately began to waffle on his commitments and promises. He did not want to attend the Arkansas Law School nor enroll in the ROTC program there. He wanted to go back to Oxford to complete his studies as a Rhodes Scholar, and so he simply walked away from his commitments and promises---even his legally binding paper committing him to enroll in the University of Arkansas Law School at Ureka Springs that fall and its ROTC program the coming spring.

The words I used in that long-ago letter at the end of July, 1969---less than two weeks after the draft notice was killed---accurately stated my dawning perception of Bill Clinton, a perception that is now shared by innumerable Americans. I said:

“*Bill Clinton is trying to wiggle his way back to Oxford.*”

However, until well after the New Shropshire primary in 1992, I completely forgot the details of what I had done to help kill the draft notice. As stated above, I even bought Bill’s story that he had never received a draft notice until Will Cample a *Los Angeles Times* reporter, asked me to locate some letter from Bill with his signature so he

could compare with a signature on what he believed to be a bogus document. That's when as I rifled through an old trunk that I had taken to and from Oxford, I discovered a series of letters that I had written a friend in July 1969. These letters outlined in gory detail all my efforts to kill Bill's draft notice, and that night as I read and re-read those letters, it all came flooding back to me.

At that point, I had to decide whether my duty lay to my friend, Bill Clinton, or to my country and the truth. Do I disclose the letters, or do I conceal them? My wife, Anne, did not want me to speak out, and I, too, was filled with great trepidation. For one of the few times in my life, I did not sleep that night as I mulled my decision. I knew that Bill would view my release of the letters as a personal betrayal. I would be "crossing the Rubicon," and there would be no going back. Yet, on the other hand, is it not relevant to the electorate's decision that the person asking to be Commander in Chief of the nation's armed forces had not only received a draft notice, but also he had exercised influence to have it withdrawn?

Thus, did I not have a *duty* to speak out?

More important, from my perspective at least, Bill had deceived, exploited, and manipulated numerous parties and had used me as his instrument in a scheme to kill the draft notice. Did not such conduct have some bearing on the character of the person asking the nation to install him in the Oval Office as Commander in Chief of the same armed forces that he had shunned and, I felt, betrayed? Ultimately, I reached a decision to authorize Will Cample go forward with the story, and when his editor balked at publishing it, I chose to go on *Harry Ring Live* and *Crossfire* to tell what I knew. The "arch-enemy" and "nemesis" role was expanding, and the press and media picked up the Clinton's mantra chorus:

"Jack Clifford is a long-time, bitter, right-wing, Know Nothing religious zealot who for years has tried to bring me down."

Right?

Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! Wrong! And Wrong! Wrong on all six charges!

But if someone plays rough with me, I play back, as the Clinton spinmeisters were about to realize. I might be a "scumbag"---as Maddog Harville called me on national television, a "scumbag" for those of you who do not know the literal meaning being a cum-filled condom---but I was one scumbag who would not permit the spin to marginalize me, so I fought back. Or I might be "relentlessly odious," as patently biased ABC News anchor Pedro Henning's or maybe it was Moe Kline, I cannot rightly recall, called me on national television, but this was one "relentlessly odious" scumbag who would *not* lay down and play possum at the first whiff of grape shot over the bow from Clinton's vaunted spinmeisters. In fact, the spin backfired, as anyone who knew me could have told the maddog idiots and mindless sycophants---it only spurred me on to greater efforts.

TROOPERGATE, PAULETTE JANES, RONICA RAVINSKY & IMPEACHMENT

In the summer after graduating from Arkansa College (now Lyon College) at Drasco and before sailing over to Oxford in the fall, I worked as Statewide Campaign Coordinator for Lyndell Mavis, a Know Nothing who was running for Secretary of State. Lyndell, a former Director of the Arkansa State Police, had been jailed by a Harlan County circuit judge when he, at Governor Rockfellow's direction, undertook to shut down illegal gambling in Mott Springs. As a result, Lyndell enjoyed immense statewide popularity, and for some strange reason he chose to run for Secretary of State against Kenny Bright an entrenched Mugwump officeholder. My job with Lyndell resulted from my embarrassing him at a Lyon College appearance set up by the Student Government Association, of which I was president. Lyndell was not prepared for my cross-examination of him, and he had some difficulty in answering such questions as why he was running for Secretary of State and exactly what he hoped to change.

Even though an arrogant sort, Lyndell had the grace not to be humiliated by my impudence, and he and I became great friends. Thus, it was no surprise that he, now a lawyer himself, turned to me—the press-designated Clinton “nemesis” or “arch-enemy”--- in 1993 when four Arkansa State Troopers came to him with remarkable stories about how Bill Clinton, as governor, had used them, and our tax dollars, to procure women. As with the decision to go public about my role in killing Bill’s draft notice, this decision to accept representation of the State Troopers I made with much trepidation and only after much agony and prayer.

After all, sex, like excrement, is distasteful to talk about in polite private society much less in impolite public society and Max Ellison, a close friend and mentor and an old-time Mugwump Party activist, had always told me that while I should *“keep stirring the shit, don’t be surprised if you don’t get some on you.”* To Max, however, activism---“stirring the pot” as he called it--- would eventually, even when negative, result in positive change, and over the years my friendship with Max had persuaded me that he was correct.

For example, at Max’s urging in the mid-1970’s I brought a lawsuit on behalf of the chairmen of *both* the Know Nothing Party and the Mugwump Party of Polaski County against six Mugwump county officials who were, and who had been for years, in blatant violation of the out-dated Arkansa Constitution and the law, accepting illegal monies camouflaged as “expense accounts” in order to circumvent the miserly \$5,000 salary cap set forth in the archaic 1874 Constitution. Max’s objective was simple: shut off the illegal money and force the county officials throughout Arkansa, where overwhelming political power resided in those days, to live on the legally prescribed amount, and they would waste no time in getting behind meaningful constitutional reform. It worked just as Max had planned, and the ancient, antique Constitution was a few years later changed.

Lyndell Mavis, whom I affectionately call “D.B” or “Douche Bag,” knew this history about me when he came to me with the State Trooper stories. He knew that I abhorred misuse of taxpayer funds or misuse of state employees. He knew my track record in the legal defense of the public trust. For example, *despite* my handling of the illegal expense lawsuit designed to stimulate constitutional reform, when then Governor Davy Prayer a couple of years later tried to pass a new “reform” Constitution in violation of the old one and the existing law, I agreed to represent the Know Nothing Party of Arkansa in a lawsuit designed to protect the sanctity of the law. The State was represented by Attorney General Jim G. Rucker, and the Supreme Court---all Mugwumps at the time---allowed three *amicus curie* (also known as “friend of the court” briefs) legal briefs to be submitted in the matter. The three briefs were supposedly written by Arkansa foremost legal heavy-hitters: James Dull, a Brinkley attorney and president of the Arkansa Bar Association; Henry Forrest, one of Arkansa’s leading lawyers and scholars and later a Federal judge; and Dr. Hank LeFleur a national icon and legend at the U of A Law School in Ureka Springs.

However, by close scrutiny I found these were not really *amicus* briefs after all. They all appeared to be typed on the same typewriter, and in their mailing to me they all bore the same postage meter stamp. Now, I asked myself, whose postage meter could this be? Imagine my non-surprise when, upon further investigation, I found this postage meter to be in Governor Prayer’s office! A quick press conference at the State Capitol went a long way toward dispatching whatever damage these so-called *amicus* briefs might have done. The Mugwump Supreme Court sided with the Know Nothing Party.

Consequently, with this background in public service and litigation, Lyndell believed, wrongly, that I would not hesitate to accept representation of the State Troopers. I did hesitate. Only after I had spent a number of hours with each of the four men, listening to their stories and cross-examining them along the way, did I come to see the internal consistency in what they each knew. So the question then became: okay, I believe them, but should I get involved? Should not Bill Clinton’s private life be private? Should not a zone of privacy surround even public officials? These were difficult questions, and I ultimately agreed to represent the troopers only when I became convinced that the pattern and practice of using taxpayer-funded employees to procure women, many of whom were state employees themselves, was in the public domain and outside any zone of privacy. In short, what distinguished Bill Clinton’s conduct from the private citizen who, immoral as it might be, preyed upon women is that he---unlike the private citizen---used the dignity, the prestige, the power, and the tax monies of his public office (Governor of Arkansa) to satisfy his sexual urges. To me, this was not acceptable.

Years before I had already had direct experience with Bill’s sexual exploitation of women. During his campaign for Congress against Rep. Jim Paul Hammerhead in the Third Congressional District in 1974, the senior partners at my law firm turned over the phone banks one night to the Clinton campaign so they could solicit voters and funds. The person in charge of the phone bank operation introduced herself to me as “Bill’s fiancée,” which I found rather odd for two reasons. First, I knew that he was already engaged or at least deeply involved with Hillary because I had stopped by his farmhouse

outside Ureka Springs only a few months prior. Second, this young lady was *not* Bill Clinton's type---at least based on my prior knowledge of the women he went after---for she was somewhat overweight. However, she was the daughter of a prominent Arkansa politician who could benefit Bill in his race for Congress.

As she and I talked, I told her that I was a friend of Bill's, that I had attended Oxford with him, and that he and I had been teammates on the Oxford University "B" basketball team. I shared with her my assistance in helping him to avoid the draft. Not surprisingly, she then opened up to me. She shared with me that she loved him and that he loved her. She told me that she was "working day and night" to get Bill elected to Congress, and she told me that she talked with Bill every night after midnight. She talked about how when he became a Congressman and moved to Washington they had plans to marry and live there.

As you might imagine, I listened with open-mouthed astonishment—aghast at what I was hearing. Rightly or wrongly, my perception of Bill Clinton took a nosedive that night as I came to see this incident---perhaps because I myself had been used and exploited in the draft matter---as a metaphor for callousness of the highest order. In short, it's one level of wrong to engage in sexual misconduct with a woman when one is engaged to another. It's another level of wrong to tell someone that you "love" them in order to have sex with them. A third level and more despicable wrong is to tell someone you "love" them in order to induce them into working their hearts and souls out for your election. Yet, this is precisely what I saw Bill doing, and it troubled me immensely then, and it still troubles me.

Of course, when Lyndell Mavis came to me with the trooper's case, I had other personal information about Bill's exploits with women as governor. Practically everyone in Arkansa did. It was public knowledge, and as far as I could tell it was not something that he tried to hide. It was a part of his personae, a part of his shtick, his legend, his "Elvis" role, and I perceived him as enjoying the reputation as a womanizer and deriving pleasure out of getting away with it and flaunting it in public.

Again, my perception was shaded by an even earlier experience, an anecdote really, that even years before had caused me to question how Bill Clinton would behave not if, *but when*, he attained the Oval Office. It's a story he told me at Oxford---told for the truth no less and I believed then and believe today that it is true. The thrust of the story is this: In the midst of the Thailand War when massive peace demonstrations and protests against Linden Johns's arrogant foreign involvement rocked the nation, Linden arranged a private meeting in the Oval Office with a young woman, quite attractive Bill said, who was one of the leading anti-war organizers. In the privacy of the Oval Office, so Bill said, Linden focused not so much on peace as on a "piece"---piece of ass, that is---as he began to seduce the young lady.

