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PORTAL

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BRAVE YOUNG HARRY O'REILLY



By Etheridge G. Lovett

The warm morning sunshine streamed through the thin curtains of young Harry O' Reilly's upstairs bedroom window. The sudden burst of golden sunlight lit up the room like an angel's appearance. The wafting aroma of breakfast awakened Harry's senses. His eyelids sprung open, revealing his blue eyes. Harry O'Reilly was ready to start a new day.

"Harry, wake up now. Brush your teeth and wash your hands... Breakfast is almost ready!" shouted Harry's mother, Sarah O'Reilly from the kitchen downstairs. She was a petite, attractive, middle-aged woman with curly red hair and blue eyes, who loved her son deeply.

"I'm up now Mom... I'll be down in a minute!" Harry shouted down the stairs. Although he's born with Down syndrome, Harry's Irish parents taught their child how to be independent. His Mom, a certified teacher, didn't want Harry to struggle in life so she educated her son. Her efforts paid off. Harry is now focused, smart and independent, always reminding his mother and father of just how smart and independent he was. The smell of the alluring breakfast grew stronger. Harry rolled out of bed, sliding his feet in his favorite bedroom slippers. He stood, entering the restroom to brush his teeth and wash-up for his morning breakfast. Moments later he emerged.

"I'm all cleaned up Mom... and I did it all by myself!" Harry reported while on his way down the stairwell. He made it to the kitchen table and sat down. Sarah had cooked Harry his favorite hotcakes and sausages, buttered toast and orange juice. His freckled cheeks seemed to blush when his mother placed his plate of food in front of him, saying, "Harry, don't start eating until your Dad arrives and blesses the food."

"Okay Mom. I'll just look at it until Dad arrives... but I hope he arrives soon because I'm hungry," Harry said, smiling.

Before Sarah could reply to her sons' statement, Jim O'Reilly, Harry's father, came down the stairwell in a hurry. The tall, red headed firemen with bright blue eyes loved his job so much that he made it a habit to be on time every day. He kissed his wife, and ran his hand through his son's highly noticeable red hair.

"Hey, what's the big idea?" Harry questioned, giggling. He rubbed his hair back in place. His mother chuckled over her husband's game-play with their son.

"A wonderful morning is the big idea... I may have some good news for you Harry," Jim said, smiling as he sat beside his son.

"What good news Dad? Tell me the good news," Harry inquired.

"Since you received a certificate from the New York City Fire Department's Fire Safety & CPR Class, the good news is that you'll soon be employed... I recently found out that your cousin is the head of the security crew in Tower Two of the World Trade Center. He has a job position waiting for you as a security officer," Jim explained.

"Honey that is such wonderful news to hear," Sarah expressed, beaming with joy for her son.

"Oh boy—I finally got a job. I can work like you Dad and help save people. I promise I'll work hard and make you proud of me," Harry said.

"Harry, I'm already proud of you son... Simple words can never express how proud I am of you," Jim replied, his voice cracking as tears welled up in his eyes.

"You achieved what many thought you'd never achieve... We love you so much son," Sarah added, kissing her son on his rounded, freckled cheeks. She then hugged him tight.

"Mom, Dad, I love you so much," Harry expressed, hugging his parents tight.

"Later this evening, we'll get dressed and go out and celebrate your new job. However, tomorrow morning, I need you to be up bright and early in the morning around 7:00am, dressed and ready to go with me so I can drop you off on your new job before I go to

work at the fire station," Jim said, shaking his son's hand.

Harry clapped his hands, beaming with excitement over the great news saying, "I'll be awake and ready to go to work Dad, don't you worry... I'll get up real early and be ready for work."

That night they enjoyed a great time in Manhattan... the city that never sleeps. As he promised his Dad, the next morning, Harry was dressed and ready to go to work. He was so excited that he barely slept. His mother prepared his lunch for him, stuffing it with his favorite turkey sandwiches, apple juice and strawberry cupcakes.

"Listen Harry, this will be your first day on the job so do your very best now and make your Mom and Dad proud of you," Sarah said, placing her forehead up against her son's, a game they often played ever since Harry was a child.

"I'll do my best just for you and Dad—I promise... I love you Mom," Harry said, smiling.

Storming down the stairs, Jim said, "Harry, I hope you're ready... We're running a little late—I got to meet cousin, Jason in front of the worksite in a few minutes or we'll miss him." Jim grabbed his car keys. He hugged and kissed Sarah, then grabbed his son's hand as they headed out the door.

"I'll see you later," Sarah said. She stood in the doorway, waving at her husband and son climbing into the vehicle. Jim waved back. The vehicle backed out of the driveway and sped off down the street.

"I still can't believe it... Harry, you're a working man now," Jim said, reaching over and playfully brushing his hand through his son's bright red hair once again. Harry exploded in giggles, shouting, "Come on Dad, you're going to make me look bad on my first day on the job!" Harry pushed away his father's hand, then brushed his hair back in place the best he could. His father laughed over his son's statement. Minutes later, Jim reached the intersection of Liberty & Church Street. He pulled up in front of World Trade Center Tower Two.

"Wow—look at how tall these buildings are," Harry said, gazing up at the twin towers through the front window of the vehicle. "Looks like I have a lot of people to protect here

as a security officer."

"Lots of people Harry... Come on... there's my cousin Jason standing over there," Jim said, hopping out of the vehicle. He waved his cousin over to his pickup truck.

The tall burly man, wearing a well-pressed security officer's uniform, approached the vehicle.

"So— where's my new employee I've heard so many good things about?" asked Jason O'Reilly.

"I'm right here, Sir," Harry replied, hopping out of the vehicle, straightening up his clothing like a private trying to impress a four star general.

"I'm your cousin Jason O'Reilly, Supervisor of the security and safety crews for Tower Two. I think you'll fit right in around here... Just stick with me and I'll take good care of you. Perhaps one day you just may become a head security officer like me," Jason explained.

"Cousin, I sure appreciate you finding a work slot for my son. Look, I got to go to the fire station so call me when you think you'll be finished showing Harry the ropes. I'll stop by and pick him up then... Oh, by the way, Harry, don't forget your lunch," Jim said, reaching in the vehicle for the lunch box. He handed the lunch to Harry and hugged him and Jason.

"Cousin, don't even mention it... I'm proud to have Harry onboard with us," Jason replied.

"Harry, you take good care of yourself son... I'm proud of you and I love you," Jim said.

"I love you too Dad... I'll see you soon," Harry said. He watched his father hop into his pickup truck and vanish in heavy morning traffic.

"Well, it's me and you now Harry. Welcome to the World Trade Center Towers. Let's begin with a hot cup of coffee and a fresh donut... how does that sound to you?" Jason asked.

"That sounds great, but I don't drink coffee. The creamer stirs up my stomach something terrible," Harry revealed, holding his stomach.

"Don't you worry—they have water, sodas, and orange juice so you can take your pick... Come on, let's get some breakfast before my other security officers gobble it all up from us," Jason said, patting Harry on the back. They entered Tower Two and proceeded to the

elevators with several others.

