

PECK

by

Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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“So what’s your secret?”

That’s how it all started, to the best of my recollection, just me posing a question to the big man in the coveralls—who’s chickens had just won the coveted Champion Rosette purple ribbon. It was an innocent enough question, directed at someone I thought would be delighted—he *was* an expert chicken farmer, after all, it said so right there on his placard.

“*Humph*,” he said, not so much as looking up; he and what I presumed to be his wife had set up a portable table near the enclosure and were playing cards.

“They’re so big!” said Trang, her face lit up like a child’s, “What you feed them to grow so high?”

The man only frowned. It was funny, because until that day I’d never met a stranger who hadn’t taken to her—with her thick South Vietnamese accent and innocent, carefree demeanor—right away.

At last he said, “Vegetable peels, bananas, apple cores—’bout what you’d expect.” He looked up for the first time, to where Trang was leaning against the enclosure. “Please don’ lean on’a pen. Upsets the chickens.”

“Oh, they’ll eat *anything*,” said his presumed wife, who was possibly the homeliest woman I’d ever seen. “Corn, broccoli, mealworms, yogurt. They *love* table scraps. Why, just the other night—”

“That’s enough,” said the man—peevishly, it seemed. “These city folks don’ care nothin’ about that. They’re just making small talk—aren’t you, city folk?”

Jesus, but the guy really talked like that.

“Well—no, actually,” I said. “I was genuinely curious. I mean, chickens don’t exactly grow that big eating grain pellets, do they? What’s your secret?”

He paused, turning a card over and over in his dirty fingers (the tips of which were blistered), locking eyes with the woman. “Just that. A *secret*. And it’s goin’ stay that way. Now if you don’t mind, there’s others

waiting to see the chickens— them’s children right there, for an instance. Yes, sir. People come from all aroun’ to see my chickens, all the counties—not just city folk.”

And that was that, we’d been unceremoniously dismissed—nor was I in a position to complain; I was, after all, due for work at those same fairgrounds that very night, which would have been January 12, 2020. The night I learned the awful truth about the “expert” chicken farmer whose name I would later learn was Jud Farmington. The night of the blowing snow and the Kensington Station Blackout—which effected not just the suburbs but the entire east side of Brighton. The night Jud Farmington’s chickens finally came home to roost.

“K-12, this is K-91, for a radio check, over.”

“K-91—this is K-12; copy you loud and clear.” There was a burst of static. “I trust you found the duty map next to the battery charger?”

“Affirmative,” I said. “Sector 4 until 0200, or as otherwise indicated, at which I’ll switch off with Rosco. Is that correct? Over.”

“K-12 to K-91, yes, that’s correct. That includes the Beef Barn, 4-H/FFA Barn, the Wonderful World of Sawdust, and the picnic grove. Oh, and don’t forget the Poultry Building—although it’s pretty hard to miss.”

I had to laugh. “Roger that, K-12. And, yeah—those are some chickens. Me and the wife used our free pass today, and—”

“Cut the chatter, K-91. You’re on duty.”

“Yes—yes, sir, K-12. Sorry about that. K-91 clear. Have a good one. Over.”

“Copy and clear.”

I holstered the radio and adjusted my duty belt, which included the club-like Maglite and pepper spray. *Nice one*, I thought. *It’s your first night on the job and you’ve already annoyed your supervisor.*

I walked through the Artisan’s Village; past Dogtown and the food courts—the wind blowing my hair, the forecasted snow already starting

to fall—toward the Poultry Building. It's funny, now that I think of it, how I should have headed straight for that; but then it wasn't every day you encountered chickens the size of large dogs, or, for that matter, cranky farmers who seemed as likely to spit on you as to look at you.

People come from all aroun' to see my chickens, all the counties—not just city folk.

Oh, I could believe that, but why such disdain for “city folk?” And what the hell had he been feeding them, really?

I entered the building—which, despite its name, was just another steel barn—from the east, taking out my Maglite and turning it on. The chickens were there; sleeping (I presumed), although it was hard to tell with animals who routinely slept with one eye open (as they had often done on my grandfather's farm, an evolutionary adaptation, he'd explained, that allowed them to rest while also watching for predators). I suppose that's when I first noticed it, the fact that the chickens seemed bigger (I mean, bigger even than earlier in the day), more robust, and that their combs seemed more colorful—not brighter, per say, but deeper, redder, more fearsome, somehow. *Yes*, I decided, sweeping the Maglite's beam across them, stirring them not at all, they were definitely sleeping. I swiveled to inspect the other pen, the one on the other side of the walkway—and promptly froze. For there was a chicken—a great, golden rooster—staring back at me through the mesh. Just staring, his amber yet bloodshot eyes gleaming. And so startling and unexpected was this that I recoiled virtually immediately and gripped the Maglite tighter—ready, on pure instinct, to use it as a bludgeon—before turning and exiting the structure, wondering why I had been so compelled to go there in the first place and why too I had napped and dreamed of chicken shopping in the hours right before work; a dream in which I'd reached for a package of breasts and realized that what was pressing against the clear plastic was not chicken at all but a human face.

“Hey, *pssst*, new guy. What’s your name again?”

I paused, training the Maglite on him, on Rosco, my co-worker. He was standing in the shadowed entrance of a big, yellow tent at the border between Sectors 4 and 5.

“Marshal,” I said. “Marshal Newman. Jesus, you scared the hell out of me. What—what are you doing?”

He stepped forward into the light of the overheads and placed a finger to his lips. “*Shhh*. K-12. He could be anywhere.”

I looked around the grove, the Grove of Oddities, they called it, but saw only a collection of tents. “I’m pretty sure he’s not hanging from the trees like a bat. What is it, anyway? And why were you—”

“You wanna see something really weird?”

I was beginning to realize, in my own dim way, that working security meant encountering a colorful cast of characters. “Well, no, actually, I don’t. I mean I already have. I mean—”

“*Shhh*. You gotta see his. Come on ...”

There’s moments in life when you leave your best judgement at the door; this was one of them—I mean, I couldn’t speak for Rosco but I needed this job. Desperately. And yet there I was, stepping through the tent fold at the Interstate Fairgrounds in the middle of the night (even as the wind buffeted the entire structure and the snow blew sideways with a howl), wondering how I would explain to Trang in the morning that I was fired—on my first night on the job.

“Try not to bump against the walls, yeah? They’re made out of cardboard,” said Rosco—Sage advice from the Master Trespasser as we moved through the labyrinth and came upon a sign; a sign which read:

PREPARE TO WITNESS
THE STRANGEST THING
YOU HAVE EVER SEEN ...
PREPARE YOURSELF
FOR THE ROCK FROM
ANOTHER WORLD.

“Groundbreaking,” I said, making no effort to hide my disappointment—not just in “The Rock From Another World” (which was still hidden behind a flap), but in Rosco himself, for being such a rube. “What is it, some big chunk of lava? Jesus. If you’re going to get us fired at least make it worth—”

“Take a look behind that flap, and then tell me about what’s worth it or not ...”

I eased aside the flap and pointed my Maglite.

Now, it’s tempting to say that what I saw in that moment was exactly what I’d expected: a big chunk of porous rock, albeit huge—the thing was easily the size of a medicine ball. But the fact is the thing’s otherworldly nature was evident from the start, not the least of which was its queer coloring, which was a shade of red—if indeed it could be called red—I’d never seen before, not bright so much as pure—undiluted—a deep red, a furious red.

And yet that was not even the strangest part, for from its pours oozed a substance which I could only liken to watered down yogurt—a kind of viscous slime—which bubbled up from the rock’s many holes as though therein existed an endless supply; and which filled the pan in which the thing sat near to overflowing.

“Okay, what the hell is that?” I said, feeling my pulse quicken.

“Dude—it’s the Rock from Another World. It says so right there on the—”

“No, I mean, what the hell *is* that? Really?”

“If you ask me—”

“I’m asking you.”

“—it’s, like, *fake*, all right? Like a movie prop. Like that crazy shit in *The Thing*. Look at the base—it’s probably full of pumps and tubes and God knows what else. Let’s check it—”

I closed the flap abruptly.

“I’m not touching that thing. And neither are you. If you do I’ll report you to K—what was his fucking name?”

"Iverson. *Captain* Rocky Iverson. And I'll just blame it on you. *New guy.*"

"This isn't the Army—there's no captains." I moved to exit the tent huffily. "And who the fuck is named 'Rocky?'"

"Jesus, I was just trying to have some—"

"Leave me alone!"

And then I was back on my side, back in Sector 4, back on my beat somewhere between the pig races and *The Secret Life of Lead: An Exhibit*, when my radio squawked and I snatched it up, for it was K—fucking "Rocky"—calling me with an edge to his voice, saying, curtly, "K-91, this is K-12. Ah, meet me at the Poultry Building ... can you? Like, *now.*"

I knew it was bad when I saw how he was standing, just sort of straight as a board with his thumbs hooked in his utility belt and his Mountie hat placed low on his brow, like Marshal Dillon. It was, for all intents, the kind of pose a guy named Rocky might take if he was about to lay down the Law—if he was, not to put too fine a point on it, about to fire you. And yet it wasn't until I had moved closer (he was standing in the middle of the walkway between pens) that I realized he wasn't looking at me at all; rather, he was staring at one of the enclosures—an enclosure which had been ripped open as if a bomb had gone off. Ripped open, I realized—now that I was close enough to examine it—not from without, by vandals, say, but from *within*. Ripped open as if by the chickens themselves—whose numbers had decreased significantly.