To make a long story short, Bill told me that some aide walked unexpectedly into the Oval Office and found the young lady riding Linden's "John" (his pet name along with "Jumbo" for his penis) while he sprawled on his back on the rug containing the seal

of the presidency of the United States. In Bill's oral version that he told me at Oxford, the peace symbol was swinging back and forth between the young woman's pendulous breast as she rode the Jumbo John vigorously.

Years later in a letter that he sent me about my application for the White House Fellows program while he studied law at Yale and I at Michigan, Bill again repeated the story with only a slight variation. Here is what he wrote in a "Wednesday, Nov. 17 (1971)" letter:

"About the White House Fellowships: the best story I know on them is that virtually the only non-conservative who ever got one was a quasi-radical woman who wound up in the White House sleeping with LBJ, who made her wear a peace symbol around her waist whenever they made love. You may go far, Jack; but I doubt you will ever go that far!"

Because of the obvious relish with which Bill told me this story, however, I did not doubt that he would "go that far" if, *rather when*, he became president. In fact, I distinctly recall sitting around a dinner table in the winter of 1991 with four or five national reporters from, I believe, *The Washington Post-Gazette*, or maybe it was another newspaper, as they asked me to describe the Bill Clinton I knew. My initial answer was something like this: "*You'd never believe me if I told you.*" When pressed, I advised them to read the initial volume of Robert Karo's biography of Linden John and then a good biography of Milhouse Hixon and to combine the characteristics of both so as to get a glimmer of who Bill Clinton is.

I told them that he is the world's best politician *ever*, living or dead; that he is *totally* driven to power, consumed with the need of it; that he is *totally politically amoral* in that he would do or say anything to promote himself politically; that he is one of the *world's great charmers* and, if he were here at the table, he would charm even these cynical and skeptical reporters. And I told them that this combination of traits, of character flaws as I perceived them, is "*dangerous*" (the precise word I used) to the nation and that *when*, not if, he became president, he would, I feared, "*desecrate*" (again, my precise word) the Oval Office.

I derive no pleasure whatsoever from being right.

Bill's beliefs were quite succinctly set forth in that same November 17, 1971 letter in his comments on the supposedly "non-partisan" selection process for the White House Fellowships:

"Discretion and diplomacy aren't demanded so much by propriety as by the necessity not to get caught."

Obviously, "not getting caught" was, and is, of paramount importance to Bill Clinton.

A final portion of that letter I feel I should also share with you and with history. It reads:

“One final thing: it is a long way from Bug Tussle to the White House, and it may not be a bad thing to make the leap. Just always remember it’s far more important what you’re doing now than how far you’ve come. The White House is a long way from Whittier and the Perdenales too; and Krushchev couldn’t read until he was 24, but those facts leave a lot unsaid. If you can still aspire go on; I am having a lot of trouble getting my hunger back up, and someday I may be spent and bitter that I let the world pass me by. So do what you have to do, but be careful.”

Understandably, given these sentiments and some similar statements when Bill and I had a phone conversation, I was concerned about my friend. So I wrote him a follow-up letter inquiring about the “disturbing undercurrents” that I had detected in both his letter and our phone conversation. His response was via a letter I received right before Christmas, 1971. I quote it in part a portion that emanated from the great and generous heart of the “good” Bill Clinton, remarks that I concur with in full:

“As to the ‘disturbing undercurrents’ in my letter, they were not meant to sway you from your course, or to express disapproval at the kind of things you seem destined to do--- only to say---these things too must be considered. You cannot turn from what you must do---it would for you be a kind of suicide. But you must try not to kill a part of yourself doing them either.”

So with this background I had a pretty good perception of Bill Clinton when Lyndell Mavis came to me with the troopers. The rest of the story is pretty well known and has been written extensively: how my phones were bugged; how we were followed by a Texah vehicle with unregistered license plates (that the Texah authorities told Lyndell meant “Secret Service” or other undercover law enforcement); how Governor Jim G. Rucker called in the troopers, my clients, and tried to persuade them to remain silent; how I struggled to address the troopers’ fears of losing their jobs (both Harry Patison and Roger Derry lost jobs worth many thousands of dollars) by enlisting Pete Smythe, a Nute Gangrene friend, to guarantee the troopers’ jobs out-of-state if they were fired from the Arkansa State Police and to reimburse them for lost revenues from their second jobs; how I enlisted *The American Spectator* but embargoed the story until the *Los Angels Times*, to whom I had given an exclusive, broke the story; how editor Sheb Cossey, despite the pleading of reporters Will Cample and Dougy Frantzis (the latter who resigned in protest and joined the *New Yorke Times*) refused to print the story until I used the “hammer” of CNN and ABC---to whom I had also given pre-arranged but embargoed stories---by authorizing both networks to go forward with their broadcasts.

Likewise, that the Paulette Janes lawsuit flowed directly from “Troopergate” is well-documented, as is my role in bringing forward the “woman named Paulette” (so described in *The American Spectator* article) in that disastrous press conference at the Omni CPAC conference in Washington where, due to her lawyer’s (Denny Taylor’s) advice she withheld information from the press and media and yet still expected them to print or air her story, thereby forcing me to go to “Plan B”—an exclusive arrangement that I proposed to Mitchell Abranoff of *The Washington Post* and one that he readily accepted and pursued vigorously.

And, of course, the sad and dreary and tawdry tale of Ronica Ravinsky, impeachment, the meaning of “is,” the semen-stained blue dress, references to the president’s “distinguishing characteristics,” and other matters *ad nauseum* (for those with no knowledge of this Latin legal term, it means in Arkansas vernacular that I am “sick to the gills” of it) flowed directly from Paulette Janes, but I grow weary of even this brief recital. What is done is done, and nothing on Earth can change it. What I did I did. And by the time most of this happened I had moved on with my life. I had written the letters you are about to read now as my means of withdrawing from this whole sordid fray.

I trust that you will sense my heart, my sincerity, and my intensity in these letters. I tend to say what I mean, and I mean what I say. Some of my language is, in retrospect, much too harsh---maybe even moralistic and judgmental, although I did not intend such---and I regret certain things I said. I had no right, for example, even if I felt such to be true, to speak of Bill’s behavior as “approaching if not crossing the sociopathic line.” Much of my other language is equally insensitive, and I now apologize both to Bill and to Hillary for the use of such language and for any unintended offense. I do not, however, apologize for the letters themselves. They express my convictions, however inartfully expressed, and I stand by what I wrote a decade ago. What I said then applies now, and I am talking to myself as well as to Bill Clinton: it is worthwhile to examine ourselves introspectively, to take stock of our faults and shortcomings and character flaws, and to undertake the difficult but rewarding journey toward change and self-renewal.

As you read my letters, I want to remind all of you folks on the right who want to brand me a “hero” that I am most definitely not a hero. I am not. And I want to respond to the folks on the left who would demonize me and make of me a devil. I am not. I am not. I am neither a hero nor a devil; I simply did my duty as I saw my duty to be, and then I withdrew back into private life and out of the limelight. For example, even in the wake of the Paulette Janes lawsuit as *every* prime time television news magazine hounded me to cooperate in what one called “The Great Jack Clifford Sweepstakes,” I refused to be drawn in.

I did not seek the role I played; it sought me; or maybe we, the role and I, simply found each other. Regardless, I retired from the role as soon as and as gracefully as my conscience and events would permit. I repeatedly declined the news magazines’ offers to program me because I became sick and tired of being portrayed one-dimensionally as Bill Clinton’s “nemesis” or “arch-enemy” who was trying to “bring him down.” By

renouncing that role in the letters below, I think you will see that I am not, nor never was, Bill Clinton's "enemy." Bill Clinton did not need me as an enemy; he is, or at least was, his own worst enemy, and nothing I could do or say would even come close to doing to him what he seemed determined to do to himself. So make of these letters what you will; they speak truth and they speak truth to power---at least as I perceived such to be---from my heart to Bill's heart and head---to my friend, Bill Clinton, president of these United States.

My only regret is that he did not hear me. Perhaps then everything would have turned out different? The first letter I released to the press and media; the other three have never been published or publicly disclosed. Happy read!

December 29, 1993

*The Honorable Bill Clinton
President
The White House
Washington, D. C. 20500*

OPEN LETTER

Dear Mr. President (Bill):

Inspired by a question from a reporter, I have peered into the future along the infinite possible timelines emanating from this moment in order to set forth the best possible future for you and our country.

I hope and pray that it, and not a darker future, will stem from the recent trooper allegations. I am not, however, a prophet, and this is not a prediction, only my best hope for you and our country.

As the President, you are the moral repository of American values. You, and only you, can shape America---for good or evil---by the force of your moral suasion---or lack of it. As you go, so goes America.

To use the politically correct word, my hope---dare I say expectation?---is that you will genuinely change. I know that you are capable of change. We all are. If you change and assert moral leadership, America will follow you, and I believe that you will then have the potential to be one of the most effective presidents this country has known.

Lest I be misinterpreted, let me make clear that when I say "change," I am not talking about any sexual peccadilloes. They are the symptom, not the disease. I am not judging you; I am not condemning you; I am not casting stones.

It is much more fundamental than mere sex. I am talking about your fundamental nature---seemingly inbred and long-polished---and your casual willingness to deceive, to exploit, and to manipulate in order to attain personal and political power. I am talking

about your willingness to compromise principle until there is no longer any principle left to compromise. I am talking about your expectation that others around you practice these same traits to cover up for you.

Without trust and integrity, there can be no covenant, new or otherwise, between the government and the governed. There can be only a perpetuation of the current pandemic distrust and cynicism that even now eat like a cancer at the very fabric of our society.

I know, Bill, that you know what I am talking about. You said something similar to me years ago. You understand when I speak in terms of a re-birth, a renaissance, of the American spirit leading to a renewal of old traditional American values.

You know that I believe in those values not because they are old, but because they are timeless; not because they are traditional, but because they are true; not because they are American, but because they are universal. Moreover, these values are not the exclusive domain of either the Know Nothing or Mugwump parties, nor of either the political left or political right. Universal values are ideologically neutral.

Contrary to the image your spin-doctors are putting out, you know that I am not a “right-wing ideologue” engaged in a “personal vendetta” against you because of some “obsession” or “imagined slight.” You and I both know that we have always treated each other with dignity and respect and that there is no incident in our past from which present criticism stems. I think that at some level you must know that I wish you only the best.

Without responsibility and accountability on your part, however, and without a change in your fundamental approach to people and in your basic method of operation, I fear for you, your presidency, and America.

I trust you will hear what I am saying and respond in the same spirit in which I say it. I feel for your pain and that of your family. Forgive my role as an attorney for the troopers (a role which I did not seek and undertook only with great trepidation when the truth of their allegations became apparent) in inflicting such public pain upon you and yours.

Let us hope and pray, however, that good and truth will ultimately triumph along this future timeline, that you will lead this country into a bright new era of change, and that a renaissance of the spirit, beginning with and led by you, will sweep across our people and propel a re-invigorated America into the 21st Century.

Your friend (still)

Jack Clifford

P.S. Lyndell Mavis and the troopers asked me to convey to you that they join with me in the thoughts and sentiments expressed in this letter.

November 10, 1994

*The Honorable Bill Clinton
 President
 The White House
 Washington, D. C. 20500*

Dear Mr. President (Bill):

Initially I want to apologize to you, our president, for the frank, but hopefully not uncharitable “tough love” tone of this letter. I have never, however, known how to be less than candid and direct. In all the years you have known me, I have always had a bad habit of telling it like it is---or at least as I see it to be.