"As members of the security crew, we get a chance to meet some very nice people around here," Jason said as they waited on the elevator to arrive.

"I can't believe how big and tall these buildings are," Harry said.

"Harry, you said a mouth full... This South Tower Two alone is 1362 feet high and has 110 floors. Each tower has ten million square feet of rentable space. To top it off, approximately ten thousand people work in the Twin Towers... is that enough statistics for you?" Jason asked.

"It sure is... All I can say is wow," Harry gasped.

"We'll meet up with the security crew on the seventieth floor. After we put your lunch in the refrigerator and grab a morning snack, we'll begin our security stroll through that area then eventually work our way back down to the first floor. Your job would be centered on walking, observing and reporting to me what you find that may be a security risk or problem," Jason said.

The elevator reached the first floor's lobby area. Harry and Jason entered with other business men and women dressed in their executive attire. Once the doors to the elevator closed, it whisked them up to the seventieth floor. The burst of sunshine beaming through tall office windows surrounding the floor, met everyone exiting the elevator.

"Come on Harry, over here," Jason said, guiding Harry to a group of security officers standing near an open doorway to one of the security monitoring rooms.

"Good morning gentlemen. Here's our new employee, Security Officer, Harry O'Reilly. He comes to us highly qualified so give him the same courtesy you give me," Jason reported.

"Welcome onboard Harry! Welcome to the World Trade Center Towers!" everyone greeted, shaking the excited new employee's hand. Jason pulled out a gold-plated security badge and pinned it upon Harry's chest.

Harry smiled, saying, "Wow... my very own security badge... I'm so happy to be onboard with you guys...very happy." He rubbed the badge repeatedly.

"Harry, don't rub that gold off that badge now... go ahead, place your lunch inside the refrigerator over there and grab a juice and

donut from the table and come with me to see an amazing view of New York from up here," Jason offered.

Harry grabbed a donut, a bottle of water, and followed Jason to one of the tall windows that had a wonderful view of New York City.

"I feel as if I am standing up in heaven like the angels, looking down on the whole world," Harry said, smiling with his face pressed against the window.

"Harry, when you're standing in this building, remember... you are in heaven... This building is pure state of the art. These buildings are like heaven on earth. These Twin Towers will probably stand as long as the pyramids of Egypt," Jason said. He took a sip from his coffee and peered out of the window at Tower One, and the endless clear blue skies surrounding it.

Before the two could turn away their gaze; American Airlines Flight 11 streaked across their view in a flash, crashing into the north side of the North Tower of the World Trade Center between floors 94 and ninety eight.

"Oh— my— God!" Jason shrieked, dropping his cup of coffee on the floor. He clutched a handful of his graying hair. "A plane just crashed right into the North Tower!"

With his eyes stretched, Harry stood petrified, plastered to the window. He watched large plumes of black smoke and fire wrapping its way around the tall building. People, who heard Jason's words and the loud explosion, ran to the windows to gaze out at the sudden devastation unfolding in the building next to them. Maintenance workers, security officers, executives, and visitors who came to Tower Two for business matters, all watched the mayhem unfolding in the North Tower.

"Someone call the fire department!" Jason shouted across the room. He called his supervisors on his handheld radio to share the terrible news.

"I can't believe it... How could a plane lose its way and crash into the tower—this is sheer stupidity on the pilot's part," one executive reasoned with his face pressed against the window, staring at the unfolding catastrophe.

"Harry, we got to go and report to the fire safety desk in the South Tower's lobby area," Jason said, waving Harry onward.

Harry took one last quick glance at the burning tower then followed Jason, saying,

"Time to go and save someone in the tower across the street."

Jason and Harry rushed through the startled crowd gathering. They made their way to the elevators. A group of people waited patiently to go into the elevator. Once the elevator arrived, everyone stepped inside. Jason pressed the button for the first floor. Another person pressed the fiftieth floor. Once the elevator's door closed, it went downward, reaching the fiftieth floor. The moment the door slid open, everyone heard a loud explosion and felt a hard jolt rattle the elevator. The sudden smell of jet fuel permeated the elevator.

Without explanation, Harry grabbed Jason by the hand, pulling him out of the elevator. They both fell on the carpeted floor. Others also sprung from the elevator in a panic. Some of them wouldn't make it out in time.

"Harry, what are you doing? I was supposed to go down to the first floor!" Jason blasted.

"I'm sorry Mr. Jason, I just didn't feel right inside the elevator when I smelled the fuel," Harry said, holding his head down in disappointment. No sooner than Harry's words crossed his lips, a loud rumbling sound was heard coming from the elevator shaft. Those who remained inside the elevator stood with a blank stare upon their faces. The elevator ignited in flames, burning those inside alive. A large ball of fire rolled out of the elevator shaft, burning the outer steel door frame. The lights in the building also blinked off, sending the floor into darkness. Only the sunlight from the blue skies outside shone into the building, offering minimal light.

"Harry—come and follow me... We got to get out of here!" Jason shouted, pulling Harry towards the stairwell. A thin haze of white smoke filled the building. Everyone scrambled to the emergency stairwell, some of them coughing and weeping.

"What the hell is going on—I just don't understand what's happening," Jason said. He called down to the fire station safety desk. They informed him that another plane deliberately flew into Tower Two. They further explained that it was a calculated, deliberate act.

"My God—Harry, we got to get out of this building," Jason said. He grabbed Harry's hand and hurried down the dark stairwell towards the first floor. The sound of women crying and shuffling feet increased all around. While going downstairs they ran into more people exiting from each floor's emergency doors. The stairway was rapidly filling up, but

Jason and Harry continued downward in the darkness.

"I can't get up—someone please help me stand up!" one woman cried out. She was knocked to the floor by the panicky crowd of people and simply forgotten. Harry heard the woman's plea and raced back to help her. In the darkness, he lost contact with Jason as the crowd continued down the stairs. When Jason made it to the first floor he noticed that Harry was not behind him or nowhere near him.

"Harry—Where are you Harry!" Jason called out, looking around in all directions, but still he couldn't find Harry.

New York Firemen and police approached Jason, telling him, "Sir, you must leave the area as quick as possible... The building's structure is not safe!"

"I have a family member up there in that damn inferno!" Jason shouted in rage.

"Please, Sir, don't worry, we'll do everything in our power to get them out... You run to safety and let the firemen do their job," the police officer said.

"Please hurry and find him... He's just a young kid... His name is Security Officer, Harry O'Reilly... It was his first day on the job," Jason said breaking down in tears.

A stout man, covered in ash and several scrapes, staggered out of the first floor's emergency exit of the South Tower. He overheard Jason mention Harry's name.

"Harry O'Reilly, a young security officer with red hair?" the man said.

"Yeah, did you see him?" Jason asked.

"Sure, he was heading back up the stairs after he lifted a piece of furniture that had me pinned down. That kid is an angel in disguise—a true hero... Before he left me he said he's going up further to see if he could help someone else," the man said, coughing a few times. The firemen placed an oxygen mask over the man's face.