"Where's your cover?" he asked—as though there were nothing amiss with the cage at all— and quickly looked me up and down. "And your name badge?" His gaze came to a rest on my black tennis shoes. "And those aren't regulation."

I stared down at them dumbly before deciding to address the matter at hand. "Jesus, what do you think happened?"

He lifted his chin slightly.

"I don't know—I mean, it is your sector. Why don't you tell me?"

There was an awkward silence as I stared at the mesh. And then—just like that—I was staring at nothing. Everything had just gone totally black, like a tomb.

"What the ...?" said Iverson—even as our eyes began to adjust. "A power outage? Are you kidding me?"

"It's this wind and snow," I said. "Probably dropped a tree on a line. Jesus. Now what?"

That's when we heard it, a man's scream, coming from the Grove of Oddities, splitting the air like a knife.

"That was Rosco," said Iverson. He reached for his pepper spray.

"We gotta—"

But Iverson was already running, his keys and utility belt jangling, his shoes clicking. And before I knew it, *I* was running: out of the Poultry Building and into the picnic grove, although not before I heard beaks striking the wire and that sound which would ultimately haunt my dreams—a sound which was as simple as it was familiar (for I'd grown up listening to it on my grandfather's farm); a sound which would take on an entire new meaning before the night was over.

A sound which went, simply, *Peck, peck, peck.*

By the time we reached the Grove of Oddities Rosco looked a lot like the Rock From Another World—just a mangled lump of holes through which blood and guts oozed and squeezed freely; and from which one eye stared wide and white, like a Ping-Pong ball. Nor was it hard to determine what had killed him, for it was clear the chickens had descended on him en masse—their beaks flashing like knives, their awful talons tearing—and gutted him where he stood. It was also clear, by the size of the indentations, that the chickens had grown larger, and might now be bigger even than us.

"So you think ... you think those *fucking chickens* did this?"

Iverson was nonplussed, especially now that he'd tried to call the police and found his phone dead—and been informed by me that I didn't have one.

"Look," I said, "I told you. When I made my initial rounds tonight the chickens were bigger—okay? I know because when we visited the fair today they weren't that huge. Now, at some point tonight, they grew still larger, all right? Probably while Rosco was showing me that rock ..."

"*What* rock?"

"That one!" I hollered, pointing at the yellow tent. "The goddamned Thing From Another World!"

"That? That's just another one of Old Man Farmington's scams ... you think he's just in this for chickens and purple ribbons? Jesus, is that what you two were—"

"Wait a minute, wait a minute," I said, seizing upon what he'd mentioned, stopping him virtually mid-sentence. "Are you saying ... that the owner of that rock is the same as those chickens? Is that—is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes, yes—Jud Farmington, cowpoke entrepreneur. Next year he'll be selling admissions to those chickens, you just ..." He trailed off, suddenly pale. "Jesus, Newman—the birds ... where do you think they are? I mean, they couldn't have—"

That's when it happened, the single most terrible thing I have ever seen—even now, almost thirty years later, it chills—for, as he spoke, his mouth popped open suddenly and unnaturally, and, good God! a beak emerged—yes, a beak!—which withdrew as quickly as it had appeared and struck him again, this time through the eye, so that he looked at me briefly from its bloody tip before again the thing withdrew and smote him through the neck.

But even that wasn't the most terrible aspect, for when the beak slid free he began to, well, *dance*—dare I say like a chicken with its head cut off—capering like a marionette, his nearly severed head flopping, even as

the rest of the brood descended and began pecking at him furiously—until at last I could take no more and bolted from the grove ...

Where I ran smack dab into Jud Farmington, who'd been coming in through the vendor's entrance ... ran into him so hard (while gripping his shoulders) that it might have appeared for a moment we danced. And here my friends is where I saw the second most awful thing; for it quickly became clear, there in the semi-dark of early morning, that he was in fact smiling, and that, indeed, he had already looked beyond me to where the chickens were devouring poor Iverson.

"Yes, sir," he said, his teeth showing black and rotten, "People goin' come from *all* aroun' to see my chickens. *All* the counties—not just city folk."

I shook him violently.

"Crazy bastard, you fed them that stuff from the rock! Didn't you? You found that thing like Jed Clampett and you fed them whatever it bled, just to win your purple ribbon! And now you think you're going to ... you're going to ..."

But he wasn't looking at me, focusing instead on the picnic grove behind me, and I knew even before turning around that the chickens were coming, that they were bearing down upon us at that very moment, and so swiveled him around (in an effort, I thought at the time, to save myself) and pitched him toward their beaks.

And then they were pecking away, *Peck, peck, peck!* as I started to flee but paused, understanding, quite suddenly, that if I were to leave the rock as it was the chickens might sniff it out and gorge themselves again—becoming bigger still, until they were the size of dinosaurs, and worse, becoming meaner, more violent, for it was clear to me now that whatever was in the rock had made them not just bigger but more aggressive, insane, like Farmington himself, whom I was now convinced had sampled it also. And so I scrambled back to the tent and crashed through the cardboard walls, and, finding the rock as before, toppled it from its pan,

screaming as I did so for its surface was as hot as coals and burned, hissing, at the touch, leaving my fingers and palms blistered and bleeding.

Until, at last, it was done, and the white liquid was seeping into the earth.

And then I ran, through the grove and past the chickens, through the vendor's and employee's entrance, refusing to look back lest I be turned into a pillar of salt, refusing to listen although my ears had other ideas, for what they heard and recorded for all time was the sound of the chickens feeding, just as they had fed on my grandfather's farm— *Peck*, they went, as I ran and ran and ran, *peck!*

Peck, peck, peck!

The End

REIGNDEER
by
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The fawn had barely opened its eyes and begun to breathe, Danny having carefully cut open the dead doe's amniotic sac and severed the umbilical cord, when Tucker stepped forward and shot it clean through the eye—splattering the crisp linen snow with blood (more than a little of which sprinkled Danny) and causing everyone to jump, especially me.

To understand what happened next one would have had to been there for the entire trip—for all the jests gone too far and the constant, incessant bickering, for the bitching about where to go and even how to get there, for the bitter rivalry which had developed between the oldest and most experienced of us, Danny and Tucker.

All I know is Danny launched himself at him like there was no tomorrow right there in the middle of the glade, his arms sort of swinging like a windmill and his fists flying like you see in hockey fights, so that Tucker lost his balance almost instantly and tumbled back into the snow. I don't know who would have won if we hadn't broken it up—probably Tucker, who'd always been a mean bastard. If it hadn't been for the appearance of the buck I'm not sure we could have, frankly.

"Hey now, hey, hey, hey!" shouted Billy, who was holding back Tucker as I held Danny. "Holy shit, look!"

"Knock it off, Billy," cursed Danny, who'd begun trying to take off his coat. "No one fires a gun two feet from my fucking head and ..."

But he'd seen it too, just standing there at the edge of the glade: a fully-grown stag—easily a 10-pointer, maybe even a twelve—it was difficult to say considering the distance and the sun's glare.

"Get off me," said Tucker, wrestling with Billy. "I said get off me!" He shoved him hard and Billy fell ass-end into the snow—which should have been enough to startle the buck into flight, but didn't.

"I say it's the Beav's," said Danny, and everyone agreed but Tucker—of course. The Beaver was me, because I was the youngest and had a cowlick. I guess.

"I don't know, Danny. The last time didn't work out so—"

"Just do it," he said, and handed me his Scout rifle. "Use this. Merry Christmas."

I took the rifle and handed him my own.

It felt good in my hands, like my Uncle Fred's guitar, which always seemed to give me something even though I couldn't play it. It was something about the shape and heft of the thing—it inspired confidence, courage, focus. And its scope was wide and clear so that the buck's face veritably leapt out at me as I sighted it.

"Easy now ... what do you see?" said Danny.

I moved up one of the buck's antlers slowly and steadily, counting the tines. "One ... two ... three ... four ... five!"

"On one side?" Billy interjected excitedly.

"Six ... seven. One side." I moved to the other antler and counted to six. "13 total. A 13-point buck." I lowered my sites to its head and steadied my grip. That's when I noticed the unusual mark on its head, like a red diamond, right between its eyes. Its foggy, white eyes.

I must have stared at them for a long time, because I remember Tucker saying, "Well, what are you waiting for?"

"I think its blind," I said.

"So? All the more reason to put it down. So put it down. Or I will."

"I thought newborn calves were a bit more your speed," said Danny.

"Hey, fuck you. Who the hell brought its mother down? You?"

"Hold up, there's another," said Billy.

I took my eyes off the buck long enough to try to see what he was talking about. Sure enough, another buck had appeared just beyond the tree line, not ten feet from the first. There was a sudden movement and I squinted through the scope in time to see the first buck vanish in a blur—but squeezed the trigger anyway, on reflex, I suppose. The resulting *crack!* caused the winter birds to explode from the trees and the gathered reindeer to scatter—dozens of them, their movement having betrayed their true numbers. Then they were gone and the gunshot had finished echoing down the valley.

At last Tucker said, "That's great, asshole. That was beautiful."

"Step off him," warned Danny, and handed me my gun back.

"You want to make me?"

"Shut up, Tucker," said Billy. "Let's just pack up and head home ... been a shit-trip, anyway." He added, "At least we got the doe."