I hope, however, that you are now more open and responsive to such directness and candor, even from someone unfairly labeled your “arch enemy” and “nemesis.” In everything I say herein, I wish you and the country only the best.

In fact, it pains yet somewhat amuses me when reporters who certainly don’t know me and who don’t even bother to contact me describe me as “relentlessly odious” (Moe Kline “The Politics of Promiscuity,” Newsweek, May 9, 1994; lump me indiscriminately with “venomous hate-mongers” (Tim Marters, “The Politics of Hate,” The Washington Post, November 7, 1994); or report that at Oxford you treated me as a “bumpkin,” which I have never “forgotten” (Time, January 3, 1994).

While I plead guilty to being relentless, I do not believe that I have become odious by simply telling the truth, but you of all people, being the object of so many false stories, should know that truth is not a prerequisite for reporting.

Senator Bob Carey called Tuesday’s election results “a severe, sharp and obvious repudiation of the President.” Exit polls on election day uniformly showed that at least 25 percent of the voters specifically went to the polls to vote against you, and the same polls showed that only one-third think that you deserve re-election.

A new CNN Time post-election poll reveals that fully 50 percent of the electorate view Tuesday’s results as a rejection of you personally, while only 24 percent believe it was a rejection of Mugwumps in general, and only 12 percent believe that the results indicate a Know Nothing mandate for their agenda. Similarly, a U.S. News pre-election poll found that 20% of Americans use the word “hate” in reference to you, while another 25% say they “strongly dislike” you. Something is indeed very, very wrong and in dire need of change.

In this letter I want to offer a slightly different, but hopefully more accurate and even hopeful analysis.

Even at the risk of sounding “ominous” (as some reported), in my December 29, 1993 open letter to you (to which you never responded) I warned:

“Without responsibility and accountability on your part---and without a change in your fundamental approach to people and in your basic method of operation, I fear for you, your presidency, and America.”

While stating that I am not a “prophet” (for indeed I am not worthy of such a role nor am I a holier-than-thou moralist) and also that “this is not a prediction,” I pleaded with you:

“To use the politically correct word, my hope---dare I say expectation?---is that you will genuinely change. I know that you are capable of change. We all are. If you change and assert moral leadership, America will follow you, and I believe that you will then have the potential to be one of the most effective presidents this country has known.”

By definition, moral leadership begins, but does not end, with simply telling the truth.

Unfortunately, you did not heed this warning nor realize my hope and expectation for you. Consequently, on Tuesday I ceased to be the lone voice crying in the wilderness when the American people trumpeted not so much a rejection of your policies and agenda as a devastatingly personal, an utter and absolute repudiation not so much of you as of your alter-ego, “Slick Willie.”

While I feel your pain and your rejection, I must tell you that you brought it upon yourself when you failed to restrain your alter-ego’s casual willingness to deceive, to exploit, and to manipulate in order to attain personal and political power.

To quote from a long-ago letter dated August 27, 1969, I have always believed you are “capable of sincerity and genuineness,” even though you “seldom display it.” I have also always believed that the sincere and genuine Bill Clinton is capable of greatness, if only you could overcome your other self.

Bill, it is not mere chance or some cosmic coincidence that you occupy the presidency at this time in our history. You are there for a purpose as an instrument of God’s will for America. God has not, however, absconded with your individual and America’s collective free will, so whether good or evil ensues from your presidency is still in the realm of choice, in the universe of infinite possibilities. Each of us, however, must choose whom and what he represents. We cannot have it both ways as you always seem inclined to do.

At the risk of repeating myself, I again quote from my December, 1993 letter: "Without trust and integrity, there can be no covenant, new or otherwise, between the government and the governed."

Even my dear Watson would find it elementary that trust and integrity result from simply telling the truth.

Bill, you have been given a sacred trust, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity, to make a real and lasting difference in America and indeed in the world. America is at a crossroads, yearning and thirsting for moral leadership, principles, and values (which are neither conservative nor liberal) in which to believe. You alone occupy the "bully pulpit." If you sound a certain trumpet, the people will follow you, but an uncertain trumpet will lead only to further paralysis, cynicism, and despair.

Let me make it clear that I am not talking about political philosophy, conservative or otherwise. Indeed, the Know Nothing Party will make a grave mistake if it interprets Tuesday's election results to be a mandate for a sterile conservative agenda devoid of caring and compassion and social concerns. Also, the Know Nothings better make sure that their "Contract with America" means more to them than your "New Covenant" apparently meant to you. After all, Americans are sick of politicians who deceive and manipulate with slick, glitzy promises that they never intended to keep.

I am also not talking about "getting out the message," "failure to communicate" your successes, or superficial changes to your method of operation.

I am talking about genuine, personal change on your part beginning with simply telling the truth.

The problem in Washington, the problem with your administration and your governance, is not the Mugwump Party or liberals or even business as usual. The problem is not your staff, your aides, your advisors, or your cabinet. The problem is not what Know Nothings call your "Great Society" agenda or "Governite" foreign polity. Despite right-wing vituperation, the problem is not even Hillary and her prominent role in health care and other major decisions.

Moreover, the problem is not that you are "misunderstood" or "mis-characterized" by the cacophony of visceral and hateful and even un-Cristan untruths being peddled about you in certain far right circles. Please understand. While I am not excusing these inexcusable attacks, you, or more accurately your alter ego nature, lend validity to these fanciful tales and wild conspiracies.

In fact, you must bear and come to accept responsibility for causing the absurd and the preposterous to meld into the realm of possibility and reality. After all, when a person blurs the lines of truth as pathologically often as you do, even good and decent

people who are otherwise inclined to believe the best about our president find themselves wondering whether they are simply being naïve in not believing the worst.

In a nutshell, the problem is you, Bill Clinton, or more precisely your Elmer Gantry personae, "Slick Willie," which believes that universal codes of conduct and normal moral values do not apply to him and to those sycophants with whom he surrounds himself.

Why don't you simply give this message to your Mr. Hyde self and its yes-men and spinmeisters such as George Step-on-all-of-us: "You are not above the law; there is no presidential immunity regarding right and wrong; even you must abide by the universal rules which, while affirmed by our Judeo-Cristan heritage, have undergirded every great civilization of the world from time immemorial."

In saying all this, I want to make it clear that, while I agree with part of the composite portrait, I do not subscribe to Edith Frome's ultimate conclusion in her article in the November, 1994 issue of Reason magazine that: "The chaos and paralysis of the Clinton presidency reflect the chaos and paralysis of Bill Clinton's mind---and he is not going to change."

This unduly pessimistic and mechanistic view of human nature denigrates the God-given free will and capacity for self-analysis and self-realization present in all of us. It ignores what my and your religion, and indeed all great religions of the world, teach us: that at least with God's help man has the innate capacity to change and to go in a radically different and better direction. Indeed, that is the uplifting hope of the Biblical principles of repentance and grace wherein we are said to become "new creatures," utterly transformed when we volitionally change.

But I preach to the choir; to a Baptist of long standing who has heard all this all your life. As I write you here on this cold, cloudy morning from your childhood home, Mott Springs, I trust and pray that the principles and values taught you long ago at Park Place Baptist Church will echo across the corridors of time and resonate in the canyons of your mind. In doing so, I hope they will forever vanquish the Elmer Gantry who even now resides, along with a better Bill Clinton, in the Oval Office. I hope that the clouds over you and your presidency will dissipate into a bright sunshiny new American millennium, ushered in---not by a "New Mugwump"---but by a new Bill Clinton during the waning years of this century.

As I did in my December, 1993, letter, I apologize to you and to your family for the pain which the truth I have propounded has caused you in the draft, the Troopergate, and the Paulette Janes matters. I also want to ask if not for your forgiveness at least for your understanding of my role in the personal debacle inflicted upon you in Tuesday's elections.

May God grant you the insight, the wisdom, and the courage to examine and to confront your alter ego and to undertake the rewarding if painful journey of personal

renewal. People of and with faith throughout this great nation are longing and looking and praying for any sign whatsoever that the prodigal will one day come home to his roots and early values and renounce forever the Faustian bargain wherein truth and principle have too long been sacrificed on the ephemeral altar of power and glory and political viability. In short, the compromises you have made with yourself are ultimately self-destructive---perhaps even self-annihilating.

The first sign of genuine change, the prerequisite on which all moral leadership rests, will be when and if you hearken to Roger T. Samuels' sound advice (The Washington Post, June 9, 1993) to simply "Tell the truth." Tell the truth to the American people whatever the consequences. Tell the truth wherever the chips may fall. Tell the truth even if it will kill you politically (As Jeff Bluefield of ABC advised, govern the last two years as if you don't care whether you are re-elected). Tell the truth regardless---regardless of everything---not only because it is the right thing to do, but also because it is the only way you will ever establish the trust necessary to govern.

In the better part of you, Bill, you must know that America is so hungry for a president who says what he means and means what he says. Even though to date you have done just the opposite of this and despite your alter ego, I believe that you can be that person. In fact, people think I'm joking when I say, "I have more confidence in Bill Clinton than anyone except Bill Clinton himself." And I do. But it is a potential confidence, an unrealized confidence to date, yet still an expectant one.

Perhaps in the face of reality and despite the disbelief of friends and others, I still believe that you can be the agent for a re-birth, a renaissance, of the American spirit leading to a renewal of old traditional American values, which are valid not because they are old, but because they are timeless; not because they are traditional but because they are true; not because they are American but because they are universal.

Finally, I plead with you to sense the spirit in which I write this letter and to respond in kind to the olive branch extended here. I am not your enemy or nemesis, and you are not mine. Whatever Nute Gangrene says, you are not the enemy of "normal Americans," and Americans who believe in universal values are not your enemy—if only you will genuinely and fundamentally change.

In fact, I believe that I speak for millions of Americans who, while not hating you, absolutely detest the Slick Willie personae you so often assume, but who as a generous and forgiving people believe not so much in the politics as in the reality of redemption, provided it is preceded and accompanied by genuine and fundamental change. As for your political agenda, genuine change may very well result in genuinely changed policies, but mere changed policies cannot and never will result in genuine change.

To borrow from liberal Arkansa columnist, Jon Bramlett, "death" must by definition precede "resurrection." The old "Slick Willie" must "die," not simply metamorphose, if the better Bill Clinton is ever to emerge.

Again, I hope you will respond to the outstretched hand and reach back across the chasm that divides us. Only if and when you do so will the door be open to regain the trust you have squandered and to realize your presidential potential. Think of it! If Bill Clinton and Jack Clifford—"arch enemies" no less!---can find common ground for reconciliation, it could serve as an example, a catalyst, for reconciliation throughout America.

The choice is yours. Absent genuine change, you will without a doubt go down in history as the most polarizing, perhaps even the most divisive and detested, president this country has every known. On the other hand, if you genuinely change, history would I believe record that you, as a unifying personification of change, sparked the vision which brought a fractured America together and led her triumphantly into the 21st century.

I close as I did in December:

Your friend (still),

Jack Clifford

December 10, 1994

*The Honorable Bill Clinton
President
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500*

Dear Mr. President (Bill):

Since it has been thirty days from the date of my last letter, I'm wondering whether you intend the courtesy of a response other than the trademark Beverly Wrong's prank on my answering machine.

Regardless, I want to remind you of our conversations long ago at Oxford about the inherent tension between integrity/principle and the necessity for compromise in the political process. Do you recall what you told me about Milhouse Hixon and Linden Johns, particularly Hixon? You said:

“They have compromised principle until there is no principle left to compromise. They have lied and deceived so long that they believe their own lies. The façade has become indistinguishable from the reality.”