Jason took one final look at the smoking building before leaving, whispering, "Harry... I love you so much."

"Jason O'Reilly!" a familiar voice called out. When Jason turned, he saw Jim O'Reilly yelling from the passenger side of his fire truck pulling up to the scene alongside several other fire trucks. Jim sprung from the vehicle dressed in his firemen outfit with his gear in hand.

"Jason—where's my boy, Harry?" Jim asked.

"Jim, there was a terrible explosion... the lights went out and we were trying to exit the stairwell in the dark when I lost contact with Harry among hundreds of other people trying to escape... I'm sorry that I lost him Jim... I'm so sorry that I lost him," Jason said weeping.

Jim hugged his cousin, saying, "Don't you worry... I'll find my son... You just get the hell away from these buildings and tell my wife to be strong... Tell her that I love her so much."

"Jim, I promise I will tell her. You, and your men; be careful up there," Jason said, hugging his cousin once more. He then walked alongside the others who were heading away from the burning buildings while still looking up at the black smoke billowing out of the windows.

Jim glanced over at the other firemen who were also gazing up at the inferno. They were stunned to see people jumping from the windows to their deaths.

"Look, regardless of what we see, this is what we trained for... let's do what we do best... that's to save lives, no matter what... my boy's up there so let's go and save him and as many others as we can," Jim said in a firm voice, rushing towards the building while putting on his gear.

The brave firemen also put on their gear and ran into a building that many were fleeing from with no fear in their hearts for their lives. They reached the stairwell where many were trapped, barred by falling debris. The firemen freed them, ordering them to flee the building. The brave firemen continued up the stairs. More people spilled out of the building because of the help of the firemen. They fled to safety, but Harry was not among them. Jim continued up the stairs. He sent up a silent prayer that he'd be able to find his son. Jim and his men came upon another cluster of people, trapped in the darkness. The firemen guided them in the right direction out of the smoldering building. Jim decided to strike out further up the stairwell in a faster pace than his men. In his final effort to find his son, he finally came upon Harry. Harry was trying to help an old woman down the stairwell.

"Oh—My—God... Harry!" Jim shouted, tears welling up in his eyes when the light of his flashlight lit up his son and the old woman. He hugged his son then helped him direct the woman down the stairs.

"Dad, I helped a lot of people today... a lot of people. Some of them said they're going to remember my name," Harry said, smiling with dirt and soot smeared over his face.

"Your name is to forever be remembered, Security Officer, Harry O' Reilly... I'm so proud of you son, so damn proud of you. You proved just how brave and strong you really are," Jim said smiling.

Other firemen met them, helping them downward. Despite all of their efforts, the building began creaking and whining. Even the stairwell seemed to move. The firemen who understood such sounds, knew what was about to happen. Even Jim knew that time was up.

"Come closer to me, Harry," Jim said. He pulled out a gold crucifix and a four leaf clover from his pocket that his father had given him as a boy and wrapped it tight around his hand. He kissed Harry on the cheek and embraced him and the old woman in his strong arms while looking upward, waiting on the laws of gravity to play its part.

Likewise, the other firemen who knew what was to come, comforted all others in the stairwell, each sending up their final prayers. They knew their fate was sealed and their work on earth was complete. The sturdy building's steel support beams were finally compromised by the intense heat of the flames, as tons of concrete, steel and glass began to pancake downward on top of frightened citizens, the brave New York firemen, and Jim and Harry O' Reilly, burying them all in a matter of seconds.

So when you ever decide to visit the site where the Twin Towers once stood, don't forget to remember the many American citizens who lost their lives there. And don't forget the brave firemen, like Jim O'Reilly, who gave their lives to save others there... Most importantly, don't ever forget about brave young Harry O'Reilly who stood the tallest amongst them all- there.



Tascosa

By Rick Weber



In 1880, Tascosa was a booming Oldham County town in the Texas Panhandle. The big attraction was beef and people up north could not get enough of it. Texas had more head of cattle than it knew what to do with. The end of the Civil War brought a new prosperity to the region. George Davis, who had fought for the South, was now a prominent rancher near Tascosa. Mr. Davis established the GD Ranch about five years after he resigned his commission as an officer with the 3rd Texas Cavalry.

Mr. Davis was a man who did what had to be done. He was firm, but fair in his dealings with others, which earned him respect in the community. When he made a promise, he kept it. He was terse and direct in what he said without ambiguity and he always spoke up for what was right. He did what he had to do and always finished what he started, which made him a successful rancher. George Davis demanded loyalty from those around him and was true to them in return. He took pride in his ranch and that was shown by the way he ran it. All of his principles were put into action. The same cowboys would return to work for him on both the spring and fall cattle drives every year with a few leaving to do other things.

For George Davis, some things could not be compromised. He never did anything which could remotely be construed as illegal. He knew when to draw the line and could not be pushed over it. Mr. Davis was a solitary man and from this he cast his lot.

Rory Bullock, not his real name, was the antithesis of George Davis. Rory made his way to West Texas not as a veteran looking for work. Rory had just turned four years old when the war ended in 1865. He had no memories of the conflict and did not care about who won and who lost. By the time he was fifteen, he had already become well acquainted with the authorities in his native New York City. Each

scrape with the law showed a growing predisposition to violent crime beginning with beating his mother senseless during a family argument on the street in front of their home when he was eleven. The altercation was witnessed by a patrolman who beat him unconscious with a Billy club. The matter was not referred to the courts and Bullock's wild behavior festered.

At fifteen years of age, Bullock performed a strong arm robbery upon a huckster selling medicinal potions on the street. A struggle ensued with the huckster falling back and striking his head against the wall of a brick building. The huckster was dead before he hit the ground with witnesses to the incident. It didn't take long for the police to come looking for the person we call Rory Bullock. Bullock used the few dollars from the robbery to get out of town and to go where he was not known. He got the name Rory Bullock from a Civil War veteran he met on the docks in Baltimore, a man whom he watched get kidnapped by Crimps for involuntary servitude on a ship. Guessing that the real Rory Bullock would not need his name working on a ship sailing to the other side of the world, the fugitive took it for his very own and became Rory Bullock. Along the way, the new Rory Bullock shied away from criminal activities. He had no desire for anyone to know that he was on the run from New York. Going west seemed to be his best way to leave it all behind.

As he went from place to place, Rory held a number of different jobs from farm hand to cobbler while keeping a low profile. The people he met along the way were nice enough, but they asked too many questions. When he could no longer keep his answers straight, he would move on. In New Orleans, he heard about the need for ranch hands in West Texas who made about thirty dollars a month. He didn't know anything about ranching, but he knew how to ride a horse, a skill he had learned while he was on the run. A church minister, who had befriended him in New Orleans, told him about moving to Santa Fe to start a church there and asked Rory if he wanted to come with him. At first Rory said no, but then asked if he would be traveling through the Texas Panhandle. The minister said yes. Rory asked if he could accompany him as far as a place called Tascosa. When the minister agreed, Rory grabbed his few belongings and he headed west with the minister and his family. Rory reasoned that he could hide out better in a new place where no one knew each other.