"I got the doe," Tucker corrected him. "And the calf."

I can't tell you what was said after that because I was still looking at the tree line and thinking about the buck's foggy, white eyes. And remembering, for whatever reason, a quote from the Bible: *Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk*. And as I did so I remember the scattered deer slowly coming back ... coming back and just watching us as we loaded the doe and its calf—each of which bore a red diamond on its head, just like the buck—into the bed of Danny's truck. As we loaded our cheeks with snuff and our iPods with rock and roll. As we popped open beers and guzzled them before crushing the cans in our cold, blue hands.

"Jesus, look, there's another one," said Billy, craning his neck as we blew past the deer. I did likewise and saw it step out onto the road, still watching us.

"How many is that? Fifteen? Twenty?" I watched until the buck disappeared around a bend. "I've never seen deer act like that. It's fucking weird. It's like they're all the Shape or something."

"The what?" Tucker was looking at me through the rearview mirror like he always looked at me, which is to say like he wanted to kick my ass.

"The Shape. Michael Myers. You know, stab-stab?" I jerked my fist in the air.

"Sorry, fresh forgot my English/Geek dictionary." He looked out his window at the pine trees rushing past. "We should be shooting them. It's not like we can't come back and get them later."

"Not from my truck, dickhead," snapped Danny. He glanced into his sideview mirror—nervously, it seemed.

“Hey, *eat shit, man*, you want to go again we can just pull over right—”

“*Fuck you, dude.*” Danny stabbed at the air between them with his finger. “Just fuck you. Not a goddamn word, you hear me?”

He’d stepped on the gas considerably—all that adrenalin from feuding with Tucker, I suppose—and no one noticed the buck standing in the middle of the road except me until—

“Jesus, look out!”

—until it struck the grill like an oncoming vehicle and tumbled up against the windshield, breaking it into a thousand spidery rings, and smearing it with blood as the truck careened wildly about the road and finally came to a rest in the ditch.

It didn’t take long to assess the damage, and the short of it was: we weren’t going anywhere—other than on foot. The old Ford had a crushed radiator, and, somehow, a flat tire.

I’d never see Danny quite so upset, quite that livid, and I guess I never will again. As for Tucker, he seemed more bemused by the situation than anything, and volunteered to stay with the truck—but really just the kills—while the rest of us hoofed it into town—to fetch a tow truck, I suppose.

It was Billy who first noticed the thing’s eyes, and called us all over. Sure enough, the buck was a dead ringer for the one I’d missed in the clearing, right down to the red diamond above its snout. It even had 13 tines.

After checking the doe in the payload by holding open its eye, Danny said, “Some kind of disease, maybe?”

“I ain’t never seen a disease that turns eyes white,” said Billy.

“Yeah. Me neither,” said Danny. He exhaled sharply, looking down at the thing. “Okay, that settles it.”

“What do you mean,” said Tucker.

"What do you think I mean? I mean it can't be eaten. We don't even dare butcher it until someone from fish and game has a look. So guard your prize, asshole. But I wouldn't get too attached if I was you."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. That's so." He turned to the rest of us as if to say, *Ready?* We were.

We'd walked about two miles when Tucker jogged to catch up with us.

"Twenty dollars says I can get back here before you do," he said, trying to catch his breath.

"That's fine," said Danny. "Fish and game will have your info."

"And that means your old man's van down by the river as well as your mamma's singlewide," said Billy.

I was laughing when I noticed a handful of deer stepping onto the road ahead of us—which were quickly joined by others until they spanned nearly the entire width of the pavement. It's funny because I don't remember feeling scared, only curious. It was comical, frankly, like something from a Far Side cartoon.

"If you're going to shoot an elephant, Mr. Schneider, you better be prepared to finish the job," I joked, but no one got it, only gazed off down the road at the line of deer.

"Okay, that is fucking weird," said Danny, and seemed to grip his rifle tighter. "Anybody else think that's weird?"

"That's definitely weird," said Billy.

Tucker raised his rifle slowly.

"What are you doing?" snapped Danny.

"Chill out, Pussy Galore," he said. He squinted through his telescope. "Just doing a little reconnaissance." He tracked his barrel back and forth slowly. "Yeah ... they've got the white eyes, just like the others." He paused and held steady. "And the red markings. I don't know, looks almost like a—"

There was a *crack!* as he squeezed his trigger, and I looked up in time to see blood jet from the back of one of the bucks' heads. Then the life ran from its legs and it collapsed, right there in the middle of the road, as the others scattered and disappeared back into the tree line.

No one said anything for several moments.

"*Boo,*" said Tucker suddenly, spinning on Danny, and to his smug satisfaction the younger man jumped.

Tucker just laughed and slapped his gun barrel against his palm. "Everyone relax. I've cleared the threat—"

"*Right now,*" hissed Danny, throwing down his gun and darting at him.

What happened next surprised everyone, even, I think, Tucker himself. For he raised his rifle and pointed it directly at Danny's head—stopping the younger man in his tracks and causing the rest of us to freeze in place also. Then he just laughed and backed away, saying, "Uh-oh. The Geek Brothers are still armed. Now what do I do?" His face became suddenly serious. "Drop 'em, faggots. Drop 'em right where you stand and kick them over here. Do it!"

We did it.

"Now here's how it's going to be," he said, gathering up the rifles while keeping his own trained on Danny. "You're going to just turn around ... and march your candy asses back to the truck. Okay? And when you get there, you're going to watch my doe and fawn *real* close. All right? I'll be back with a truck as soon as I'm done boning your mothers."

And we started walking.

I'm not sure how long it took us to get back, about a half-hour, I reckon. I only know the sun was starting to go down and it was getting cold, like, *real* cold, enough to see our breath and for our fingers and toes to start going numb. One thing was for sure: it was going to be a hellish night

with no radiator and no heat, unless of course Tucker got back—if he was coming back—before the freezing temperatures set in.

I only know that Tucker was the last thing on my mind when Danny told me to search the payload toolbox for a lighter, and it's funny, because when I first saw him stretched out in the bed of the truck I thought he was fooling and had somehow double-timed through the trees and beat us there, just to give us a good scare.

But Tucker wasn't fooling. He was dead. I knew it the moment I laid eyes on him, even though he'd been rolled over on his stomach and might just as well have been sleeping. He was full of holes, for one; holes that looked as though they'd been made with tent stakes, and which covered every inch of him from the tips of his feet (which were frozen at odd angles in rigor mortis) to the crown of his head.

But that wasn't the worst of it. No, the worst of it was when Danny rolled him over and we saw that his face had been almost completely spared—spared, that is, except for a single devastating wound: his right eye, which had been punched out like a raw egg and pushed so deep that the remains of it were now looking out from his brain.

“Where's the doe? Or the fawn, for that matter?”

But I could only look at Danny dumfounded, and I'm embarrassed to say the Bible verses were racing through my mind again: *Thou shall not boil a kid in its mother's milk. An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.*

Vengeance is Mine, sayeth the Lord.

“My God,” I remember Billy saying. “Danny. What do we do?”

But he didn't say anything for a long time. That was the worst of it, I think. Seeing Danny who was always so stalwart and brave and sure-footed and confident reduced to something like a frightened old lady, something like a wounded, hunted animal. But he recovered himself, as Danny always did, and when at last he spoke he did so calmly and with something of his usual assurance, outlining our options and asking us which we thought was better: to walk back down the road and look for our guns, or to wait it out here, inside the truck, and pray to God some-

one happened along, either tonight or in the morning, before we froze to death. Or worse.

To his obvious surprise, we voted unanimously to move on down the road.

I can't vouch for what Billy was thinking; I can only tell you how I felt. And my reasoning was as simple as it was ultimately misguided: The reindeer had gotten what they wanted. *An eye for an eye. A tooth for a tooth.*

They were finished with us now. *He* was finished with us—God, Yahweh, Jehovah, whatever. We'd boiled a kid in his mother's milk and been punished. Now all that remained was the final part—the denouement—our perp walk through the very garden we'd spoiled. Then we'd be allowed to continue with our lives. Then we'd be allowed to return to our singlewide trailers and our pawnshop guns and our pickup trucks—our pregnant girlfriends, our jobs at the Ace steel foundry. Then we'd be allowed to simply roam the world as we saw fit.

It was Danny who first saw them this time, whispering to us that they were there and slowing his pace until all of us were standing bone-still in the middle of the road.

For they'd come back, all of them (and then some), and the road was blocked just as it had been before. Unlike before, the road was blocked in the direction from which we'd come as well.

"Easy does it," Danny whispered. "Just ... don't make any sudden moves. We'll head into the trees ... and climb them."

But when we moved toward the trees the deer were there also.

Which left only the trees on the other side of the road, which, not surprisingly, were devoid of any animals—all of us, I think, knew why. And then the animals were running—bounding—toward us, both the ones nearby and the ones father down the road, and we were running, too, into the trees to which we'd been herded and between which we

sprinted like pale, frightened ghosts. And it dawned on me that things could not have ended any other way—at least not in a just universe, because that is precisely what we'd stumbled into—for the dogs had become the hunted and the fox was now at their backs. And it seemed to me also that they took as much sport out of chasing us as we had taken out of chasing them, as we had taken out of chasing the pregnant doe (we didn't know that then, I tell you plainly) into the clearing in which it was killed.