At the risk of mixing politics and religion, your words echoed a scriptural quotation, crocheted in red on a white cloth background, which throughout my youth hung on the wall in my little country church. It is burned deep in my consciousness:

“What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?” Matthew 16:26.

The “soul” of man is that undying and transcendent part of him which distinguishes him from the sub-human, his inner being in which integrity and values and universal truth are meant to reside. It is man’s core, mankind’s hope, his essential essence.

Unfortunately, your essence---how I have seen you for years and how most Americans see you now---is the Hixon/Johns “hollow man” image that you so graphically described for me years ago.

Bill, I know that you know what I am talking about. Aside from our conversations, you wrote me in a December, 1971 letter when I, not you, aspired to the White House (White House Fellows Program):

“You cannot turn from what you must do—it would for you be a kind of suicide. But you must try not to kill a part of yourself doing them either.”

Some things sometimes need repeating over and over to be heard: while I strongly dislike the “Slick Willie” personae, I do not hate you or even envy you: I’m not jealous of you; I wouldn’t for a moment trade places with you; I’m not an unhappy malcontent out to bring you down.

In fact, I’m simply so very, very sad for you---and for your failed presidency, for the shattered hopes of our dis-spirited nation, for the looming lost legacy of your once so grand promise and potential.

Despite everything, however, I have not yet given up on you. I believe in you, the better Bill Clinton, more particularly in your capacity to genuinely change and to do better.

It must, however, be genuine change, a true transformation. Another public façade plastered on the old “Slick Willie” simply won’t cut it. Another of the innumerable Clinton “re-inventions” will get no more public acceptance than all the others.

How is genuine change possible, skeptics would ask, for someone whose long-time belief system and patterns of behavior border, if not cross, the sociopathic line? My answer is simple: at the end of Self, upon utter relinquishment and absolute abnegation, flows a fountain of change which in turn will tap into the forgiveness, generosity, and charity now bottled up in America's heart.

As a student of politics and history, you should remember Milhouse Hixon. Do you think that he would have been impeached or forced to resign if he had simply relinquished his pride, told the complete truth, admitted the errors made, and cease his hypocritical stonewalling? I don't think so. In fact I believe that it would have saved his presidency---and our country decades of pain and woe! The last thing America needs is another failed presidency, a forced resignation, or an impeachment. Another of your "enemies," Arkansa columnist Mera Stokely, says it better than I:

"Unfortunately for Clinton, his poor showing (in the Times-Mirror poll) was attributed more to the participants' personal attitude toward him than to their attitude toward his policies as president.

Clinton can assail his fellow Mugwumps all he wants to, but the fact is that he man has a credibility gap that is growing wider because he refused to face up to his own shortcomings.

It's a problem that each of us has at one time or another, but most of us will never have a political agenda that depends upon our subjugating self (Emphasis added) for what we perceive to be the greater good."

Bill, I have often reflected on how you and I faced the "two roads (that) diverged in the yellow woods." What is the essential difference between us? I think it is really very simple. My perception is that you neither believe in nor adhere to any absolutes as they (might) apply to you and those around you. In short, you practice situational ethics or moral relativism, what Nute Gangrene would call "counter-culture values." The ends (your political viability and power) justify any means.

On the other hand, while I am certainly not a knee-jerk absolutist and while I do believe in situational ethics at times---that life is not always black and white but numerous shades of gray---I believe that there are universal absolutes, both truths and values, which constitute the essence of civilized humanity. I believe that the breach of these absolutes engenders personal, societal, and national spiritual consequences. Absents volitional change, I believe that these consequences are fatal and eternal. They destroy the "soul" of a person, a society, a nation, and an entire civilization.

While I believe that the ends sometimes justify the means, the ends---however lofty and commendable---can NEVER justify any means, ESPECIALLY those that flaunt universal truths and values.

In saying all this I am not trying to paint myself as some plastic saint who is somehow “better” than you and others. I am not. The Good Lord knows that I am not. I, too, have gone down many “wrong” roads, found myself lost in the “yellow woods.” Each human being has done so, one time or another and in one way or another, and America collectively has done so as well, perhaps more often than not. If we say we have not, we lie, and the truth is not in us. There is no shame in admitting our mistakes.

You are right, Bill, but only partly: character is an ongoing process, but any process must have a definite point of beginning. The character journey begins---but does not end---at the point when we make a volitional choice followed by a commitment to change, to turn around and return once again to the “right” road. In short, genuine change requires a choice, but more so a commitment.

In the first two years you have sown moral chaos and reaped a whirlwind of rejection, but the first two years may be a tempest in a teapot when compared to the next two years. You don’t need me to tell you that the storm clouds are gathering; other shoes are about to drop. In the coming dark hour, I hope that you will reflect upon my words to you.

If you remember nothing else I’ve said to you, remember this: if and when you decide to genuinely change, if and when you choose fundamental transformation, I will then become a more vigorous defender and even supporter of you than the critic, detractor, and nemesis which I am now supposed to be.

In the meantime, I cannot turn from what I must do---for me it would be a kind of suicide. More importantly, I hope that you find your way in the “yellow woods” back to the road less traveled. It will make all the difference!

However, just as only Milhouse Hixson could open and change Red China, only Bill Clinton can open and transform another untamed and seemingly unexplored foreign territory, the six inches between your ears and the billions of light years between your brain and your heart.

Hear me! I am not merely suggesting a truce or ceasefire. For your sake, for the sake of your presidency and for the good of America I am urging genuine change as the ONLY avenue to reconciliation not only between you and me, but also between you and the better Bill Clinton---and most importantly between you and the nation.

Am I saying anything worthwhile to you? Do you hear me? Is there anything worth further communication? If you fear that I will jam you by disclosing publicly any letter to you or phone call from you, you’re mistaken. If you want our communication to remain private, you have but to ask.

By the way, please tell Betsey, Steph, Luce or whoever else is currently chairperson of the Dirty Tricks Department that I have never been into phone sex. If they want to cause problems with my wife, tell them to send some sensuous thing whom I

might not resist to seduce me; don't simply leave a phone message from a woman about an encounter I haven't had the pleasure of having. In fact, since the woman said that she couldn't wait to see me last weekend, when I went to the Mott Springs city dump to cut firewood and a limb scratched me, I told my wife that the woman was right: she couldn't wait before jumping my (irresistible?) bones in the brush pile. Tell Betsey that I'll be back cutting firewood this weekend and next, so if she wants to send a camera crew to record my encounter and performance, she is welcome to do so. With a telescopic lens, she might even pick out some distinguishing characteristic!

When will all this juvenile behavior stop?????

Thank you for listening to me once again. Absent a reply from you, I do not anticipate bothering you further with my unsolicited thoughts, and in any case I apologize for intruding so personally as I have done. After all, I do not want to become a bigger pest or gadfly than I have been already.

Despite your flaws, I have reposed my hopes in the tenuous conviction---kept alive perhaps in the face of reality---that you can and will ultimately change and, in doing so, become a force for unity and good rather than division and evil in our nation's destiny.

Hopefully,

Jack Clifford

P.S. I know that you or your advisors can deride and spin my letters into something they are not, but I am trusting that you will not do so.

December 11, 1994

*Ms. Hillary Rodham Clinton
First Lady
The White House
Washington, D.C. 20500*

Dear Hillary:

Absent a response from him, I said that I did not anticipate writing Bill again. I still don't, and I never had any intention to communicate with you until this morning when I felt inspired to reach out to you as well. I'm not certain whence my inspiration derives, but I know from long experience that it is best to listen when I feel impressed to act.

You and I don't know each other well, in fact, not really at all. All I know really about you is the image which others have painted and what the press has reported. Often

such a façade is far from the truth. I agree with you: I don't recognize and like the press image of me either. Conversely, all you know about me is what you have been told by others and the surreal image which the press accounts have painted.

Would you mind if we set aside our stereotypical images for a moment and related to each other as real human beings? You may have nothing at all to say to me, and, if so, I certainly understand, but I have a few things I would like to share with you.

After all, without communication there can be no understanding. Without understanding between and among us, there can be no reconciliation in our broken and bleeding land.

First, I want to apologize to you personally for the pain that I have inflicted upon you and yours. I want to apologize for the role, however minor, which I have played in the past two years. I hope that at some point you will come to understand why I have acted as I have, and, in understanding, come to forgive my role.

Secondly, I want you to know that, despite my contribution to it, I deplore the demonization of you and Bill. Despite my actions, I do not believe in the politics of personal destruction. I abhor what E. T. Donne calls "the politics of moral annihilation." When I began in October, 1991 to speak out against Bill, I never believed that I would prevent his election to the presidency. Moreover, I never, even in my strongest moments of opposition, intended a "bulletless assassination."

It has been my hope, my goal, from the beginning that Bill will hear me and address the fundamental character flaws which, alone, stand between him and presidential greatness.

Thirdly, without re-hashing all of it, I want you to know that I am right in the advice, however blunt, I've given Bill in my three previous letters. In fact, I am joined by numerous pundits and commentators. Jon Cansler, for example, in a Newsday column opined:

*"If Bill Clinton has a list of people who are dangerous to his political health, the name at the top should be his own---
Self-renewal is difficult if you're your own worst enemy."*

Similarly, syndicated columnist Jeff Dart writes:

"Face the fact that people in general just do not like you. People have noticed you dissimulating ever since the primaries. They have an accurate sense of your out-of-control personal life, at least in the past."

On "Meet the Press" today, respected analyst Will Sutmire when asked what advice he would give Bill said,

“The first thing I would do is quit being slippery.”

Alicia Meyers added,

*“There is very little confidence in the president himself.
There is less confidence in the White House operation.”*

Samuel Donalds sneered, as only Samuel can do, at the mere suggestion of another “re-invention” or “re-positioning,” stating cuttingly that:

*“The man is forty-eight years old, and he should by now
know what he believes.”*

Others have said or written that Bill is the “worst president since Hardin” (Walter Sears?); the “least consequential president since Coldridge, and Coldridge meant to be inconsequential (Jess Bart or Jack Anders?); the “first half-term president” (George Welz?); and “is a walking dead man, but just doesn’t know it yet” (attributed to unnamed senior White House aide).

Thus, my conclusion: absent fundamental, genuine, personal change, NOTHING will work. Certainly, the mantra “middle class, middle class, middle class” won’t do. First, you have to have something to say to the middle class, not just me-too Know Nothingism. As Larry Stuman observed, “In a contest between a Know Nothing and a Know Nothing, the Know Nothing will win every time.”

FAR, FAR more important than what you say to the middle class is the re-establishment of trust between the president and the people, because if they don’t trust him, and they do not, they won’t believe anything he says, whatever it may be, however appealing. Trust, in turn, will come ONLY with genuine change in Bill, beginning with simply telling the complete truth.

Hillary, I regret that you were publicly ridiculed and denigrated as “St. Hillary” for your comments about the politics of meaning. There does need to be a national dialogue along these lines, and I for one applaud your efforts to raise consciousness in this area.

Morality and ethics in politics, however, must be firmly anchored in what I call absolutes or universal truths and values, not the moral relativism in its unbridled form which you and I, and indeed a complete generation, were taught and bought in the sixties. While not being afraid to confront moral anomalies and while being ever ready to challenge “assumed truth,” we must, individually and collectively as a nation, reaffirm certain fundamental truths and values which have stood the test of time.