When the minister's wagon arrived in Tascosa, Rory got off and thanked the minister and his wife for all they had done for him before

saying goodbye. The minister wished him Godspeed.

As the minister's wagon went down the road out of town, Rory went to the local blacksmith's shop nearby to check out the prospects of finding a job. He went inside the shop and saw the proprietor, a large black man, working with a piece of iron at the forge. The proprietor, Acorn Emmanuel, had lived in the area for several years moving there after his discharge from the US Cavalry at Fort Concho, where he was a Buffalo Soldier. His first job in Tascosa was on George Davis' GD Ranch. Acorn worked the cattle drives for Mr. Davis and in-between helped out on the ranch. As more people moved into the area, more goods and services were needed. Acorn was very handy and George Davis knew it. After Acorn married an Indian woman, whose family had not been driven off by the white man, Davis offered to stake Acorn's interest in opening a blacksmith shop. Soon after opening his doors, word of mouth alone gave him a prosperous business and Acorn's days on the trail doing cattle drives were over.

"What can I do for you?" Acorn asked the stranger. "I'm looking for work. Do you know any place that's hiring?" Rory politely asked, "If you're looking for ranch work, I know a place that needs help for the upcoming cattle drive, the GD Ranch." Acorn answered him. "I can ride a horse, but I'll have to learn the rest." Rory quietly said. Seeing that Rory didn't have a horse, Acorn made an offer to him. "I have some hinges, nails, and a few other things I made for a new barn Mr. Davis, the owner; wants to build. If you help me load my wagon, I'll take you up there this afternoon and you can ask him about a job." Rory agreed and the two of them set out a few hours later for the GD Ranch.

At the ranch, Acorn introduced Rory to George Davis on the front porch of his small, but nicely appointed house. While Rory and George talked, Acorn unloaded the wagon by himself, putting everything into a shed by the house. When Acorn was finished, he returned to the front porch where George told him. "Acorn, you'll be going back to town by yourself. I just hired this young man to work here." Acorn then got back on his wagon and headed back to town as the sun was beginning to sink in the western sky.

During the next few weeks, George would occasionally stop by the blacksmith shop and Acorn would ask how the "tenderfoot" was doing. Each time, George would say, "Just fine," and would let Acorn know that Rory was a hard worker, and doing well at learning the ropes.

Acorn's most frequent visitor to the shop was Noah Bigelow, a newly appointed deputy sheriff for Oldham County. Noah, like Acorn, was another former employee of George Davis, who also held Mr. Davis in high esteem. Noah was also a confederate war veteran and migrated to Texas after the war. Noah and Acorn had worked together at the GD Ranch before Acorn had struck out on his own to open the blacksmith shop. Noah stayed on at the ranch until Mr. Davis urged him to take the job of deputy sheriff.

Tascosa was one of four towns in the Panhandle at the time and had the reputation for being the original Wild West town. Bars, dance halls, and brothels had sprung up in this metropolis, bringing with them all of the violence which became synonymous with the region. According to local legend, Noah's boss, the sheriff, killed the first man to be buried in Boot Hill Cemetery. Noah had no intentions of ending up in Boot Hill himself, but couldn't turn down the job when George told him the sheriff needed all the help he could get. Being a deputy for Noah had one advantage. It meant no more cattle drives and long nights on the trail. It also meant he could settle down and have a family.

Noah usually stopped by Acorn's shop in the mornings before Tascosa became alive for the day. It was the only time the two men could get together to talk. On most mornings, Acorn would be getting his forge fired up with charcoal he had made himself in a kiln he had built behind the shop. While Acorn did this, Noah would usually start the morning conversation with the latest news from what happened overnight. Noah would give detailed accounts of the bar fights, arguments over the ladies of the evening, and any shootings, which may have occurred as a result of such encounters. Today, it was Acorn's turn to start the conversation and he told Noah about the tenderfoot who arrived in town the day before and got a job at the GD Ranch.

Acorn advised Noah that he didn't know what to make of the stranger. The young man seemed nice enough and wanted to work although he didn't appear to have the makings of a cowboy. When Acorn finished his assessment, Noah remarked, "Well, I guess that I'll have to keep an eye on him." With that, Noah left the shop to start his rounds for the day.

The railroad was coming to this part of Texas and with it the thoughts of more prosperity among its inhabitants. Land was being bought up by the railroad. Corporations were beginning to delve into ranching. This bothered the small ranchers most and even

some of the larger ranchers, such as George Davis, who didn't like to think that they'd be muscled off of their property. This didn't stop local politicians from pushing their own agendas and Silas Kirk was one of them. Silas had courted a meat company owner from Chicago, John Whitehall, to come to Tascosa with the purpose of making an investment.

Silas Kirk was not held in the same high regard as George Davis was by the local citizens. Kirk was a robber-baron, pure and simple. When the Red River Indian was pushed the Comanche, the Arapahos, the Kiowa, and the other tribes off of their lands, Kirk was among the first to lay claim to them. Although he had no intention of ranching, Kirk had enough inside information to let him know that the railroad was coming and with it was progress. Progress to Kirk only meant one thing, money.

Kirk had Mr. Whitehall as his house guest at his palatial homestead outside of town. With the exception of a few outbuildings, such as, stables to house his horses and barns to store his wagons, Kirk's homestead was anything but a ranch.

George Davis never made any judgmental comments about anyone in town whether it was a power broker or a pauper. George kept his opinions to himself and minded his own business, which is why the people in Tascosa liked him. They also knew that when the time came, George always did the right thing.

The event, which would forever be etched into the history of Tascosa, came on a night when there should have been much joy. Noah Bigelow's wife Maria had just given birth to their first child, a boy they named Zebulon, at their home just outside of town. Horace Spencer, the town doctor, was there to bring Zebulon into the world and he was assisted by Acorn's wife, Dawn. Noah and Acorn sat on the front porch with Acorn's two young sons, Seth and Aaron, waiting for the baby to be delivered. Immediately after Zebulon was born, Dawn came out onto the porch and brought Noah in to see his new son. Acorn, Seth, and Aaron soon followed to partake in this momentous occasion.

As Doc Spencer was packing up his medical bag to go home, Butch, one of George Davis' ranch hands, knocked on the front door and asked Noah if the doctor was still there. Noah nodded and asked Butch what happened. Butch replied in a panicky voice, "Mr. Davis has been shot at the ranch. We need Doc Spencer's help." The doctor had heard the commotion at the front door and came out of the bedroom of

Noah's small house to investigate. Hearing about the shooting, he asked Butch, "Where was he shot?"

"In the back," Butch replied, "and he's bleedin' pretty bad..."