A cry went up as I leapt over a deadfall and I looked into the dark next to me to see Danny impaled on a buck's horns, blood gurgling from his mouth and his eyes bugged out in terror before the animal rammed him into a tree with a sickening crunch and my supervisor and friend was lost behind me.

Then it was just me and Billy—the two hopeless dweebs, the ones who should never have been on a hunting trip in the first place—bounding like fucking gazelles through the ponderosa pines, laughing a little, I think, at the stark absurdity of it, hoping, perhaps, that it had all been a dream, that we would wake up momentarily in our shitty, threadbare beds, in our shitty, threadbare trailer parks, our shitty, threadbare lives, and maybe just maybe be grateful that we didn't actually have to hunt for our survival nor forage constantly while being hunted ourselves. That we were just lucky to be soft men living soft lives.

At last one of the bucks reared up next to Billy and jerked its head with an unimaginable violence—enough so that the tips of its tines penetrated clean through his neck—then he too stumbled over a deadfall and was gone behind, and I thought for a moment I'd been impaled myself but of course it was only the pounding of my own convulsing heart.

Then I was falling, tumbling, rolling, down a rocky incline and into a semi-frozen creek bed, where the reindeer fell upon me in full force, stomping me with their cloven hooves, banging their heads like teens at a death metal concert, punching me full of holes, taking out first one eye then the other.

Filling the world with a light as white as their eyes.

The End

SADIE
by
Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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In spite of his fear that he was becoming his father, he had to admit: knowing he would be coming home to her later was nice. He still left the TV on, of course—although he did so now to keep Sadie company rather than to take the edge off a lonesome apartment—and his solitude still got to him on occasion, especially now that the holidays were in full swing, but, mostly, he was just enjoying his little experiment in cat ownership—more so than he would have guessed. He still worried about Bonnie and Clyde—his parakeet and goldfish, respectively—despite the fact that he'd suspended the birdcage from the ceiling and relocated the tank to the highest shelf of the entertainment center; but even that, like his loneliness, had subsided since Sadie's arrival, mostly because she'd proven to have such a chill temperament.

None of which changed the fact that he'd taken his third step now toward becoming his father, a man who'd never met a stray he hadn't eagerly taken in and who lived barely a mile away in a house overrun by animals and their odors. A house which, as a boy, had been the envy of his friends—but which now reeked of cat piss and dog excrement ... so much so that it was difficult even to keep caregivers. He'd never understood it, frankly, this need of his father's (of anyone) to keep and maintain animals—my God, wasn't life complicated enough? And yet here he was, David E. Smithson Jr., keeping and maintaining animals—a regular chip off the old block, he supposed.

No matter. The fact was he was glad for the company, and he showed his appreciation before heading off to his nightshift the same way he had every night since bringing Sadie home from the shelter—by feeding her some Feline Caviar Buffalo Cat Treats and scratching her behind the ears; after which she purred contentedly and brushed against his leg—covering his uniform with hair, but that was okay. He'd bought a lint roller. And then he was off, locking the door behind him and saying, “Now you be a good girl. No parties.” But if she meowed anything in response, he was unable to hear it.

When he got home at 7:30 am, he found Sadie right away—sitting like a fuzzy triangle in the corner of the living room, apparently sound asleep. At least that's what he'd thought until he knelt beside her and found her not only awake—but staring at the birdcage intently. Nor had she moved so much as an inch as he'd approached, which was unusual in itself.

"Sadie ... *Hey*." He snapped his fingers next to her head, twice, and still there was nothing. "Hello? Earth to Sadie?"

At last she came out of it, stirring as if from a trance, and he scratched her behind the ears. "What was *that*?"

And she growled at him, not hard, and not long, but enough to make him pull his hand back.

"Hey!"

And then she leapt forward, shaking herself, and trotted away from him, padding first into the hallway and then the bathroom, where a moment later he heard her scratching in her cat box.

Well, that didn't take long, he thought, and laughed a little to himself. The bloom was apparently off the rose.

He'd walked into the kitchen and begun unpacking the groceries when the doorbell rang—not just once but multiple times, as though the person ringing it were trying to be annoying. Harry.

"It's open," he hollered.

Harry poked his head around the door. "I, ah, thought I heard grocery bags. Borrow a soda?"

"Come in," sighed David. "Hurry up, before the cat gets out."

His neighbor crept in quickly and shut the door. "My God, he actually did it. Well, that's that, then. You're on your way."

David tossed him a soda. "Hardly. I just—"

He paused as Bonnie flew between them and landed near Sadie's dish, after which he and Harry just looked at each other.

"Hey, David. Your bird's out."

David peered at the cage, perplexed: sure enough, its little door hung wide open. He strode closer and stood on the end of the couch to inspect it.

"That's weird," he said, rubbing the latch between his fingers. "It's almost like ..." He paused.

Harry popped open a can of soda and joined him. "What?"

David frowned, examining the parts. "The latch. It's like it's been melted. Look," He made room for Harry on the couch and the man hopped up next to him. "Check it out. It's just sloughed away like butter."

Harry looked at it, squinting. "That is weird. And look at this," He reached into the cage and fingered the rearmost bars. "These are warped, too." He dabbed at them with his fingertips. "They're still warm. You been pointing heat rays at your parakeet or what?"

"Maybe Sadie has heat vision," David joked.

There was a distinct *chirp* followed by a tentative *meow*, and they looked toward the kitchen. "Uh-oh," said David. He hopped down from the couch and hurried toward them—but was instantly relieved when he saw the two just checking each other out ... amiably, it seemed. "I don't believe it," he said.

"And now for the bad news," said Harry, and laughed.

"What do you mean?" asked David, watching them carry on.

Harry finished his soda and crushed the can in his fist. "The bad news is ... she'll be no good as a mouser."

And then they both laughed, and David let them be as he began preparing dinner and Harry invited himself to stay.

By the time David's lunch hour rolled around the snow was coming down in sheets and the radio had warned of more to come, possibly as much as 6 inches. He was quite frankly exhausted from trudging through it when he collapsed in his chair next to the heat radiator in Building #4 and sat his lunch pail on the floor.

Because that was the thing about snow in his line of work—he was a night watchman for Community Colleges of Spokane—you *had* to do your rounds. If you didn't, the evidence, or lack thereof, was there for all to see. He stripped off his shoes and socks, thinking about Bonnie, and sat them on the radiator, wondering where the parakeet had disappeared to, and if, when she turned up, Sadie would be as docile in an empty house as she had been while he and Harry watched. He picked up his lunchbox and sat it on his lap, thinking about the cat's weird behavior when he'd gotten home: the frozen manner, the dazed eyes, and thinking, too, about the melted latch.

You been pointing heat rays at your parakeet or what?

Maybe Sadie has heat vision.

He had to laugh a little. She *had* been staring at it when he'd gotten home. He unlatched the pail but paused before opening it. But really—how had the thing gotten like that? Did he have a poltergeist? Was that it?

He watched as the snow drifted down, turning the campus into a necropolis. Then he opened the lunch pail and looked at its contents, wondering how many baloney sandwiches a guy could eat before he loosened up his budget and opted to live a little. No matter. He had vegetable soup in his little Thermos and a chilled Pepsi right outside the door—he'd placed it in the snow at the beginning of his shift—so how bad could it be? He unscrewed the cap of the Thermos and swished his spoon around in the broth—when he was distracted by an enormous gray cat, just looking at him through the glass.

Well, hello there, he thought, even as he lifted a spoonful to his mouth—and realized suddenly that it contained not just canned vegetables but Bonnie's little head.

He was still brooding over it even as he pulled into his driveway, wondering how the thing had gotten there and when precisely she'd killed

it—and why the soup, for God’s sake? His mind felt numb as he thought about it: There’d been no blood on the counter, he was sure of that. So that meant she had killed Bonnie elsewhere and literally carried the head for whatever distance to his soup, probably when it was still on the stove, but again, why, in God’s name?

He looked up at his apartment window after he’d gotten out of his truck, he didn’t know why, and saw Sadie sitting in the sill, staring down at him, it seemed. *Hey, you little psychopath*, he thought, as the snow flut-tered down and clung to his face. *Have you been a good girl?*

He was relieved to find, a few minutes later, that she had: for nothing appeared amiss either in the kitchen or the living room. The bedroom, too, seemed in perfectly good order—although Sadie was no longer at the window, which *did* beg the question: Where on earth was she, exactly? He began calling out her name as he moved toward the bathroom, and was surprised by how little his voice sounded, how nervous.

“Sadie? Saaadie?”

He felt a wave of apprehension as he entered the bathroom, he wasn’t sure why, but was pleased to find it normal in every respect—there wasn’t even any discernable cat box odor. He laughed a little at his own paranoia. What had he expected? ‘REDRUM’ scrawled across the mirror in cat shit?

“Saaadie ... here, kitty-kitty ...”

He felt her before he saw her, just sort of a chill that ran up his spine, causing his arms to break out in gooseflesh, and craned his neck after re-entering the bedroom—and she hissed as they made eye contact. Nor was that all that he found disturbing: for she had somehow scaled the tallest bookshelf in the home in order to gain her present position—and yet not a trinket had been disturbed, not even the little glass flamingo perched on its single leg. Then she meowed almost forlornly and it occurred to him that she was stuck up there—that she was, quite frankly, probably just scared.

“Easy does it, girl,” he said, as gently and non-threateningly as he could. He took a tentative step closer. “You want down, is that it? We—we can do that. But you got to be nice, okay? You can’t—shred my arms to ribbons if I try to help, all right?”