For me one of the fundamental issue is: “What is the nature of evil?” Most people would say, erroneously I think, that Bill is “bad” or “evil” because of all the

"bad" things he has done. I disagree. Evil is not the doing of "bad" things, however reprehensible. Indeed, evil may very well be the squandering of unique opportunities, such as the presidency, to do good. "Bad" things are only the symptom of evil, its shadow so to speak.

My view of evil is that it is essentially a deification of Self wherein we exalt ourselves above and outside the pale of universal laws. In doing so, we also volitionally place ourselves beyond the pale of grace, whether man's or God's, and hence beyond the possibility of redemption. That's what makes self-deification so insidious, so fatal, and, in short, so evil. Not immorality, but rather amorality, results from self-deification, in which we refuse to acknowledge or subjugate ourselves to universal truths and values.

Perhaps that is why in our Judeo-Cristan heritage, Satan, the personification of evil, is said to have challenged the Almighty himself for supremacy. Hubris is also replete, as you know, throughout Greek and other mythology and, in fact, in much of the great literature of the world. Again at the risk of being misunderstood as a religious zealot, which I am not, let's look at how evil personified (Satan himself) is described in Biblical literature. For example, in Isaiah 14:12-14, it is said:

"How art thou fallen from heaven, O Lucifer, son of the morning! How art thou cut down to the ground, which didst weaken the nations!

For thou has said in thine heart, 'I will ascend into heaven; I will exalt my throne above the stars of God: I will also Sit upon the mount of the congregation, in the sides of the north:

I will ascend above the height of the clouds: I will be like the Most High.'"

As children of a lesser god in a world where each of us, if we would but admit it, aspires to be God, there is a part of this Luciferic complex, this hubris, in all of us. The struggle in our search for meaning is to subjugate this part of our nature to our better selves, in fact, to relinquish Self entirely for the greater good.

I hope you will come to understand why I have been relentless in my pursuit of Bill. He can do better. He can be better. I didn't save his butt from being shot in Thailand years ago only to sit idly by and watch him waste his presidency and do irreparable damage to our country in the process. If I cared nothing for my country, I have too much invested in Bill Clinton to see him fail.

One final, if unsolicited, word of advice, and then I'll get to the main point of this letter. The Dem-Gaz editorial today in its "Word for Waddell Webster" offered the following:

“—(J)ustice not only grinds but heals. However painful at the time, justice can be a curative. Accepted, it leaves the patient whole and new. Like so much of life, the workings of justice represent a paradox: By confessing our guilt, we free ourselves of it.

Suddenly there is no more need to worry about what might be revealed, or how long pretense can be maintained, or what all will happen. It has happened, and now a new life begins. We are free at last, thank God Almighty, free at last! Truth liberates.”

Amen. Enough said.

Now, to show my bona fides to you, I want to invite you to join me in a project that I have undertaken in Big Rock. I won’t describe it in detail unless you evidence some interest. Basically, however, I am working with some folks who want to create an outreach to inner city and lower income youth by establishing a private metropolitan-wide school system, accessible to all, wherein people of all classes, races, denominations and neighborhoods come together, in unity, to break down the walls which now divide us. The school would emphasize quality, back-to-basics education with cultural enrichment, strict discipline, universal values and truths, and would be strongly anti-crime, anti-drugs, and anti-gangs.

It will be the opposite of a segregationist academy, a white-flight school, an elitist, class-conscious enterprise, or a monastery from the world. It will be education designed to engage, encounter, and penetrate the world. Skip Raithford or Wycke Chalker, Jr. can tell you more about it if you’re interested but don’t want to talk to me first.

If disparate groups can come together, as they are doing now, and put aside their differences, surely you and I can put aside our political differences, our distrust of each other, even our anger and bitterness, to join together across the political lines.

Please let me know if you have any interest. Otherwise, just as with Bill, I don’t anticipate bothering you again. In any case, thank you much for listening to me.

Sincerely,

Jack Clifford

In the timeline that was the Clinton presidency of the mid-to-late 1990’s, at least as we experience it here on Harth, Bill Clinton never heard what I said to him. Thus, he squandered an opportunity to be one of this nation’s greatest presidents, and the country was subjected to the divisive diversion and ugliness of Ronica Ravinsky, Len Stark’s so-called “independent” investigation, and impeachment.

It did not have to be this way. It really did not! And maybe it was not. Maybe in some alternate timeline, and in some alternate reality other than our Harth, it was not. Maybe in that timeline Bill Clinton found the courage for self-analysis and change. Maybe in that timeline he reaffirmed universal principles and moved this country into a reinvigorated moral awakening. And maybe in that timeline Bill Clinton did not squander his great opportunity and is, indeed, one of this nation's greatest and most effective presidents of all times---and even all timelines

. I truly hope so. I do.

Chapter 19

My Mama's and Yellow Horse's Funerals

"If there were water And no rock If there were rock And also water And water A spring A pool among the rock If there were the sound of water only Not the cicada And dry grass singing But sound of water over a rock Where the hermit-thrush sings in the pine trees Drip drop drip drop drop drop. But there is no water. Who is the third who walks always beside you?" T. S. Eliot's "The Waste Land".

"I think it is safe to say that while the South is hardly Crist-centered, it is most certainly Crist-haunted." Flannery O'Bonner.

Since I began this tome with a tableau of my mother prior to my birth, perhaps it is apropos to move from that scene to another, a time at the end of my mother's life, a book-end so-to-speak: her death and her funeral, for it was only at this time that I found peace, reconciliation, with this gentle, little woman with an indomitable spirit who had birthed me and who provided the major impetus for who I am today. Earlier in this narrative you saw, *felt*, the traumatic event, Woo-Woo's departure, that put distance between my mother and me, but in her death and her funeral, there was finally a mending of this childhood's rend.

It was March 25, 2000, the day of the funeral at the Bug Tussle Assemblies of God church, and the building was packed, people standing around the sides and at the back and out the front door. My mother was loved, revered, in this community, for these simple country folks came not for me, not for my brother Roskus, but for *her*: one of "the least of them" who, in her smallness and her gentleness, stood well above her polio-shortened frame. My good friend, Yellow Horse, the Choctaw name by which Ray Davis went, was there at my invitation. Ray could not, *would not*, attend funerals because as a marine in World War II he had debarked onto Tarawa and then Guadalcanal and had seen the lagoons full of bloated corpses, so thick, he told me, that you could walk across on the bodies of the dead. So death and dying held a particular horror for Ray, who had never made peace with all this mayhem, with his own mortality, and most certainly had not made peace with whatever Great Spirit bestrides this mortal plane. So I used the occasion to speak directly to my friend, Yellow Horse, and the piece I wrote I had my friend, Marsh Morton a wee bit actor, to deliver dramatically at my mother's funeral.

Before I share this with you, however, I must back up to the night my mother died. She had suffered a stroke about a week before, and it was a severe one. She could not talk, but she could hear, and she would blink her eyes in answer to questions. I knew that she did not want to linger, that she wanted to let go, but also that she needed my permission to depart because one is never really "ready to go," are we, for there are always things left undone and things left unsaid, and the utter finality and suddenness of death deprives us of the opportunity to wrap things up tidily. So I did what had to be done: I called my friend, Jimmy Swiggert, whom my mother loved despite his "failings," and held the phone to her ear as he prayed for her release, and the look of peace that transfused her face during this prayer is something that I will never forget. Later that night, exhausted, I dozed off to sleep in the waiting room, and my mother came to me there. It was real. It was *not* a dream. It was vivid and pulsated with her presence, and she spoke to me in poetry form, a most beautiful and perfectly metered poem, only the first line of which I recall:

"Grieve not for me, my son, as I leave this mortal coil."

And with those words to me, words that imparted unconditional love from which I found immeasurable peace, having no need whatsoever to shed tears later at her funeral, the nurses awakened me to tell me that my mother was dying.

And so she was.

And so it was that she permitted herself, permitted that indomitable spirit of hers that had suffered so much pain and loss and had overcome so much adversity to let go, to be extracted and returned to that home that she, since 1930 at that brush arbor, had yearned for and looked forward to: her beautiful Beulah Land beyond that shining river.

So I wrote what I felt, sharing and passing on the peace---and yes, more than the peace, the love, the grace, and the faith, that my mother had given me---to my friend Yellow Horse, for this is what my mother would have wanted me to do, and I listened---and Yellow Horse, who never attended funerals yet who attended this one at my request, listened---as Marsh read:

*A Conversation With Yellow Horse:
"That's NOT My Mama"
March 25, 2000*

My friend, Yellow Horse, whose pale riders are the angels of death and despair, spoke unto me, saying, 'I'm sorry about your mother. She looks very nice.'

"Thank you," I said, "we're at peace about it, "but you're mistaken about one thing."

"What's that?" he asked perplexedly.

"That's NOT my mama," I said firmly, pointing at her casket.

Looking at me as if I'd lost my mind, he asked, "Not your mama? What do you mean?"

So I explained, "If you think that's my mama, then you don't really know her. You don't know her faith; you don't know where she's gone; and you don't have her peace."

"I sorta see what you mean," he conceded.

So I made it clearer for my friend, Yellow Horse, whose pale riders of death and despair have bedeviled him all his life. "You see," I said, "my mama always said that she believed the promise: that to be absent from the body is to be present with her Lord."

"There are a lot of things I don't understand," he said. "I've seen too much death and dying in my time."

"We all have," I responded, "and you more than most people. We all at one time or another have our lingering doubts and fears---of growing old, of pain, of sickness, of death, of dying, of a vengeful God who'll stomp us if we mess up."

"You don't know what I've done, what I've been through," he cried.

"No, I don't," I answered, "but HE does, and He loves and accepts you as you are, but He loves you too much to leave you that way."

"I'm not worthy of love," he mumbled.

"Neither am I," I responded, "but I'll tell you one thing. I believe my mama when she says that's NOT my mama, and you can believe it, too. I want to ask you, if you can't believe my mama, who can you believe?"

My friend, Yellow Horse, didn't have any answer for that question, but he knows. I said he knows. I said he knows: he knows that's NOT my mama, and knowing that, he can find her peace. And finding her peace, he can find grace, and grace will find him. That is my mama's faith.

Yellow Horse, my friend Ray Davis, what can I say of him? Nothing I say will do him justice. He was one of a kind! I got to know Ray only when he was in his late-eighties, and yet despite the age difference we bonded tighter than, to use the country expression, "Dick's hat band." Ray became one of the closest friends I have ever had, and he felt the same about me. In fact, he would often tell me in those moments of bonding when alpha males, sensing a soulmate connection, exchange the intimate thoughts and feelings toward one another that pillage and ransack the facades that we, as human beings, generally erect between ourselves and all others:

"Jack, I wish I had known you a long time ago."