"I'm comin' with you," Noah said to Doc and grabbed his hat from a hook near the front door. Acorn just nodded to Noah and warned him, "Just be careful, Noah, we'll take care of things around here until you get back." The trio then rode out on horseback to the GD Ranch.

The ride to the ranch was long and it took some time to get to George Davis' house. Once there, inside the house they found Rory Bullock with two other ranch hands, a gringo named Slim, and a Mexican called Chico in the parlor. Slim was the only one who spoke.

"He's in there," he said, pointing towards the bedroom. Doc dashed into the room followed by Butch. A few minutes later Doc came back out and just shook his head. Noah and the others there knew that George Davis was gone.

"What happened?" Noah asked directing his question to no one in particular, although he and Doc had heard on the ride out from Butch that he, Slim, and Chico had been at one of the bars in town drinking since Saturday night. When they got back to the ranch, they saw Rory on the front porch yelling for help and saying that Mr. Davis had been shot. Butch volunteered to go for Doc Spencer since he was the most sober one of the three of them who had been at the bar.

Rory was the first one to respond to Noah's question. "I don't know. I was in the bunk house sleeping because we worked all day. I was dead tired. I heard a shot that woke me up. I hopped out of bed, put on my pants and boots, and went out to see what happened. At first, I thought Mr. Davis had shot a gray wolf or some other varmint but when I got up to the house I saw the front door was wide open and a lamp was lit inside. I went in and yelled out to Mr. Davis, but I heard nothin'. I went through the house lookin' for him and that's when I saw him in his bed face down. He was still breathing. I didn't know what to do. I heard the other guys comin' back from town and ran out on the porch to get help. Butch went to get the doctor. Slim and Chico stayed with me in the house with Mr. Davis. After a while, Mr. Davis just stopped breathin'."

Noah pondered over what Rory had just told him, not knowing if he had told him the truth or not. While Noah was in thought, Doc Spencer motioned to him and said, "Come into

the bedroom. There's something I want to show you." Noah ordered the four ranch hands to stay where they were and went into the bedroom with Doc. There Noah saw George Davis on his back with a blanket pulled up to his chin. His face was ashen. Doc then told Noah in a matter of fact tone, "When I checked to see if he was alive, he didn't have a pulse. I rolled him on his side to look at the gunshot wound. The bullet went into his back and out his chest, most likely ending up in the mattress. That's pretty cut and dry, but what caught my attention was the bed linen. Noah, it looks like he spent the evening here with someone. He's buck naked under those covers."

George Davis was a lifelong bachelor and both, Doc Spencer, and Noah, knew that he had no girlfriends. George was the most straight-laced person they'd ever met. Noah just shook his head and said, "Doc, I don't know what to say or where to start. The sheriff is gonna want someone locked up right away for this."

"I don't know what else to say myself," was Doc Spencer's reply and he added, "George lived like a monk up here. He never went to the cathouses in town and, as far as I know, none of the local widows ever kept time with him."

The doctor finished his work for the night by taking some notes. As he was leaving, Noah asked him to notify the sheriff and the town undertaker about George Davis' death.

Noah talked to the four cowboys after the doctor had left. Noah knew Slim, Butch, and Chico. The two gringos, Slim and Butch, had worked on the ranch for the past two years and Chico for over a year. Except for too much drinking on Saturday nights at the bars and an occasional fight in a brothel, the three of them were hardworking men who also played hard. Rory, on the other hand, was an unknown commodity. No one in town knew him at all. If Rory Bullock was like some of the other newcomers Noah had met since moving to Tascosa, he probably had something to hide. Noah was a cowboy not a Pinkerton detective. He didn't know what to do next... but as he told Doc Spencer, the sheriff would want results.

The sheriff rode out to the ranch with Wilhelm Mueller, the undertaker, on his horse drawn hearse. Noah told the sheriff of the accounts given by the ranch hands and Doc Spencer's comments about the condition of George's body and bedroom while Mr. Mueller listened. The sheriff had nothing to say when Noah finished and told the four cowboys not to leave town. Mr. Mueller collected George Davis' corpse and with the help of Chico and

Slim loaded it into his hearse. The sheriff locked up George's house and advised the hired help not to go into it while Mr. Davis' death was being looked into. The sheriff told Noah and Mr. Mueller that he would get a telegram sent to George Davis' next of kin in San Antonio, his brother Thaddeus, his only living relative, to notify him of George's death. The sheriff returned to Tascosa on Mr. Mueller's hearse with Noah following them on his horse.

It was dawn before Noah finally made it home. Maria and Zebulon were both asleep in the bedroom while Aaron and Seth slept on the floor in the front room. Dawn was cleaning up some things around the house, while Acorn extinguished the lamp in the front room. Acorn heard Noah ride up to the house and came outside to meet him.

"What happened?" asked Acorn.

Noah then reiterated what had gone on at the ranch. When he finished, Acorn responded, "I didn't know he had a girlfriend. He never had anyone up to his place except for the local politicians when something was up."

"I don't know myself," Noah remarked and added, "I just need some sleep." With that, they heard little Zebulon start crying.

"You better get used to that," Acorn said with a smile as he and his family left to go home.

Later that morning, the sheriff stopped by the Bigelow homestead to see their new addition and to talk to Noah about George Davis' death. After seeing the baby and congratulating Maria, he told Noah on the front porch that Noah had to get this matter wrapped up quickly because word was now all over the county about George Davis being killed. Noah knew that with only a couple of hours of sleep he had to start his day. As he was about to make his way to the GD Ranch, he was met at his front door by Gertrude Mueller, Wilhelm Mueller's wife, who had stopped by to see baby Zebulon. When she came inside of the house, she told Noah that Wilhelm wanted to see him, but Wilhelm didn't say what it was about. Noah then left on his horse after Gertrude informed him that she would stay with Maria and Zebulon until he got back.

Wilhelm Mueller, a tall German from Munich, let Noah into their funeral home. With a heavy German accent, Wilhelm told Noah, "While I was preparing his body, I noticed some unusual things you should be made aware of. Doctor Spencer came over and also looked at the body."

"So, what did you find that was so unusual?" Noah asked.

In a tactful manner, Wilhelm explained that he had observed other injuries to George's body which were not from gunshots. After Wilhelm completed his explanation of his findings, Noah could only say, "I guess this means I have to talk to Doc Spencer." Noah thanked Wilhelm and left the mortuary, heading over to Doc Spencer's house.

Doc Spencer was sitting on his front porch as Noah rode up to the house. They exchanged some pleasantries and Noah told him that he would pay him at the end of the month for delivering Zebulon. Doc Spencer, knowing that they were both tired, gave his assessment of what he observed at Mueller's funeral home. To summarize what Doc Spencer had just told him, Noah stated, "So, in addition to being shot, you're saying that some other things went on in George's bed before he got shot."

"That's right," was the doctor's reply.

"We knew that last night. How did this play into him getting shot?" Noah asked.

"That's for you to find out," the doctor responded.