She hissed as he took another step and he paused, thinking better of it. His uniform. Then he went to the open closet to fetch his old civilian coat—the one he wore when he was working on his truck—and promptly froze. For the truth of it was: he was having difficulty processing just what it was he was seeing.

“Get rid of her, dude. Seriously,” Harry said as he examined David’s spare uniform, which had been riddled with burn holes as if someone had taken a lighter to it. “Just take her out to the country and drop her off. I’ll go with you.”

David stopped pacing long enough to look at the clock, which read 10:30 pm—meaning he had exactly one-half hour before he had to be at work. “Jesus, Harry. It’s the middle of winter. I can’t just abandon her. We don’t even know if she’s respons—”

“Dude. The melted latch. Your parakeet. This crazy shit,” Harry indicated the burnt uniform. “Somehow I don’t recall you having these problems before.”

He looked at Sadie, who was sitting in the corner of the living room and staring at the fish tank atop the entertainment center—a spot from which she hadn’t moved since they’d gotten her down from the bookshelf. “And move that tank. She puts a hole in it and all that water’s going to short your electronics. And then *poof!* We got a fire. And I live in this building too, you know?”

David looked from the cat to the tank to the clock again. “Fuck. I gotta go. Can you help me with it in the morning?”

“I don’t trust her until morning,” said Harry, flatly. “Leave me your key ... and I’ll—I’ll look in on her. All right?”

David just looked at him. At last he dug out his keys and separated the one for his apartment. “Don’t lose it. It’s the only one I got. And don’t drink all my soda.”

And then he was gone, back out into the world—as the snow piled down and Sadie stared at the fish tank and Harry paced back and forth nervously.

David found himself going way too fast on the way home—in no small part because of what he’d read in the college library. For what he’d read made a certain kind of sense: this notion of some cats being almost co-dependent; of feeling a sense of ownership with regards to their human masters. To the point that anything which might take them away could be viewed as a threat, and thus lead the animal to act out ... by defecating on furniture, say. Or dropping severed parakeet heads in their vegetable soup.

All he knew for certain was that he’d had a very bad feeling most his shift—a feeling which had been exasperated when he’d dialed Harry and only gotten his voicemail. Now, as he sprinted up the stairs toward his apartment, he was genuinely worried.

The first thing he noticed was the door to Harry’s unit hanging open, which initially flooded him with relief—until, that is, he called his friend’s name, and there was no answer. He crept into his unit slowly and checked all the rooms—nothing.

It’s fine, he thought. Just means he’s at your place ... probably snuggled up with the damned cat.

He eased Harry’s door shut and moved across the hall to his own—and heard water boiling before he’d even finished opening the door. That’s when he noticed Harry standing in the middle of the room, just standing there as though he hadn’t a care in the world—even though half his head was missing and his left eyeball was dangling. Even though Sadie was perched on the edge of the couch nearby and staring up at the

fish tank—her eyes rolled back in her skull—as the tank boiled over and the electronics began to spark and short-circuit.

Crazy old Harry, just standing there, as dead as he was wide-eyed, and with a small fire burning in what was left of his partially-exposed brain. A fire which must have at last melted whatever was holding him up, for his knees buckled as David watched and he crumpled to the floor, startling Sadie from her trance and prompting her to pounce on him reflexively, after which she glared at him over the man's corpse and he felt a burning between his eyes—and knew he had to get away.

And then he was running, out the door and into Harry's apartment, the door of which he swung closed behind him—before sliding down the wall in a kind of mental exhaustion and attempting to catch his breath, which he'd just begun to do when he smelt burning wood and realized a hole was being seared into the lower portion of the door.

Come on, then, bitch, he thought, half-crazy with desperation, and loosed the Maglite from his belt. *You want a ticket to the great kitty condo in the sky—well, come on!*

And then she *was* coming, for the hole had expanded to let her through even as flames raced up the rest of the door, and he brought the club-like flashlight down hard and fast—striking her in the head as brutally as he could so that she yowled and hissed and tried to swipe at him ... but finally retreated beneath his continuing blows. At which instant he scrambled to his feet and grabbed a blanket from the couch, which he promptly used to beat the out the fire.

What followed was a silence in which he could only stare at the hole warily, certain he had wounded her but not nearly convinced the threat was over. At last he moved into the kitchen and took a butcher knife from the sink. Then he crouched near the door, and, after listening for several moments—and hearing nothing—began calling out to her.

"Saaadie. I'm right here, honey. Come on ..."

Several more minutes passed and still there was nothing. He leaned closer to the hole.

“Come on, sweetie. You know we’re not finished yet ...”

He gripped the knife and waited as the silence buzzed in his ears.

Wasn’t it at least possible that he’d already killed her? Blows like those ... and from a Maglite ... they would have laid low the strongest man, much less a 10-pound Main Coon.

He didn’t stop to think about it before he looked through the hole and the tip of his nose was flayed away. And then she was upon him, bursting through the hole and attacking his face, biting at his cheeks, sinking her claws into his scalp—even as dropped the knife and tried to shield himself desperately.

And then he was up, somehow, he was stumbling toward the window, and he somehow managed to yank her from his face before, holding her by the scruff of the neck while cocking his arm back—he launched her at the glass.

She hit like a rock and the glass shattered ... and then, just as suddenly as it had all begun, it was over, and he was standing there with his face and uniform cut to ribbons while watching snow billow gently into the room. Finally, once he’d caught his breath, he approached the window and looked down.

A story below, what had once been Sadie burned in the snow, its ashes spiraling in the breeze and the flames which were consuming her popping and hissing.

The End

CLOUDS
by
Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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“Meet you at the top!” Kerber hollered—cockily, as always—as he climbed rapidly past us. He gestured toward the cloud ceiling. “We’ll leave a light on!”

Sean and Karen looked at each other as his balloon disappeared around the envelope of our own.

“Everything a competition,” sighed Sean. There was a deafening roar as he toggled the blast valve. “Had to show us he could beat us on the ascent—even at night.”

“Talk about that a little,” I said, continuing to roll. “You mentioned that his balloon was different from yours. How so?” I nodded at Eddy, who moved the boom mic closer. “Just look out at the sky, Sean, not the camera.”

He scratched at his beard and seemed to marshal his thoughts. “Well, he’s running a gas balloon, not a hot-air vulcoon, which is what this is. A gas balloon uses gas instead of hot air for its lift, which is advantageous because you can stay up longer—a lot longer—and because it’s so quiet. There’s none of this,” He toggled the blast valve again and there was a mighty roar as liquid propane vaporized and ignited. “So, on that level, they’re extremely sought after. The problem is one of economy. Helium is *expensive*. Like, real expensive. Like five grand to fill a balloon expensive. So people use hydrogen—which, while relatively cheap, is also incredibly flammable. The *Hindenburg* was full of hydrogen, as is The *Excelsior*.”

He was referring, of course, to billionaire Ronald Trimp’s promotional blimp—which, winds allowing, we’d be seeing when these balloons and others converged on the Super Bowl in the morning.

Sean looked at the camera awkwardly. “How was that?”

“That was good, Sean. Thanks.” I stopped recording and ran the footage back—too far, to the point where the old Indian we’d encountered before takeoff was talking.

“They move,” he said, gazing at the snow-smothered hills.

“T-they? The mountains? The mountains move?”

“Uh-huh. They fall from sky ... onto my land.”

“Oh?”

He nodded. *“They move.”*

I powered the camera down—there wouldn’t be much to see until dawn, anyway—still thinking about his words. *They fall from the sky ... onto my land.*

“Wreckage from Jupiter 6?” prompted Eddy, noticing my expression. He was referring, of course, to the unmanned mission to the cloud planet, which had blown up in the earth’s atmosphere immediately after its long journey home.

“Yeah. Maybe.” I zippered my parka all the way up.

The two-way radio crackled to life. It was Kerber, calling from the other balloon. “West by northwest, you see that?”

It wasn’t until Sean had turned on the spotlight and aimed it in that direction that what he was talking about became clear: for a kind of fog bank had rolled in seemingly out of nowhere—and was moving toward us at a shockingly rapid clip.

“Sean ... what is that?” I recall asking nervously.

But he didn’t respond, at least not at first, and it took an elbow from Eddy to remind me why we were there in the first place.

I reactivated my camera. “Okay, folks. This is what reality TV’s all about. Remember, we’re not here.”

I zoomed up on Sean’s beard and focused as he toggled the mic.

“That’s affirmative, *Gas Monkey*, we see it. Not sure we believe it, but we see it.”

“The weather report said clear skies,” cursed Karen, even as the radio crackled and Kerber came again: “It’s nothing to worry about. A little thermal turbulence—*Gas Monkey* suggests letting it pass and carrying on.”

I panned past Karen slowly enough to register her concerned expression before focusing on the approaching clouds, which bubbled and roiled and shown mauve-pink, like plumes of dry ice at a rock concert.

Then they were upon us, reducing visibility dramatically and smelling faintly of ammonia.

"I'm not so sure," said Sean at last. Though I may have imagined it, it seemed there was a small quaver in his voice. "*Hot-air One* recommends seeing how thick it is before proceeding. Stand by."

"Negative, repeat negative on that. *Gas Monkey* will continue to ascend."

"Jesus Christ," hissed Sean, and released the mic.