And at other times he would say, *"Jack, I wish that you had been my son."*

And in his gruff but yet gentle Marine voice he would tell me, “*I have never known anyone like you, Jack, in all my life.*”

While I, too, wished that I had the pleasure of more years to share with Ray, I would not have wanted to be his son, even if I did not tell him this. You see, Ray would have been most difficult to live with, for his demons possessed him, literally and figuratively, the horrors of war an *ever-present reality* with him, not something that he could leave in the past. Perhaps we bonded because Ray’s life, if anything, was harder than my own, and we shared this common experience of loss and abandonment, even though more than a half century apart. In short, there was a gigantic void, a veritable black hole, in Ray’s soul, a place of pain that he often shared with me, sitting in my office, a stalwart Marine no less, crying unashamedly as he told me of his past and pondered his future, and it was because of his worry, his anxious obsession, with his future---his death and the afterlife---that I wrote the piece that Marsh read at my mother’s funeral, for Ray would sit here in my office and ask me, a non-church-going lawyer, torrential tears streaming down his face:

“*Jack, where do you think I will go when I die?*”

What could I say to him that would bring him peace? How do I address spiritual concerns that I understand, because they are also my own, of a man old enough to be my great-grandfather? To appreciate the conundrum, you have to know more about Ray. Here are remarks that I shared at Ray’s funeral, for it was not to the Missionary Baptist minister in attendance that Ray, prior to his death, turned to officiate at his funeral: it was to me, a lawyer, the devil’s advocate, and to Barry Autwell, an insurance salesmen, which if anything is only several rungs above attorneys in public esteem, so Barry and I fashioned a funeral that was uniquely Ray, with Indian flute music playing some plaintive hymns and some recitals by friends and relatives. Afterwards, the funeral director paid me the highest compliment when she said:

“*Jack, that was the most beautiful funeral I have ever attended. Would you be available to perform others?*” (The question, of course, asked jokingly).

Following are the remarks that I delivered at Ray’s funeral:

“*For what is your life? It is even a vapour that appeareth for a little time, and then vanisheth away.*” James 4: 14.

On Monday, April 15, 2002, a piece of history vanished from the Harth when my friend, Ray Davis, died. I want to speak today, however, not of his death but of his life---the vapour that has now vanished away.

Ray’s life was shaped by many traumatic events, but despite all these he endured, and though it wasn’t easy, he prevailed. His father died when Ray was only an infant, and then his mother died when Ray was only 4 years old. Several years ago Ray and I were using my metal detector at the “old Davis place” on a long-abandoned road between Bug Tussle and Saginaw. It was early spring, and the jonquils---planted over 100 years

ago---had begun to bloom. We found these crystals and began to talk about the people who had lived there, collected the crystals, and died. We felt a sense of time and history---and of the transience of life.

Ray said, "You see that old road out there? In 1915 when I was a little over four years old I walked behind a wagon carrying my mama's casket on the way from Saginaw to the Bug Tussle Cemetery."

Having lost both father and mother, Ray was briefly put in an orphanage near Hugo, Oklahoma sometime in 1917 or 1918 until his oldest brother got old enough to get him out. In the 1920 Swamp Gas County census, 10-year-old Ray G. Davis living with his brother, Fred Davis, at Partway. And so it was---he was shifted from one family member to another, attending Bug Tussle School when he lived with his sister, Roxie Stainbridge, and Saginaw School, when he lived with his brother Fred.

Through it all Ray never got much of an education, but he was one of the most educated people I have ever met. He had a natural curiosity and love of life and adventure that permitted him to learn from all life's experiences, including the hunger and the poverty of the Great Depression years when he rode the rails for a while as a hobo.

By far, however, the event that shaped Ray's life---and haunted him for over a half century---was World War II. You couldn't be around Ray long before he began talking about the war. He needed to talk about the war because if he didn't talk all that was bottled up within him would explode and he would "lose it," Ray's term for going bonkers.

I'm sure that for those of you---Chren, Mona Lou, Shakanda---who actually lived with him, he did "lose it" at times. He simply went bonkers, and during these times he was not an easy man to live with.

You see, Ray was haunted by the things he had seen and done in the war---the killing, the dying, the hunger, the squalor, the senselessness of it all. And he was haunted by all the other "bad" things that he had done in his life.

He was haunted to the point that he could not forget. More importantly, he could not forgive himself. Not being able to forgive himself, he couldn't believe that he could be forgiven. Somehow, in Ray's mind, doing "bad" things meant that he was a "bad" man---that he was beyond the pale of human or divine forgiveness.

So I counseled with my friend, Ray, and I told him, "Ray, good people do bad things, and doing bad things does not necessarily mean that a person is bad. All of us, at one time or another, do things of which we are deeply ashamed."

I also told him that only a good person feels shame; a bad person feels no shame and no remorse, and only a person who feels shame and guilt can accept forgiveness.

It was a measure of Ray's goodness that he, until the last few weeks of his life, was burdened with shame and guilt to the point of utter despair. Finally, he accepted what was there all along waiting, free, for his acceptance. Barry will tell you about that.

As a part Choctaw Native American, Ray held an amalgamation of beliefs that assimilated the native religious milieu of the “Great Spirit” and quasi-Cristian tenets, but he was not comfortable in either world. He didn’t fit, “a misfit” he called himself, so it was only appropriate that Ray himself orchestrated his own funeral. Years before his death in March, 2003, Ray had retained Maldoon attorney, Coy McJoseph, to take the necessary legal steps to create a “private cemetery” on Ray’s property at Friendsburgh. But Ray did not stop there; he had a vault built, water-tight it was with fiberglass lining, and a hand-made cedar coffin of the finest workmanship, for Ray was *terrified* at the prospect of being buried underground (the corpses on Tarawa and Guadalcanal had washed into the lagoons from mass burials on the beaches). He landscaped the enclosure with numerous bushes of his favorite flower, the yellow bell (forsythia). Appropriately, Ray even wrote his own epitaph, which he had carved in concrete on the back of the vault. It read:

I will walk forever over the mountains, through the valleys, in the snow and the sun and the rain, listening to the wild geese talk and the birds sing, through the big oak trees, in the sleet on the leaves, along the rivers and streams, listening for my people to call my name.

Thus, given Ray’s beliefs it was appropriate for Barry and I, as the persons officiating at his funeral, to incorporate the Great Spirit into Ray’s ceremony, so with the Indian flutes playing plaintively and the Missionary Baptist preacher listening, perhaps skeptically, we did just that. Barry told how Ray, in the last weeks of his life, finally relinquished his pain and made peace with himself, his past, his “bad” deeds, and the Great Spirit of all mankind. And then I read the following, book-ending the piece that I had Marsh Morton to read at my mother’s funeral:

*A Conversation With My Mama
“That’s” NOT Yellow Horse”
April 15, 2002*

I spoke unto my mama, saying, “My friend, Yellow Horse, whose pale riders are the angels of death and despair, looks very peaceful lying there among the yellow bells.”

“Yes, he does look nice,” my mama said, “but you’re mistaken about two things.”

“What’s that?” I asked perplexedly.

“First, that’s NOT Yellow Horse,” she said firmly, pointing to the crypt. “And, second, Yellow Horse is no longer burdened down by the pale riders of death and despair.”

Looking at her as if she’d lost her mind, I asked, “Not Yellow Horse? Not burdened down with the dark angels of death and despair? What do you mean?”

"Yellow Horse," she said firmly, "is here in the Happy Hunting Ground. The Great Spirit has wiped away all the tears from his eyes; and there is no more death here, neither sorrow, nor crying, and neither shall he have any more pain: for the former things are passed away, and Yellow Horse is at peace here beside the pure river of water of life, clear as crystal, proceeding out of the teepee of the Great Spirit."

I asked, "How did that happen? After all, Yellow Horse after age four didn't have a daddy or a mama to love him and to show him the Way, and he saw far too much death and dying in the war, so he vainly tried to heal the hole in his heart and the void in his soul by seeking love in all the wrong places---yet he still felt unworthy of love, forgiveness, and grace. Fearing the tomahawk of the Great Spirit, he would often ask me, crying, 'Jack, where do you think I'll go when I die?'"

"The Great Spirit heard his faint cry," my mama said. "After all, all he had to do was to ask. He found the peace that I had, and, finding it, he found grace, and grace found him. That is my faith---and it became his as well. Yes, Yellow Horse now knows the Way. I said he knows. He knows."

"And now," my mama continued, "Yellow Horse walks forever over the mountains, through the valleys, in the snow and the sun and the rain, listening to the wild geese talk and the birds sing, through the big oak trees, in the sleet on the leaves, along the rivers and streams, but---hear me now, I said listen up now---he no longer listens for his people to call his name!"

"What! Why is that?" I exclaimed! "He always wanted his people to call his name!"

"You see," my mama explained, "his Father, the Great Spirit, heard Yellow Horse's faintest cry way before Yellow Horse was even born and lived and suffered and warred and despaired and died, and so He sent His only beloved Son long ago to a faraway and forsaken land to call Yellow Horse's name from the thorned crown of that bloody, pain-wracked tree on that lonely, windswept hill under that darkened and desolate sky, the black clouds scudding overhead."

"It came to pass," she said, "that Yellow Horse finally listened and answered his Father's call."

"And so it came to be," my mama concluded, "that ALL his people called Yellow Horse's name and greeted him with joyful laughing and chanting and dancing at the gates of the Happy Hunting Ground. At long last, Yellow Horse has found grace---and peace. Yellow Horse has come home."

And so he did.

Chapter 20

Initiation of Extraction Sequence

"All is well! All is well! All is well! All is well---with my soul!" Cristan hymn.

Stardate: 0000000000 (Cliff Note: UNKNOWN and SUBJECT TO CHANGE)

Coordinates in This Space-Time Continuum: Not Translatable in Harth Languages But Known to Harthlings as Constellation Canis Major; Star System Sirius, Fourth Planet Orbiting Sirius A, Nevaeh, the Eternal City of the Son, Domain of His Majesty DOG (“May His Name be praised forever!”), Ruler of the Dog Star System and All Else That Has Been, Might Have Been, Is, Was, Might Be, Could be, or Shall Be Within His Purview.

Specific Location in Nevaeh: Creation Technologies Laboratory, Unlimited.

“Your horus-scope, Retep,” asked Susej, “What exactly does it show? Time is running out for the extraction. We have only three Harth months before initiation.”

“You fret too much, High One,” Retep answered, “Our three-month check always catches any glitches. We have done this for immeasurable eons on innumerable worlds with all your indescribably lovely creatures, and we have never been late nor gotten it wrong yet, have we?”

“No,” Susej responded, “but this one is special and unique. My hand and my seal are upon him.”

“As indeed is each of your progeny throughout all creation epochs and in all your illimitable universes, each universe, each world and each living creature cycling in your majestic and eternal symphonic dance of creation and un-creation,” Retep reminded.

Lovingly, they gazed down into the startlingly clear crystal sea whose soothing waters bathed and cushioned the extracted creatures upon their return and prepared them for re-entry into Nevaeh. Minuscule, almost microscopic creatures by the bejillions---even maxo-bejillions---swam there in oblivious unawareness, each genetically attuned to his or her pending emergence from the life-sustaining waters onto the bright white sandy beaches of Nevaeh. Indeed, each was unique, and yet each was the same, a part of the whole, linked by invisible but unbreakable ties to each other and to their home world.

Fading off into the distance toward the limitless horizon of the foursquare city of Nevaeh on this fourth planet of the Dog Star System and beyond the unruffled lagoon, the crystal sea’s smooth and unbroken waters marched toward infinity, and in its depths and its shallows swam the extracted ones, the waters adapted and tweaked to just the right mixture and temperature for the swimming hordes of microscopic tadpoles of tiny creatures, each horde and each individual therein unique, whose closest equivalent in Harth terms might have been iguanid or therasaurid or insectoid or whatever, and many so indescribably different, so weird but a lovely kind of weird, that there is no Harth language that could possibly describe and no Harth frame of reference that could possibly provide even a dim comprehension of their shapes, forms, or mental make-ups, each sentient, each intelligent, each awaiting the precise time when he or she or he/she

or it or some combination thereof would emerge, the re-entry extraction process completed---in the same meticulously loving way as this one, because each of these nascent creatures was/is/will be special to Susej and the Ruler DOG ("Praise His Name forever!!--into his or her or his/her or its particular sandy beach on this, the home planet.