Noah saw the sheriff before going to the GD Ranch and let him know about his discussions with Doc Spenser and Mr. Mueller. The sheriff gave Noah the key to George's house and told him to look around to see if there was something they could use to help them find the murderer. Before entering the house after he had arrived at the ranch, Noah checked on the ranch hands and found that all of them were still on the property.

The closed up house had an odor of death about it. Noah went into the bedroom and looked over the bloody mess from the night before finding nothing of interest. Back in the parlor, he walked over to a desk George Davis had against one wall. There he saw a couple of letters from some companies. Another was from the railroad. Noah couldn't read very well and put the letters in his coat pocket. Hopefully, Acorn, who learned how to read when he was with the 10th Cavalry, could explain to him what they said.

Over at the bunkhouse, he spoke with Rory since he was the only other person that was known to be at the ranch when George Davis was shot. Slim, Butch, and Chico went out to tend to some livestock while Noah talked with Rory. Noah first stared at Rory not sure what to ask, but then prefaced his first question, "You have only been here a few weeks and not

like the other guys here, you don't know the first thing about ranching or moving a herd. What really brought you to Tascosa?"

Rory became nervous and started fumbling for answers. None of what he stated made any sense to Noah, who finally said, "We get a lot of folks passin' through here who have a past that they don't want the world to know about. The people who live here don't care about these things as long as they don't interfere with what we have goin' on here. In your situation, we need to know. Now, what don't you want us to know about you?"

Rory's face became pale and he began groping for a response. He looked at Noah and knew his time was up. Rory then detailed his incident with the huckster in New York and his movements to go out west. He concluded by denying killing George Davis. Noah saw it differently and took him into custody.

At the jail, the sheriff was happy to see that Noah had locked up the stranger and congratulated him on bringing the young man to justice. Noah, on the other hand, was not so sure about his accomplishment.

On the way home, he stopped by Acorn's house and asked him to read the letters he took from George's desk. After reading the letters, Acorn told Noah that the one from the railroad was asking to build a right of way through the ranch to get into town. One was from a company from New York looking to buy property for an "investment". The third letter was from a meat packing company in Chicago wanting to buy the ranch and saying that Silas Kirk was their "local agent in Tascosa".

"Is that last letter signed by John Whitehall?" Noah asked and Acorn replied that it was. Both Acorn and Noah knew that Mr. Whitehall was Kirk's house guest and what Kirk was up to was not good.

"Kirk has been doin' a lot of things behind peoples back," Acorn started. "He's been goin out to the ranches and homesteads tryin' to get folks to sell their land cheap to these companies, but I don't know what it has to do with George bein' killed."

"I think I might be able to get an answer for that," Noah said.

The next day Noah met up with Chico, Slim, and Butch after George Davis' funeral at Boot Hill Cemetery. In keeping with the custom of the time, funerals took place soon after a person passed away. Thaddeus Davis was not able to be there because he was still en route by horseback from San Antonio to tend to George's

affairs. Outside the graveyard, Noah pulled the cowboys aside and asked them, "Did anyone visit George Davis at the ranch over the last couple of weeks?" "Just, Mr. Kirk, he had been by a couple of times. Once, he stayed overnight. I heard him and the boss talkin' about some land deals," Butch offered as Slim and Chico nodded. Some things were coming together for Noah, but he still was not sure. The next day, he stopped by the Acorn's blacksmith shop and told him about his latest trip to the GD Ranch.

"I remember when we were working there," Acorn mused thoughtfully as he stoked the forge, "Silas Kirk would come up to the ranch from time to time and it wasn't always when he had some money makin' deal cookin'. I knew George would have some long loud discussions with Mr. Kirk which would end up with them downing a bottle of whiskey and Mr. Kirk spending the night. No one saw him at the ranch the night George died. What's your plan?"

"Good question, I'll have to let you know," Noah answered. Noah then left and went over to the jail to talk with the sheriff.

At the jail, Noah talked with the sheriff out of the earshot of their only prisoner, Rory Bullock. The sheriff listened intently to what Noah had to say. When he finished his assessment, the sheriff told Noah that it was time to talk to Silas Kirk. Kirk was politically influential, but so was the sheriff. The sheriff had seen Kirk at the general store earlier in the day and thought that he was still there getting some extra items for his house guest. The sheriff and Noah went over to the general store and asked Kirk over to the jail for a "chat".

The sheriff invited Kirk into his "private office" which was a tool shed behind the jail. At first, Kirk was cocky and condescending to the sheriff. After the sheriff told him that Deputy Bigelow had come up with some new information which might concern him, Kirk's attitude changed.

Noah then described to him the additional injuries found on George Davis' body by the undertaker and corroborated by the town's doctor. Kirk became noticeably anxious when he heard this. His face beaded with sweat. Noah then went over the history of his visits to the GD Ranch along with his occasional overnight stays in George's house. The sheriff added that letters were found on George's desk by Noah, one showing an interest in acquiring George Davis' property. The sheriff also went on to outline Kirk's past dirty business dealings around the county. Kirk showed more signs of strain, wrenching his head from side to side.

At this point, Noah asked him a series of rapid fire questions, "Mr. Kirk, were you at the GD Ranch last Saturday night? What were you doing there? What was your relationship with Mr. Davis?"

Before answering, Kirk broke down crying and yelled out, "Yes, yes, yes, I was there." He went on to state that he had had a long time intimate relationship with George Davis sometimes spending the night at the GD Ranch. He did go on to state that he was also at the ranch that night to push a deal through for John Whitehall's meat packing company to buy the GD Ranch along with some other properties. When George Davis refused to go through with the deal because it would hurt some of the smaller ranchers, Kirk became uncontrollably upset and shot him with a pistol he was carrying. Kirk immediately left the ranch after the shooting.

Rory Bullock was subsequently released from custody when no word came back from New York about bringing him there to face charges concerning the huckster's death. Bullock slipped quietly out of town and was never heard from again.

The sheriff discussed Kirk's situation with the district judge. Kirk was allowed to plead guilty to a reduced charge saying for the record that the shooting arose from a heated business dispute and that he had not planned to kill George Davis.

The judge and the sheriff both agreed that the other details of George Davis' relationship with Silas Kirk were irrelevant to the charges at hand. The sheriff later told Noah and Acorn at the blacksmith shop that George Davis would always be a good man in the hearts of the people of Oldham County and that everything should be done in a sensitive way not to sully his memory with the community. Both Noah and Acorn concurred because they would always remember George Davis for the good person that he was.

The railroad never went through Tascosa, but ended up at nearby Oneida, a city now called Amarillo. Tascosa eventually folded and became a ghost town. However, the courthouse and Boot Hill are still there serving as reminders of its turbulent past, but ranching is still a big part of life in Oldham County.

An Angry Young Man



By Narda McCarthy,
2006

The car came to a stop with a loud shriek. Slamming the door, a young man faced an older couple standing on the sidewalk across from his new home.

"I told you I would go up to see you!" He spat... "I have things to do, don't you understand?!"

The older man approached and hugged him. He returned the hug, his anger unabated.