I refocused on him, liking the way the purple fog rushed past him in the dark—

And something moved in that dark. Something like a giant scythe, which rose like a whale's pectoral fin breaching water and just as quickly vanished.

"Holy shit, what was that?" blurted Eddy, and jolted, his sudden movement rocking the basket.

Karen had seen it, too.

"Jesus, Sean, there's something out there ..."

"Something out—" He turned and looked into the mists, which bubbled and swirled, and I regained my senses enough to tape him as he did so.

"What'd it look like?" he asked, craning his neck to look up, then quickly cued his mic. "*Gas Monkey* this is *Hot-air One*. What's your altitude?"

"It wasn't them," said Karen.

"I repeat, *Hot-air One* to *Gas Monkey*. What is your present altitude?"

We all waited, shivering in the dark, and as we did so I zoomed up on Sean's face to capture his concern.

"It looked like a wing," Karen blurted suddenly.

He froze for a moment and didn't say anything. At last he looked from her to Eddy and then to me. "Ah. I see." He smiled suddenly and waved a finger. "You got me. Who's idea was it? *Hmmm*, let me guess ..."

He looked back to Karen and was about to say something when there was a sound like a slab of meat hitting the concrete and he jolted abruptly and we all just froze, in part, I suppose, because we couldn't figure out what the massive, arrow-shaped thing that had suddenly materialized amongst us was. But then the blood dribbled from his mouth and Karen began screaming and I realized with horror that he'd in fact been impaled—impaled by some kind of spaded appendage, which uncurled in the mists even as I watched and was suddenly stretched taught—so that he was jerked from the basket with a sickening crunch and swung arms and legs akimbo into space.

That was the worst of it, I think, seeing him swung about like a ragdoll like that, and in such an empty void, his body rising and falling as though in slow-motion and his arms and legs flapping almost gracefully—even as the owner of that appendage passed through the beam of the spotlight and revealed itself in full.

In retrospect, I wish I'd continued recording, for what I saw in that instant is difficult to describe, even now. Suffice it to say that it had a body like that of a manta ray—upon who's tail the balloonist had been impaled—or a manta ray combined with a bat, albeit huge, and that it was covered with a kind of camouflage which reminded me of pictures I'd seen of Jupiter—just a roil of purples and pinks and browns. I suppose that was when it first hit me: the possibility that there might be a connection between this *thing* and the Jupiter 6 probe. That the probe might have brought something back, even if it had just been a sprinkling of microbes on its surface.

And then there was an explosion somewhere above us, the concussion of which rocked our balloon, and we all looked up to see *Gas Monkey*—my God, it was like the sun!—on fire; and yet that wasn't all we saw, for as it dropped it became evident that there were more of the bat/manta ray things attached, suckling it as it fell, crawling upon it like flies. Then it passed us like some kind of great meteor—its occupants shrieking and calling out—and was gone below, the heat of it still painting our

faces, its awful smell, which was the smell of rotten eggs, filling our nostrils.

And then we were just drifting, all of us crouched low in the basket ... and the only sounds were those of Karen sobbing and my own pounding heart.

I'm not sure how much time passed, maybe five minutes, maybe twenty. All I know is that the sky had begun to lighten and that it was Eddy who spoke first, saying, "Hydrogen. They feed on hydrogen. We're safe."

I must have looked at him, because I remember clearly how pale he looked, how ill.

"Jupiter 6?" I said, although I already knew the answer.

"Why not?" He laughed a little to himself. "Cosmos. Carl Sagan. Hunters and floaters."

"Someone needs to toggle the propane," said Karen, absently, it seemed, as though she were a million miles away.

I looked at her to see a woman clearly in shock. "I'll do it. Okay? You—just relax." I looked at the apparatus for controlling the balloon. "The red lever?"

She nodded and sniffed, like a helpless little girl, and I climbed to my feet. Eddy grabbed my ankle.

"Wait. The cloud. Are we still in it?"

I scanned our surroundings. "Yes."

"Okay, toggle it and get back down. Quickly!"

I toggled it and got back down.

Quickly.

"What is it?" I asked.

"The cloud ... it's ... I think it's a form of camouflage. You know, like how octopuses squirt ink—but in this case it's to confuse their prey, not predators. Right? Okay. So that means as long as that cloud's there, we got trouble."

"But you said they—"

"Feed on hydrogen, that's right," he said. "But they don't *know* we're running on hot air—not yet."

"Which means—"

"Which means they're checking us out, right now."

I looked at the pink and purple clouds. "But wouldn't they have a way to, I don't know, *sense* when hydrogen is present?"

"I'm sure they do. Look, all I know is they just hit the jackpot with Kerber's gas balloon, and it looked a lot like ours, all right?"

"Right," I mumbled, seeing the truth of it. "And that's not our only problem."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean there's a giant meal called the *Excelsior* which could be hovering over the Super Bowl right now. Jesus. How many people does a stadium like that hold? 90,000? A hundred?"

No one said anything.

I climbed up and peeked over the basket's edge.

Sure enough, through a hole in the marmalade clouds, the stadium had come into view, shining like a north star and already crowded with balloons—including the *Excelsior*. I looked at the bullhorn in the corner of the basket, the one Sean had said he used to communicate with people on the ground. At least there was a way to warn the crowd—if and when we got there.

"The burner—it needs to be triggered again," said Karen, distantly. "And our altitude ... what is it?"

I looked at Eddy. The truth of it was, I was sort of hoping he'd take this one. But he only shook his head.

"Right," I sighed at last. "Okay. Is that the altimeter?" I gestured at the readout next to the burner valve.

Karen nodded.

"Okay—hold my beer."

And I counted to three.

What happened next happened very fast—so fast that I was unable to process the enormity of it until Eddy was long gone and so was most the floor, leaving us to dangle precariously as our feet sought the shattered plywood's edges and we hung onto the cold, chromed burner supports for life. For Karen had stood with me as I reached for the red propane valve (to check the altimeter herself, presumably) and thus been spared falling into nothing when one of the creature's knife-like tails penetrated the flooring—harpooning Eddy through his abdomen before jerking him clean through the plywood and dragging him screaming into the void.

But something else happened in that instant too, something which remains the single most terrifying aspect of the ordeal. For as we clung to the burner supports and tried to keep our feet on what was left of the floor, the head of one of the creatures darted from the fog—it was easily the size of a refrigerator laid on end—and just stopped: the tip of its nose all but touching my own and its huge eyes which were full of spirals regarding me with something like curiosity. Then it exhaled, blowing the hat off my head, and arced away into the mists, and as it went I felt a great rushing of wings as though a dozen others had suddenly abandoned their fascination with us and followed.

And then it was just us, Karen and I, gripping the burner supports and trying to keep our feet on what little remained to support them. And I knew that she knew we were safe now—at least from our Jovian hunters—but that we had a responsibility, too. For it was clear to both of us, I think, that the monsters had not merely lost interest but been *lured* away—by the promise of enough hydrogen to fill them all to bursting. By the promise of Ronald Trimp's leviathan blimp, which now loomed large in the slowly clearing mists.

By the time Karen had maneuvered us to a hard landing at the edge of the playing field, the first of the sword-tails were already circling the *Excelsior*—just circling and gliding, as though carefully sniffing the zeppelin out. As for myself, I knew we'd have but seconds before security responded—violently, I was sure—and so was scrambling with the bullhorn before the balloon's envelope had even fully deflated. I only remember that the thing was heavier and louder than I'd expected, and for the latter, at least, I was profoundly grateful.

"Ladies and gentlemen, I'm going to ask you all to get up and proceed to the nearest exits. Please don't panic, just do it now and in an orderly fashion."

But they did panic, almost instantly, probably because someone had already noticed the sword-tails, and the next thing I knew there was a sea of humanity crushing toward the exits even as the security staff ran at me across the field and the first explosion rocked the arena.

"Get on the ground!" I recall someone shouting in the instants before I was piledrived, and then I was literally seeing stars as the heavysset men piled on and at least one of them started kicking me in the ribs.

"Jesus, look up!" Karen shouted, and when I rolled over on my side I saw that she had leapt atop one of the men's backs and was forcibly lifting his head.

To the purple-pink sky and the soaring Jovian hunters. To the massive, dark-skinned zeppelin which was already on fire and continued to explode as additional cells were ignited.

And then I was free, they'd clambered off me at last, and I struggled for breath while still curled up on the Astroturf even as great chunks of burning wreckage began to reign down all around and Karen tried to help me to my feet. And yet even amidst all that it occurred to me: my camera might still be in the ruins of the balloon (for I'd placed it on a shelf below the bulwark right after the *Gas Monkey* had exploded). And the next thing I knew I was searching for and finding it and triggering

the record button, pausing only to look at Karen over the viewfinder as she let go of my arms at last and began shaking her head.

“I—I’ve got a kid, if no longer a husband,” she said, the tears streaming down her face. “I can’t stay here.”

“I know,” I remember saying—as gently as I could under the circumstances. “Go. I’ll be all right.”

And then she smiled almost motherly—and was gone across the wreckage-littered field.

It didn’t take long for what remained of the *Excelsior* to come crashing down, its great, bullet-shaped envelope almost completely burned away and its interior girders warping and melting. Nor did the hydrogen-eaters abandon it even then, but continued to draw sustenance from it as their abdominal sacs swelled and their manta ray/bat wings beat furiously and their eyes seemed to spiral like the storms of Jupiter itself.