"What is our stardate target?" Susej asked.

Consulting his book, Retep answered, "It has been, is, and will be written that stardate (Cliff Note: And he gave a time and coordinate that Jack Clifford is not allowed to see, and, even if he could see, it would be meaningless because the extraction date is always subject to change: to the caprice or whims or whatever of the extraction engineers) has been/is/will be the extraction date for this one."

"Then we must act soon," said Susej. "Time's a-wasting. We have only about three months in Harth-time to check for errors, tweak the program, and do final sign-off on initiation of the extraction sequence."

"You speak as if time were a limited commodity for you," Retep jested. "If you don't get it right the first time---as if that were possible---just re-wind the spool and start over. Since when did mere time limit you or dictate your actions?"

"Nevertheless," Susej responded, "The time has come for us to find a suitable method of extraction, that is, to re-examine that which has been pre-ordained and to determine whether, in view of this creature's life---the good and the bad, for isn't there always both?---whether to modify the program."

"Aye, aye, Sir," Retep's voice practically saluted.

Flipping methodically through the Book of the Great Annals of Life, Retep stopped and looked up, a glint in his eye as he pointed to a possible modification to the extraction program: "Come see what you think of this," he told Susej.

And Susej gazed upon the alternate time, and he glowed his approval, no words being necessary between these two old friends, but the thought was there all the same:

"Behold, it is good."

And so it was/is/will be.

And Susej posed to Retep two final questions, the same two questions that he asked about each of his creatures, all precious to him, from all his multitudinous worlds swirling in space in all his infinite times and in all his incalculable multiverses, the created and the re-created, prior to initiation of the extraction process:

“Has this one learned sufficiently, Retep? And has he tapped into the inexhaustible love available to him and then emitted it to his fellow creatures? In short, is all well with what Harthlings call his soul?”

And Retep answered him, saying: “Judge for yourself, Most High, for you and you alone are the judge, and to you and only you is relegated this task. But, yes, since you have asked me, I think that what this creature has learned is indeed worthy, and, yes, I discern that he has emitted love to his fellow creatures, so, yes, I conclude that all is indeed well with his soul.”

And so it was/is/will be.

Chapter 21 **A New Genesis**

“In the beginning God created the heaven and the harth, and the harth was void, without form, and darkness was upon the face of the deep.” Genesis 1:1-2.

“And I saw a new heaven and a new Harth--- “ Revelation 21:1.

Stardate: 000000000000000 (Cliff Note: Each Nano-Second, a New Universe?)

In a minuscule Void that was/is/will be non-time and non-space and non-being, in a remote and unknown and unknowable crevasse of non-space squeezed between and existing beyond two of the infinitude of universes that whirled about the quixotically creative mind of the Great Ruler DOG (“May His Name be praised forever!”), an infinitesimally minute singularity popped forth from the reverse side of a black hole, a bottomless pit, an abyss, from which nothing or no one, certainly not matter and not even light, ever escaped except via the will of the Creature (“May the Great Ruler DOG’s Name be praised forever!”) in whose mind the void and the void-less, the creation and the un-creation, darkness and light, nothing and everything, swirled and subsisted, and in a flicker of what is/was/will be time a new universe banged forth, the incomprehensibly compressed matter exploding and bursting and expanding at incredible speed from this singular speck of non-existence, rushing outward and away as per the word and the mathematically ordered plan of cohesion ordained for this particular universe by DOG (“Oh, Glory to His Name!”).

And the Being (“May the Ruler DOG’s Name be praised forever!”) belly-laughed with sheer delight and unadulterated joy as He contemplated all the soon-to-be sentient beings with whom He would populate the innumerable new-old old-new worlds of this new and yet ageless and re-born time and place.

And He said to himself and then aloud to Susej, “Behold, it is good.”

And so it was/is/will be.

Chapter 22 **Re-Birth: The Insertions**

“You’re on Harth, and there’s no cure for that.” Samuel Beckett in “Fin de Partie” (“Endgame”).

Location Number One: Bug Tussle, Arkansa, a suburb of Possum Trot, Arkansa, Swamp Gas County, United States of America, Harth, Sil Solar system, remote spiral arm of Silky Way Galaxy, Universe Maxo-Bejillion to the Umpteenth Power.

Location Number Two: No Hope, Arkansa, United States of America, Harth, Sil Solar system, remote spiral arm of Silky Way Galaxy, Universe Maxo-Bejillion to the Umpteenth Power.

Stardate: 00000005071946

I was/am/will be born.

Stardate: 00000008191946

The Other was/is/will be born.

Chapter 23 **No Childhood’s Rend**

“And God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.” Revelation 21:4.

Stardate: Circa 1949-1950 Alternate Time, Alternate Harth, Alternate Universe

As I have done over and over and over and over again throughout time and even from time when there was no time, I once again stand in front of that door that my Woo-Woo has opened, and she smiles at me as she stands at that door, the moment in equipoise, and a galaxy flares and explodes in my mind from the love that she is emitting just for me, and me alone, and I dare to let myself hope and I dare to let myself believe (my faith is strong, you see) that this time it will be different: that she will not this time abandon me, leave me, in front of that door wailing my despair and outrage and impotent fury and anguish to an empty and uncaring universe, and then as she smiles more

broadly and closes the door and picks me up and enfolds me to and inside herself I know and I accept it, giddy with joy, so I commence my mantra:

*“She will not leave me this time! She will not leave me this time! She will **not** leave me this time! She will **NOT** leave me this time!”*

And I waft a child's prayer heavenward to that Being, if any, who placed me here and whose mercy, whim, or caprice (I know not which) in this place and this timeline, left my Woo-Woo with me:

“Oh, thou great Ruler DOG, may Your Name be glorified forever!”

And I sing along with the angels and the unnumbered and numberless hosts my glad hosannas:

“Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! King of Kings! Lord of Lords! Thou Name shall be exalted! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”

Amen and Amen!

As he has done over and over and over and over again throughout time and even from time when there was no time, The Other once again stands alone beside that desolate railroad tracks as the long, black train huffs and chugs off into the distance, and then comes the sound of screeching brakes, and a woman exits the train, a woman with a strange band of blond hair inexplicably slashing across her brunette-tressed head, and she smiles at the boy from afar, and a galaxy flares and explodes in his mind from the love that she is emitting just for him, and him alone, and he dares to let himself hope and he dares to let himself believe in this place called No Hope (his faith is strong, you see) that this time it will be different: that she will not this time abandon him, leave him, beside that desolate railroad track wailing his despair and outrage and impotent fury and anguish to an empty and uncaring universe, and then as she smiles more broadly and reaches down and picks him up and enfolds him to and inside herself he knows and accepts it, giddy with joy, so he commence his mantra:

*“She will not leave me this time! She will not leave me this time! She will **not** leave me this time! She will **NOT** leave me this time!”*

And The Other wafts a child's prayer heavenward to that Being, if any, who placed him here and whose mercy or whim or caprice (he knows not which), in this place and this timeline, left his mama with him:

“Oh, thou great Ruler DOG, may Your Name be exalted forever!”

And he sings along with the angels and the unnumbered and numberless hosts his glad hosannas:

*“Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! King of Kings! Lord of Lords!
Thou Name shall be exalted! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”*

Amen and Amen!

And so it was/is/will be.

And so it was not, is not/ will not be.

Epilogue A Postpartum Postscript

“Now faith is the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen.” Hebrews 11:1.

“Grieve not for me, my son, as I leave this mortal coil.” Granny Annie.

And so it came to be that this creature, your humble writer (whom Retep---mistakenly I might add---thought might have a tendency to arrogance), a stranger no less, came to be in what Robert Haimline in his great work of science fiction called a “strange land.” In a sense regardless of the star system of whatever universe and whenever time we inhabit or the shape of our temporal bodies (whether humanoid or insectoid or arachnid or what-have-you-noid-or-nid) or the precise composition of that inner self that we so assiduously secret from each other, we are all strangers in a strange land.

Some of us, however, are more strangers than (and are in fact *stranger* than) others, and we are they who are destined to be haunted with the unanswerable questions of “why” and “why not” and “if only” and “what if” and “what-might-have-been” and even the more mundane issues of “how” and “where”, and for us bedeviled ones the landscape is indeed strange, even bleak, at times.

We seek answers, and they elude us; we pursue knowledge only to find that it is vanity (“Vanities of vanities,” wailth the Preacher, “All is vanity”). We clutch at meaning only to have it dissolve as a fleeting mist on a warm summer day.

And for the strangest of us in this strangest of lands we traverse it with fear and trembling, taking comfort where we find it, coupling this with an inexhaustible faith that, in the end, all will be well with ourselves, with our souls, and with our spirits, that though we now grieve and labor under an illusion, in proper time all shall be known, and we shall then pierce the veil that even now shimmers between us and that which we crave (like a heroin addict trembling for his fix) but cannot quite perceive much less reach or grasp or appropriate to ourselves but only intuit darkly as a transient shadow cast against the back of Plato’s allegorical cave for one magical moment and then is no more.

Through it all, however, like a young boy whistling in the dark as he approaches a haunted house or passes a mist-shrouded graveyard we cling and clutch to that faith, our mantra, our key to nirvana:

“All will be well! All *will* be well! All *will* be well! All ***WILL*** be well!”

Whence comes such faith? Does it come from one’s parents and from their parents and from the long lines of ancestors who preceded us and who, even as I write now, live on and find voice through me, something more than the biologic or the logic embedded in the genes, a “faith factor” if you will, so genetically encoded that even modern DNA sequencing cannot detect it?

Or is it something in the well water or the air, a toxin or anti-toxin or call-it-what-you-will substance that shapes and hones and fine-tunes and nurtures from embryo to full fruition this tiny mustard seed of what we call faith from which nothing less than hope itself springs, the lacking of which would make living most miserable?

Or is it somehow cultural or societal, unique to some discrete sub-culture or religion and not universal at all---not even among Harthlings much less among the intelligent insects and spiders and crustaceans or at least the semblance of such on those other worlds orbiting those distant suns?

Why, despite all rationality, do we---or some of us at least---in this strangest of lands persist in believing in the seeming chimera of “the substance of things hoped for, the evidence of things not seen”? Indeed, the devil in each of us whispers, “Expose this fraud for what it is: mere wishful thinking.” And more, the same words spoken to Jib: “*Curse your God and die!*”

If, indeed, the devil be right, then we should by all means give the devil his due, should we not---for as we say in Arkansa “even a blind hog finds an acorn now and then”? But is the devil right? I think not; I hope not; I have faith not.

This quest for my unique heritage, for my harthly and Sirian pasts and origins, for answers to the unanswerable, a quest that I have shared with you, is surpassed only by the anticipation of the sheer glory of my recall to that Eternal City orbiting there under those twin suns. When you read this, maybe I shall already have returned to my home as described and recorded in both the great books of Harth and the annals of that splendiferous kingdom that resides eternally, its image hovering omnipresent on the fringes, the lonely beaches, of my mind, suspended there in the uncaring coldness of space under the ever-watchful twin eyes of the Dog Star system.