"A Dollar too little, a day too late... I don't need you now!"

The woman tried to explain something in a low voice, but was interrupted.

"When my brother's kid was in the hospital you were immediately there; I call to ask where the car's registration is and you do not understand what I am asking for?!"

"He was a baby..." said the woman in a faint voice.

"You asked for the registration that is in the glove compartment and you are old enough to report a car break-in to the police!" responded the older man starting to get angry.

"You are never there for me! You are always too busy or too tired! I can still remember when I called you after I won the varsity wrestling championship, you did not care! I had worked my butt off and all you said was that... it was nice!"

A thousand images crossed the mother's mind, but she decided not to say anything.

After a brief pause the young man said, "Please leave my property—now." He got in his car and drove away from his home, leaving the elderly couple standing idle.

With tears in their eyes, the couple got in their car and in silence drove the forty miles that separated their home from his. They would allow distance and time to do the healing and when he was ready, they would be waiting for the son they deeply loved.

Uncle Max's Gift



Jamie White



Andrew hated that doll. From the moment he opened up the package, he could tell there was something not right about it. The doll felt weird... evil. As he stared into those creepy, blank eyes he couldn't help but feel a cold chill run down his spine. No one else seemed to notice, though. He wanted to toss the doll into the trash right then and there. Unfortunately, Andrew knew if he tried, his parents would've been furious. And besides... what could he do? Say the doll was scary? They'd think he was crazy, or at least sneaking in some scary movies at a friend's house. He also didn't want to hurt Uncle Max's feelings by telling him he hated it. He was always Andrew's favorite uncle and they were very close. They always had fun together and usually he was great at picking out presents, so Andrew sucked it up and thanked him for the devil doll.

Looking at the doll was bad enough. Then he found out it could move and make sounds. As the doll moved across the floor, its choppy movements and creepy music made Andrew want to run screaming from the room. The weird thing is everyone else liked it. They actually thought it was cute! He tilted his head, noting how the lights in its eyes formed this kind of demonic look. Why couldn't anyone else see that?

Later that night, he had a hard time sleeping. The doll seemed to be watching him. He got up and slowly walked over to the dresser he'd set it on. He didn't want to touch it, but he had no choice. He needed to put that thing somewhere he couldn't see it. After moving it

behind a bunch of pictures, Andrew turned to go back to bed.

He woke up the next morning, feeling much better after a full night's sleep. Andrew managed to forget all about the doll as he stretched and yawned. He stood up, putting on his slippers and bathrobe trying to warm up a little. As he reached for the doorknob, Andrew stopped, looking around the room. Something wasn't right.

After a minute, he saw it- the doll. Somehow, it was now sitting on top of his television. Had he dreamed of getting up and moving it? No, he definitely woke up during the night and moved it behind some pictures. Andrew decided it was time to move the doll to a more out of the way spot. He took the doll and set it on the top shelf of his closet. He even tossed a few old sweaters he never wore anymore on top of it. *There. That should do it.* Satisfied, he turned around and hurried to the kitchen for breakfast when he remembered they were supposed to be going to his grandparent's house. They were throwing him a birthday party because they had been out of town on his birthday. He'd been looking forward to the party for days. There was going to be great food, lots of music and lots of cousins to play with. Forgetting all about his new toy, he hurried to eat as quickly as possible and then finished getting ready. *This is gonna be so cool....*

They got home at about nine o'clock that night and he had to hurry up and get ready for bed. As Andrew opened his door, a scream escaped his throat. Sitting on the bed was that horrible little doll. His parents raced in, asking what was wrong. "The doll!" Andrew pointed at it with shaky fingers. "It moved!"

"What do you mean 'it moved'?" His dad raised his eyebrow, looking at his son like the child had lost his mind.

"Daddy, I swear! Before we left I put the doll in my closet! I even had a bunch of sweaters on top of it and now it's on my bed!! It did the same thing last night." Andrew turned to the dresser, pointing at the pictures. "I moved it behind those and this morning it was sitting on the TV!"

"Sweetie, I think you're letting your imagination run away with you. Were you watching scary movies at Tommy's house again?"

"MOMMY, I'm serious!! And I only did that one time!"

"You did that a week ago! A doll can't move by itself, even ones like that. You still have

to press the button to make it move. Why were you trying to hide it anyway?"

"It moved, Mommy! The doll scares me, so I put it where it couldn't watch me but it moved!! Now it moved again. I don't like it!" Andrew was so scared, he was almost crying. His parents looked at each other a minute and then his Dad spoke up.

"Alright.... We'll tell you what. We're going to take the doll and put it in our room, okay? We'll show you where we put it and in the morning, you'll see it's still going to be there."

"Okay, Daddy". Andrew was just glad to get that thing out of his room. It almost felt like its eyes were following him wherever he went. Andrew ran to his bed, grabbed the doll, and handed it to his mom before following them to their bedroom.

"Now let's see...." His mom glanced around the room a minute before walking over to their bookcase and setting it on the top shelf. "Here; this is where it's going to be, alright? You'll see, tomorrow morning it will still be there."

He didn't believe them, but he nodded anyway. "Ok, Mommy. Good night. Night, daddy!" Andrew turned and hurried to his room, eager to be as far away from the doll as possible. He finished getting ready for bed and climbed under the covers, pulling them all the way up to his chin and looking around, wishing he still had a nightlight.

It took a while, but Andrew finally managed to fall asleep. When he woke up the next morning the first thing he did was look around for the doll. Seeing it was safe, he got up and left the room, heading into the kitchen. "Good morning." His mom was cooking eggs while his dad was buttering up some toast. Andrew breathed deep, almost forgetting about the bad dreams he had. Everything smelled so good....

"Morning buddy." His dad set down the knife and walked over, giving Andrew a hug. "How'd you sleep?"

"Good." Suddenly, the little boy remembered the doll again. "Did it move?! Where is it?"

His mom turned the stove down a little, continuing to stir the eggs. "It's exactly where we left it, just like we said. You see? There's nothing to worry about." She must've seen Andrew was still nervous because she added "If you want, we'll keep it with us one more night." Andrew nodded. He was in no

hurry to get that thing back. He didn't care that it hadn't moved during the night.

Two nights later, though, it was back. This time it was sitting on a chair in the corner. The boy still couldn't get over the feeling that it was watching him. Scared, he picked up a jacket and covered it up again. He lay down in bed, pulling the covers up high, watching it. Just as Andrew was starting to fall asleep, he heard it; the choppy, robotic sounds of it moving across the floor. Then the music started. He couldn't even scream he was so scared. Andrew watched in terror as it moved closer, its eyes lit up like the demon eyes he'd seen in all those Halloween pictures. He tried to move, to run for the door but he couldn't. It was like the doll had put a spell on him. Andrew started breathing fast and shaking as the lights in its eyes grew bigger and bigger. The doll seemed to get bigger too. It finally reached the bed with the light spreading out away from the doll, moving towards him. He tried to scream again, to let someone know what was happening, but he couldn't get a sound to come out.