As for myself, I’d retreated to the relative safety of a roofed area near the dugout, where I continued to record as the now-gorged hunters at last began to rise ... and in very short order disappeared into a cloud of their own making.

And then—finally—it was over, and I could only stare at the ruins of the *Excelsior* as a few survivors stumbled from the smoke and swirling particulate—at which instant I awakened as if from a dream and hurried to assist them.

I was helping an elderly woman get back on her feet when I first heard the gasps and expressions of surprise happening all around us. Nor did it take long to figure out what they were responding to, for when I followed their collective gaze to the blue-gray sky I saw two enormous creatures rising into the clouds—*huge* creatures, as big as mountains, shaking off avalanches of snow with each undulating breath, pulsing upward like man-of-wars in water.

And I remembered the old Indian.

They fall from sky ... onto my land.

And knew nothing would ever be the same.

The End

GOLEM
by
Wayne Kyle Spitzer

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Why did I do it? *Because I was meant to.* Because that's why I had been allowed to live. This was the whole of the affair in one simple statement.

Memory, of course, can be a dodgy thing: why else would my recall of the Benton Boys—and how Old Man Moss had brought their reign of terror to an end—have lain dormant for so long (forty years, to be exact), right up until that moment I saw what I'd at first taken to be a man—but quickly realized was not—ascending the tower crane just beyond our encampment?

The obvious answer is that a lot can happen in forty years. A man could go from being an innocent kid in Benton, Washington (population one-hundred and seventeen) to a scary homeless dude in Seattle—Belltown, to be precise—just as I had. But there's another answer, too, one we don't talk about as much, which is that some things get buried not for any lack of a mental space to put them but for their very unfathomableness and steadfast refusal to make sense. For me, Old Man Moss' handling of the Benton Boys had been just that, something I'd sublimated completely in the years following not because the event—the events—had been forgotten, but because I simply hadn't the means of processing them up until that night; the night I climbed the massive tower crane in downtown Seattle and came face to face with the brute. The night the string of gruesome murders that had plagued the city for months had, at last, come to an end.

"I don't see anything," said Billy the Skid, his boozy breath seeming to billow with each syllable, as he stood beside me and squinted up at the crane. "Who would it be? Construction's been halted for months, even I know that."

"I didn't say 'who,' I said 'what,' as in what is that, right there?" I pointed to where the gray figure could once again be seen (ascending not the ladder inside the scaffolding but the tower itself, like some kind of huge spider). "Do you see it? Like a man, and yet somehow not a

man. And look, it's got someone thrown over its shoulder. It's right there, damn you!"

Billy only shook his head. "Whatever you say, boss." He chuckled as he made his way back to his shopping cart. "Someone thrown over his shoulder. I say if you can't handle Thunderbird you ought to leave the drinking to me. Who the hell did 'ya think it was? The Belltown Brute? Ha! And I suppose he ..."

But I wasn't listening, not really. I was still watching the gray man, the gray *thing*, ascend the tower—the hammerhead, I've heard them called—its tail swinging like a cobra (yes, yes, it had a *tail*), its ashen skin seeming to catch the lightning and throw it back, its cone-shaped head turning to face me.

Yes. Yes, it could be. Still ... was it even possible? Well, no, to be frank—it wasn't. But then, everything about the summer of '79 and what had happened to the Benton Boys and Old Man Moss' ancient Jewish magik had been impossible. That didn't change the fact that it had happened—and it *had* happened—hadn't it?

I didn't know for sure, no more than I knew whether the entry point to the crane would be locked or if I had the courage to scale the ladder or if lightning would strike as I climbed killing me just as dead as the Benton Boys. In the end I was certain of only one thing—one thing alone as I gazed up at the tower crane and watched its great jib swing in the wind. And that was that if what I suspected was true, I was at least partially responsible—for the Benton Boys, for the string of murders across Seattle and the so-called "Belltown Brute," all of it.

And that meant I had a responsibility to do something. Indeed, that I was the only person who could.

They'd had names, of course. Rusty, Jack, and Colton—otherwise known as the Benton Boys. But their individual identities had long since been subsumed by the group, the pack—I'm sure if you would have

caught any single one of them alone they'd have been just as agreeable as could be. The rub, of course, was that they were never alone—that was something those who challenged them learned quickly. I learned it the day I was to meet Colton at the flagpole after school to settle our differences and he didn't show; which left Aaron and I to hoof it home feeling both victorious and relieved, at least, that is, until we rounded his block—and found them waiting for us. All three of them.

I wish I could say I was shocked that Aaron got the worst of it—it was my fight, after all, not his—but the truth of it was the Benton Boys' race-hatred was well known, and they weren't about to miss a chance to thrash a genuine Jew. Not when his idiot friend had created such a perfect opportunity. And so the racial epitaphs flew, faster even than the Boys' fists—kike, shylock, yid, Christ-killer, a few I'd never even heard before—and poor Aaron bled, and by the time it was done we'd both suffered concussions and Aaron had lost a tooth and Old Man Moss had begun screaming—in Yiddish—from his door, calling the Boys chazers and hitsigers and paskudniks, and informing them the police were already on their way. Which they weren't, actually, because Old Man Moss didn't trust anyone in a uniform.

Regardless, the Benton Boys promptly fled, and after a brief sojourn in the emergency room we were back in Aaron's front yard—just sitting there on the porch with his parents and watching the shadows lengthen across the grass. That's when I first heard his old man utter the word “golem,” which he pronounced *goy-lem*, drawing a stern rebuke from Aaron's mother, who said, quickly, “Feh! And bring tsores upon us? Oy vey! *Mishegas*.”

The Old Man only snorted. “It is Mishegas to do nothing.” He stroked Aaron's hair absently. “No. An eye for an eye. A tooth for an actual tooth.”

“Bubbala ...”

“No. *Meesa masheena*. So it will be.”

And nothing more was said—not by the Old Man or by Aaron’s mother or by anyone present at all.

By the time I saw Old Man Moss again, Spring was moving rapidly toward Summer and we’d been out of school for nearly two weeks—long enough to have already tired of jumping into the river and/or bicycling out to Shelly Lake; which, in case you were wondering, were the only things to do in Benton, during that summer or any other. I was luckier than most in that I had a lawn mowing business to occupy my time—mostly for friends and family, the Mosses included—which is what I was doing when Aaron tapped me on the shoulder and asked if I could lend he and his father a quick hand.

“Is it out of this heat?” I remember shouting over the lawnmower—which was louder than most—the sweat running in rivers down my face and arms, “Because I’m dying here, and that’s no joke.”

“It’s right here, in the garage,” he said breezily, but seemed uneasy as I killed the motor and sponged my brow. “Look ... not a word about this, okay? And, please, don’t laugh. Whatever you do. He—he’s touchy about his art.”

I think I just looked at him. It was fine by me; I’d no idea he was even an artist. “Sure, man. No problem.” I must have leaned toward him. “What is it? Some kind of naked pictures?”

He blushed and stepped back. “No, man. Jesus. But it is—strange. Not a word now, okay?”

“Not a word,” I promised, and gave him a salute.

It’s funny—because the first thing I noticed upon stepping into the garage wasn’t the fact that Old Man Moss was holding what appeared to be massive gray arm in his hands. Nor was it the fact that in the middle of the room stood an 8-foot-tall giant—a giant which appeared to have

been fashioned from solid clay and resembled not so much a man but a hulking, naked ape. Nor was it even the thing's frightful visage or stoic, lifeless, outsized eyes.

No, it was the fact that the room was illuminated by candles and candlebrums—as opposed to bulbs or work lights or sun seeping through windows (all of which had been covered with what appeared to be black sheets). It was the fact that the garage didn't look like a garage. It looked—for all intents and purposes—like a temple.

"Ah, Thomas, by boy! *Vus machs da!* You are just in time."

It was on the tips of my lips to ask him what for when he handed me the arm, which was surprisingly heavy. "I'll need you and Aaron to hold this while I sculpt. Can you do that?"

The clay was tacky and moist beneath my fingers. I looked at Aaron, who looked back at me as if to say, *Just go with it. Humor him.*

"Sure, Mr. Moss. But—" I followed Aaron's lead as he positioned the arm against the mock brute's shoulder. "What on earth *is* it?"

His face beamed with pride as he worked the leaden clay. "Why, this is Yossele—but you may call him Josef. And he is what the rabbis of Chelm and Prague called a golem—a being created from inanimate matter. This one is devoted to *tzedakah*, or justice."

At last he stepped back and appeared to scrutinize his work. "And justice is precisely what he will bring—once he is finished. Once the *shem* has been placed in his mouth." He took a deep breath and exhaled, tentatively. "Okay, boys ... you can let go. Slowly."

I didn't know what justice had to do with art, but we did so—the clammy clay wanting to stick to our fingers, its moist touch seeming hesitant to break contact. "Aaron, won't you be a good *boychick* and bring me the *shem*. Easy does it, now. Don't drop it."

I watched as Aaron approached one of the workbenches and fetched an intricately-crafted gold box.

“Ah, yes. The *shem*, you see, is what gives the golem its power—thank you, son, a *sheynem dank*. It is what gives it the ability to move and become animated.”

I glanced at Aaron, who only looked back at me uncertainly, as his father approached the golem and opened the box, the gold plating of which gleamed like a fire before the candelabrum. “This one consists of only one word—one of the Names of God, which is too sacred to be uttered here.” He withdrew a slip of paper and placed it into the golem’s mouth. “I shall only say *emet*, which means ‘truth’ ... and have done with it. And so it is finished. *Tetelestai*.” He turned and looked directly at me, I have no idea why. “The debt will be paid in full.”