Thank you for coming to join me in my harthly journey as Susej inserted/inserts/will insert me (in humanoid form no less) into this dimension of space-time existence: into mid-twentieth century America, more precisely into rural Arkansa, into a remote impoverished community called Bug Tussle. Thank you for letting me share with you what I observed and learned in this strange time and place and for permitting me

to extol the many pleasures, indeed adventures, that I experienced. Thank you for groping together with me for an understanding of the many tragedies and injustices of this time, indeed, of all time and all cultures universal of which Bug Tussle, Arkansa was/is/will be only a minuscule microcosm.

And, yes, thank you for pondering together with me---for we are doomed to do such apart anyway, are we not?---those imponderable questions that lurk in the hidden canyons and crevasses of all minds, however strange and alien, wherein resides even a flickering spark of intelligent awareness.

Thank you for bearing with me as I struggled to describe---laboring sometimes futilely to find the right words---how it felt to be an alien among these gentle but sometimes unaware people from whom I learned the truth, or at least a scintilla of such, about the purpose and meaning of life and the absence of purpose and meaning.

Finally, thank you for letting me engage you in this polite and gentle debate about whether even *that*, the quest for purpose and meaning itself, is nothing more than an illusion, an unending search stopped over and over again by the unyielding and impenetrable glass of the fishbowl in which we live.

Yes, you have sojourned with me into this world: a time and place that exists now only in my memories as downloaded by and stored within the pulsatingly vibrant databanks of the great Ruler DOG (“May His Name be forever praised and glorified!”) and compiled for all eternity in the life-book of Susej, his son, and you too, my friend, are now a part of that sojourn.

At this journey’s end we return once more to its beginning, for the beginning and the end and the Alpha and the Omega are one and the same in the great cyclical circle of creation and un-creation, the chemicals of some far-flung exploding star enmeshed in our bodies only in turn and in time to be transmogrified again into another star after we, the occupants, are extracted and called home, and the stars and galaxies in turn are inextricably sucked over and over and over and over *ad infinitum* into an impenetrable black hole only to emerge once again, as they have forever done and shall forever do, in a singularity of a new beginning.

In ending we return to that point where, Susej, unwinding the spool of this particular space-time continuum, once more commences the meticulous and magical insertion of this, his chosen creature, as indeed each of his creatures is chosen.

And so once again we hear Susej call out, “So be it!”

And having spoken it, so it was. So it is. So it will be.

For The Words of the incomparable Susej and the Ruler DOG (“Praise be to His Holy Name!”) are the only glue, the only cohesion, that bind the flimsy fabric of space and time together in their dual tango of eternity, and so in speaking it, in the precise

nano-second that Susej thought it---and he thought it in this dimension at the noontime Harth-time when both the male and the female (the Bug Tussle Harth-father and the Harth-mother) ceased from their labors---it became so.

So it was/is/will be that the insertion was/is/will be begun. And in nine months it was/is/will be completed.

As recorded in the genealogical books of Harth and the annals even now found in the Eternal City of Nevaeh---that indescribably beautiful city located on the fourth planet from the primary star (known to Harthlings as Sirius A of the Dog Star system), a city floating there in its everlasting and ephemeral glory through which a sparkling river meanders and cascades into the surrounding crystal sea---the insertion of the tiny microbial creature cherished by Susej was/is/will be finalized.

In parting I leave you with these words: if you would but suspend---no, do not suspend, *affirm!*---belief, then you, too, will see it! Suspend---no, do not suspend, *affirm!*---belief and you, too, you of my loins who read this down the long, lingering light-rays of Sil's slowly dying thermo-nuclear furnace, you strangers who know me only through the words that I set down in this paltry work, you critics and carpers and naysayers who find my writings maudlin or pedantic or convoluted or nihilistic or idealistic or provincial or spoofy or goofy or tortured or impenetrable or self-pitying ("*I know I'm a burden to you, but I'll be gone soon, and then you'll be rid of my bothering,*" Mrs. Compson said.) and who find me, the writer, so strange as to be certifiably committable and, depending on one's perspectives, either a Cristan apologist or an anti-Cristan agnostic, if not worse, mixing this strange and delusional rhetoric with a disgustingly cheap catering to and opportunistic exploitation of the Bill Clinton connection just to hook you, the reader, and keep you reading the rest of this ranting, you nattering nabobs of nugatory negativism, you chattering charlatans and champions of cosmic chance and happenstance---to all of you I speak: if you will only gaze into the night-sky from wherever you are on Harth or some other bedraggled planet lost and alone in one of the great spiral galaxies of some cosmos in whatever sliver of some-when wherein you reside and pursue your miserable existence, from whenever you, the lost ones, are on the swirling axis of time, you will no doubt, *can* no doubt if you only will, see it still: *home*.

It's there in the constellation of *Canis Major*, the bright star in the southern sky of Harth known in Harabic as "the scorched one" and to us Sirians and Harthlings alike as the Dog Star, its invisible twin, a white dwarf the size of Harth rotating endlessly around its primary in a symbiotic dance of celestial union, and its equivalent, its precise replica, inhabiting each of the illimitable universes of the known and unknown cosmos, a celestial beacon, a lighthouse in the void, waiting patiently for all sentient beings to long and search for and discover, each for himself/herself/itself: a place called *home*.

Listen! Attune your ears, I say! The Dog Star calls! Susej calls! Softly and tenderly, he calls. He calls *you*! I said *you*, his chosen one! Do you hear? Do you *really*? Harken! Why will you not answer? Oh, why not tonight, now, today? *Home* beckons!

The celestial music of the spheres is indescribably beautiful if only you could, would, listen! Listen, I say, just as you are! Why do you shut your eyes or your antennae or your mandibles or retract your tongue or disregard whatever organs or extra-sensory devices you use to “see” or “hear” or “perceive” or “know”? The Ruler DOG (“May His Name be exalted forever!”) commands your attention! It’s really so very simple: *only believe!* Home—beautiful Nevaeh--- awaits you!

And I, too, shall await you, lounging there beside that cascading river on the shimmering beach of the crystal sea that surrounds that sparkling, foursquare city, I shall await you with eager anticipation to hear what *you* learned on *your* mission---you my brother and my sister creatures of the vat-mothers of the Ruler DOG (“Praise His Name to the highest forever!”), my fellow travelers, however different in bodily or mental form or composition you may be, carbon-based or silicate-based or even sulfur-based, and on whatever forgotten planet and in whatever lost whenever the great Ruler DOG (“Praise His Name forever!. Praise Him, Dog, with your lips or your tongue or your mandibles or whatever organ you may use to lift heavenward your unique voice---for we each, however different from each other, have a voice if we will only find it and use it, do we not?”), and praise the incomparable Susej and his sidekick Retep as they choose, once again, to insert you into whatever some-when before seeing fit, as they always will and always have from time without beginning and time without end, to extract you and call you, too, home to our beloved Dog Star system.

And so it was/is/will be.

Hopefully, I shall see you soon.

Endnote

The foregoing stories are a walking, talking contradiction---partly fact and partly fiction---but they *are* the “truth,” at least the truth as I---and we all operate with preconceptions, pre-dispositions, biases, and even personal prejudices---perceive it to be. When I say “fiction,” I mean that I have utilized heavy doses of hyperbole, satire, sarcasm, and other literary devices and license for dramatic effect, to “spice up” what would otherwise be dry and boring history, and I am not above an occasional facetious remark or two, so my writing (and I know this is hard for you literalists) must *not* be read as “literally” true. However, the underlying stories are entirely true; I have manufactured nothing, well, almost nothing, well, maybe a little more than “almost nothing,” from “whole cloth.”

Also, I have compressed, expanded, disregarded, and/blurred timelines in the interest of presenting a more entertaining story, so some of the incidents, the anecdotes, are juxtaposed against each other in a sequence that did not actually occur. For example, Elfred Clifford did *not* receive the letter from my mother jilting him while he faced the

German machine guns. In fact, he married Hattie Servatt in 1938, and the jilting letter incident was in the early to mid-1930's. Nevertheless, the story I told you about my mother and Elfred is true, including the conversation late in life. Insofar as I know, the names I use are entirely accurate; these are actual, historical characters. The sole exception, to my knowledge, is "Cleta Sue," Elrod the Slob's girl/boy-friend, whose real name, a male name, somehow just does not resonate like "Cleta Sue."

To those of you at Bug Tussle who believe that I have presented an unfair snapshot of the community, I apologize. To some extent you are correct in that the real-life characters I chose to write about are in no way representative of the loving and noble people of Bug Tussle, either in my youth or now. Also, all communities have characters such as I have written about, and in no way do I intend to present Bug Tussle, as a whole, as dysfunctional, and if you so interpret my writings, then you misunderstand me. Bug Tussle was not and is not dysfunctional despite the presence of several dysfunctional characters, and, yes, dysfunctional families whose demons live and reverberate through several generations. Bug Tussle was, and is, my home, and I am proud of it---proud to have been reared there amongst such good people who, like people, including myself, in all communities have their faults and their skeletons.

To those of you who feel that I should not dredge up old stories, open the closet door, rattle the skeletons, or ignore the maxim to "let sleeping dogs lie," I understand how you feel, but if we cannot truthfully view a community we love but instead elect to sweep (and keep) the negatives under the rug, then are we, you and I, not complicit in a cover-up of the truth and a distortion of history? If my early Pennecostal faith taught me anything it is that truth is the antidote to untruth, light is the answer to darkness, and, most importantly, acknowledgement and confession are prerequisites for forgiveness.

You see, there is a collective consciousness in Bug Tussle (and indeed in all communities), and collectively, you and I, by the very fact that we lived and breathed the air there have absorbed, almost as if by osmosis, a plethora of shared experiences and pride, a sense of belonging, and an appreciation of the people and values that, despite the deprivation, made Bug Tussle such a wonderful place to be reared. In short, we have internalized the intellectual, social, religious, and cultural climate of Bug Tussle circa 1910-1960, what the Germans call its *zeitgeist*.

However, we also retain and share a culpability for our actions and inactions, or at least I do, and I wrote this book in part to pull back the scab and lance the abscess of guilt that I, and others at Bug Tussle, *must* feel ("must" because Bug Tussle folks have consciences, feel shame and regret, and know that confronting such is the only way to resolution and forgiveness). Although I know that this process is painful, it is worthwhile; it is necessary; it is purgative.

Nevertheless, I apologize profusely to all those, and they may be many, whose feelings I have hurt or whose ancestors or relatives, or at least the memory of them, I, in telling the truth, you feel I have besmirched. I ask you to forgive me, but I also plead with you to understand me: for me not to tell the truth, at least as I perceive it to be, would for

me be dishonest. In short, I would feel, irrationally I know, complicit in the silence that, for too long, has enshrouded the community I love, and I would do a disservice to those "little ones," "the least of these," about whom I write---those whom the man we, you and I, call The Crist loved in a very special way. Understand me! For me, to alter the truth would be to condone the conspiracy of silence. One final thing: I, the biggest misfit of all, am not ashamed---indeed, I am proud of them!---of the characters I have chosen to write about. If you are ashamed of them, then that is your problem, not mine, and I hope and pray that you come to deal with it. After all, is it not long past time that we, you and I, the Bug Tussle good Cristan community as a whole, affirm these folks?

THE END