Nobody said anything for a long time, even as the birds tweeted outside and a siren wailed somewhere in the distance. We just stood there and stared at his creation.

At last I said, “So are you going to enter in the Fair, Mr. Moss, or what? How will you even move it?”

At which Old Man Moss only smiled, ruffling my hair, and said, “No—it is only for this moment. That is the nature of Art. *Tsaytvaylik*. Tomorrow it will be gone. Now run along and finish your lawn. I’ve involved you enough.”

And the next day it *was* gone, at least according to Aaron, and both of us, I think, promptly forgot about it. At least until the first of the Benton Boys turned up dead, Sheriff Donner directing the recovery while his ashen-blue body bobbed listlessly against the Benedict A. Saltweather Dam.

It was June.

By July, the body of a second Benton Boy had been discovered—my very own buddy, Colton.

They’d found him in a stone quarry about fifteen miles from town—the Eureka Tile Company, as I recall—his limbs broken and bent

back on themselves (“like some discarded Raggedy Ann,” wrote the local paper) and his head completely gone—which caused a real sensation amongst the townsfolk as each attempted to solve the riddle and at least one woman reported having seen it: “Just floating down the river, like a pale, blue ball.”

But it wasn’t until Rusty was killed that things reached a fever pitch, with Sheriff Donner under attack for failing to solve the case and neighbor turning against neighbor in a kind of collective paranoia—for by this point no one could be trusted, not in such a small town, and the killer or killers might be anyone, even your spouse or best friend.

It was against this backdrop that I was able to break from my lawn duties—which had exploded like gangbusters over the summer—long enough to visit the Mosses: which would have been the day before Independence Day, 1979. A Tuesday, as I recall. It’s funny I should remember that. Aaron’s mother was working in her vegetable garden—just bent over her radishes like an emaciated old crone—when I arrived, and didn’t even look up when I asked if Aaron was around. “He’s in his room—done sick with the flu. Best put on a mask before you go.” She added: “You’ll find some in the kitchen.”

I think I just looked at her—at her curved spine and thin ankles, her tied up hair which had gone gray as a golem. Then I went into the house and made my way toward Aaron’s room, passing his parents’ quarters—upon which had been hung a ‘Do Not Disturb’ sign and a Star of David—on the way. I didn’t bother fetching a mask; I’m not sure why—maybe it was because I was already convinced that whatever Aaron had, I had too. Maybe it was because I was already convinced that by participating in the ritual we’d somehow brought a curse upon us—a curse upon Benton—that it had never been just ‘art’ and that it could never be atoned for, not by Aaron or myself or Old Man Moss or anybody. That we’d blasphemed the Name of the Lord and would now have to pay, just as Jack had paid, just as Colton had paid. Just as Rusty had paid when

they'd found him with his intestines wrapped around his throat and his eyeballs gouged out.

"Shut the door, please. Quickly," said Aaron as I stepped into his room—immediately noticing how dark it was, and that the windows had been completely blacked out (with the same sheets from the garage, I presumed). He added: "The light ... It—it's like it eats my eyes."

Christ—I *know*. But that's what he said: *Like it ate his eyes*.

I stumbled into a stool in the dark—it was right next to his bed—and sat down. Nor were the black sheets thick enough to completely choke the light, so that as I looked at him he began to manifest into something with an approximate shape: something I dare say was not entirely human—a thing thick and rounded and gray as the dead, like a huge misshapen rock, perhaps, or a mass of potter's clay, but with eyes. Then again it was dark enough so that I may only have imagined it—who's to say after forty years?

"Jesus, dude. What's happened to you? And where's your dad? I saw a 'Do Not Disturb' sign on his door. Is he—"

"Like me, only worse," choked Aaron, and then coughed—wetly, stickily. "Listen. I haven't much time. Do you remember the ritual ... and how we inserted the *shem* into the golem's mouth?"

"Of course," I said—and immediately started shaking my head. "Now wait a minute. You don't really think—"

"*Shut up, man. Just shut the fuck up.* This is important. The Benton Boys—what's happened to us—it's not a coincidence, okay? Dad—he created a golem ... do you understand? Not a work of art—not what Ms. Dickerson calls a metaphor. But a genuine, animate golem—right out of the folklore. Now, my mother called Rabbi Weiss when the murders started happening and told him what she suspected—that my dad had created Josef to avenge the Benton Boys' attack on us. And do you know what he said?"

"Aaron, Jesus, man—"

“He said this type of golem would go on killing, that it wouldn’t stop with just the Benton Boys but would continue on to different towns and cities—for months, years, even decades. That it could make itself invisible—at least to anyone who hadn’t a hand in creating it—and thus go about killing with complete efficiency; and that not even bullets could stop it, only the hand of its creator or someone who had assisted in that creation—by removing from its mouth the one thing that allowed it to move in the first place ... the Holy Shem, the slip of parchment upon which was written one of the secret Names of God.”

He gripped my arm suddenly and I could tell by his cold, clammy embrace that it wouldn’t be long; that his flesh had become like clay and his blood had turned thick as mud. “It’s you, Thomas, don’t you see? You! Only you can stop it now, only you can—”

But I didn’t hear anything else he had to say, for I’d scrambled to the door and burst back into the hall. And then I ran, ran as though the world could not contain me, faster and faster and further yet—across forty years and from every type of responsibility—into drugs and alcohol and the cold numbness of the streets. Into a dream of forgetfulness which ended only when I saw the man who was not a man scaling the ghostly tower crane near our ramshackle encampment in Belltown. Until I went to the base of it, and, finding its gate laced open, mounted the ladder at its center. And began to climb.

I was nearing the top—although still a good fifty feet away—when there was a sound, a series of sounds, actually, *thunk—thunk—thunk*, like a ham bouncing down metal stairs, and something sprinkled my face. That’s when I realized that what had fallen (and bounced off the beams) was in fact a human head. By then, of course, it was gone, and I was continuing my ascent: trying not to acknowledge how the city had become so small or that lightning could strike at any instant or that the shaft of the crane was swaying woozily in the wind. Trying and mostly succeed-

ing—at least, that is, until I reached the top, whence I climbed onto the platform next to the operator's cab (which was hanging wide open) and proceeded to vomit, although whether it was from a fear of heights or the smell of decomposition from the cab I couldn't have said.

Nor was I surprised to find that the compartment was stuffed full of bodies and body parts, like a veritable meat locker ... filled with arms and legs and heads and torsos ... or that when I turned away to retch again I saw the golem itself at the end of the crane's long jib—just crouched there in a kind of lotus position, as if he—it—were meditating. As if it—he—were waiting for me.

I can see you, Josef, I thought as the American flag crackled at the back of the crane and the great jib swung languidly in the wind ... *Can you see me?*

And then I began moving forward, slowly, tentatively—the rails of the jib like ice beneath my grip.

You can, can't you? I thought, and knew that it was so. *Tell me, Josef. Why is it you think I was spared—why I've been spared all these years—when your other creators were turned into little more than pillars of salt? Have you ever thought about that?*

Lightning flashed in the distance and turned everything white—turned the golem white—so that its monstrous features fell into stark relief; so that its cone-shaped head shown like a knife.

We are bound together, after all—don't pretend I don't know that. Even as I know you can hear me—just as plain as though I were speaking. And I ask you again—have you thought about it? Because I have.

Thunder rumbled as I drew to within twenty feet of him and paused, wondering just how I would go about it, how I would remove the *shem*. At last I said, "You were created not by God but by a man and the sages before him—now you must return to your dust. Do you understand that? It is not now, nor has it ever been—nor will it ever be—your earth to walk. It is time to go, Josef. It is long past time."

He—it—whatever—just looked at me, its slanted gray eyes inert, uninhabited—lifeless—and yet, *not*. And it occurred to me that creation was itself a kind of blasphemy; a fracturing of some perfect, unfathomable thing into something separate and purely reducible—something alone, something apart. That it was, in a sense, a cruelty. And if that were the case—wasn't it at least possible that the golem—

But then it was *moving*—suddenly, impossibly, and I was stumbling back along the gangway, and before I could do much of anything it had leapt upon me and begun gnashing its teeth—at which instant I jammed my fist into its mouth and groped for the *shem*, and whereupon finding it, yanked it free.

At that it had simply collapsed, its full weight pinning me to the gangway, and its body had broken apart like so much old masonry as its arms and legs snapped in two and its head rolled back from its shoulders—to promptly shatter against the steel mesh floor.

That's when the rains came, washing away the clay and drenching my hair and clothes, which were a beggar's clothes, until finally I rolled upon the gangway and peered down at our encampment—which was visible only because of Billy the Skid's battery-powered light—and realized, abruptly, that I still gripped the *shem*. The Holy Shem.

The Secret Name of God.

I didn't move, didn't breath, for what seemed a long time. In the end, I merely turned my fist and opened it—letting the slip of parchment fall. Watching as it fluttered into the void.

And then I slept.

At length I dreamed, of Benton and summer and freshly-cut grass ... and the first time I'd had matzo; as well as of Aaron and his parents and my parents too, whom I hadn't seen or dreamed of in years.

And when at last I awakened I did so not to the gray ceiling of my tent but a swirl of seagulls and the entire sky.

The End