The next morning when Andrew's parents came in to wake him for school, all they found was the doll lying on his pillow.



THE WATCHER

By Edward White/CP Bialois

John Hampton breathed in the cold, crisp mountain air before exhaling in a puff of white steam. This was what he lived for. Nothing was better than the smell of fresh air, especially in the higher climates similar to those of the Rocky Mountains. Out here there was life. One could feel themselves breathe and see the beauty of the land. In the city, where his daughter and her boyfriend chose to spend a majority of their time, there was nothing to see aside from fumes, trash, and the depravity of what the human race had become.

He fought back the tears the cold and beauty of the land tried to bring out of him. It

was the same every time he ventured out on one of his hikes. He knew how most people thought of him when he began one of these endeavors. It was the same thing his daughter, Rachel, and her boyfriend, Chad Li, said when he first told them about his plans for the weekend. He could remember the surprised looks on their faces as easily as he could hear them huffing behind him. After pausing for a minute to enjoy what was around him, John turned to them smiling. Rachel was leaning against a tree trying to catch her breath while Chad was bent over with his hands on his knees. *Kids nowadays.*

“Almost ready? We’ve got a few more miles to go before we make camp,” John’s voice carried through the air with an ease he was certain didn’t exist in the city.

Chad let out a groan while Rachel managed to open her eyes and pleaded between gasps. “Why not here?” She motioned around them. “There’s plenty of room for us.”

John sighed and shook his head, “You can’t camp on a slope like this. One false step and you’ll roll right on down.” He nodded towards the steep hill to his left and the falling slope to their right. The pair shared a brief sense of vertigo before nodding their agreement.

Pleased his point was understood John smiled, “Good. Don’t worry, another mile, two at the most and we’ll make camp.”

Chad and Rachel shared a look and she patted him on the shoulder to urge him on. “It’s only a little further.”

“Yeah.” Chad managed to catch some of his breath in their brief rest stop. “Isn’t that what he said a mountain range ago?”

Rachel smiled at him, “You think this is bad? You should’ve seen him when he was younger.”

They began following her father as close as they could, but their out-of-shape bodies held them back. Chad didn’t want to imagine keeping up with the old man when he was in his prime. As it was, John’s every footstep was secure on unmoving earth while he and Rachel found every loose bit of ground and tangle in their path. He would’ve thought such a thing was impossible, given everything was frozen. The only conclusion he could make was nature was conspiring against them. Shaking his head, Chad pushed himself to keep up as best he could. He always thought he was in shape, but at least Rachel wasn’t doing much better.

After another three torturous miles, John brought them to a stop by a large fallen tree and clearing set off to the left side of the path where the slope leveled off. Used by other hikers as a camping spot, a small blackened fire pit was in the center. Someone else had been there since the last snow fall, which was a couple of days earlier. With no one within shouting distance they were truly alone just as he wanted.

John had been wrong in his estimation but by then neither of his charges cared, Rachel and Chad dropped onto a smaller log between the fallen tree and the burned out fire. They gasped for air while John busied himself about the clearing by pulling out the small two man tent along with a pack of water proof matches and a magnesium stick. He set his tools aside and pulled his canteen from its harness on his belt, taking a deep gulp of his water. Before they set out he made sure each of them had a full canteen, snack bars, and beef jerky along with flashlights and a small aluminum cup. While they were only planning on being there that night, it was a bit much, but when one went into the wilderness it was better to be over prepared than under. The difference was often measured in life and death.

Rachel and Chad finished catching their breath and feeling this would be the perfect time to earn some brownie points with the old man, especially after it was his wiseass mouth that got them into this mess. If he hadn’t mouthed off about the older generation not knowing when to sit down and rest, John wouldn’t have come up with this camping excursion. While he wasn’t a woodsman in any sense of the word, he knew no one, absolutely no one, who went into the wilderness this time of the year, unless they needed to. Last he checked John didn’t need to go hunting for food or firewood.

His final thought gave him the perfect idea so he turned to Rachel who was working on settling in on the log. “We’ll get the firewood.”

Rachel looked up in surprise, mouthing, “*We will?*”

John looked up from where he was working to set up the tent and nodded, smiling, “Good idea. It’ll be dark in a few... You better get that taken care of.” He looked towards Rachel, “You know what to look for honey, try to keep him out of a bear’s den would you?”

After a brief pause she smiled and nodded, “Sure, no problem dad.” She shot her boyfriend an irritated look, which he shrugged off as best he could.

Once they were a short distance away from the campsite Rachel shook her head still irate. “Do you have anything else you’d like to volunteer us for? We could be home, *warm*, and comfortable.”

Chad rolled his eyes. He didn’t let her see him doing that of course, as he shook his head. “I’m sorry, alright. I don’t know what else I can say.”

Rachel turned around to face him, “You could start by learning when to shut up. God, you’re the dumbest smart guy I know sometimes.” With a growl she turned back around and continued their trek for firewood.

Chad knew he screwed up, but for the first time in his life he didn’t have an answer. Not even a hypothesis came to him as he tried to catch up with Rachel. His left foot punched through the snow covering an overhand of twigs sending him sliding and rolling down the side of the mountain into a shallow valley. He stopped only twenty feet from where he and Rachel stood a few seconds earlier but his body didn’t want to cooperate so he remained there on his back looking up at the canopy of leafless trees and gray skies.

“Chad!” He heard Rachel’s call and tried to answer, but at first his voice came out as a croak. By the time he was able to move he could hear the snow crunching under her feet near where he landed. “Chad!”

“Yeah, I’m alright!” He pushed himself into a sitting position then struggled to his feet with Rachel’s help. Once he was standing he was amazed at how well he felt considering he came a foot or two from bashing his brains out against a couple of trees during his fall.

Rachel helped brush the snow and small twigs off of his coat. Despite herself she couldn’t keep from chuckling at the whole situation they were in. “Leave it to a city boy to step on the wrong spot.”

“How was I supposed to know? The snow’s covering every damned thing...”

“That’s why no one in their right mind goes into the mountains this time of year.”

He eyed her not believing what he just heard. “Then why are we here?”

Rachel finished brushing off Chad’s coat, “We’re here because someone challenged an old woodsman.”

Chad rolled his eyes, “So he’s not in his right mind, right?”

She took a step towards the way she came down to help him. "That'd be you, dear." Without another word she headed back for the path and after a moment he followed, eating a dose of humble pie.

After reaching the path he heard what sounded like something being beaten against a tree trunk. The sound echoed in the woods around them. "Did you hear that?" Chad had a sudden rush of energy brought on by his rising fear.

Rachel shared his fear but to a lesser degree, she'd spent her youth in those mountains and refused to allow it to intimidate her. "Yeah... Come on, we'd better get some wood and get back." She wasn't spooked so much from the sound as she was by Chad's reaction to it. At any other time she would've laughed, but after seeing the look of fear in his eyes she felt it was the wrong thing to do. "It's probably some other idiots out here cutting down a tree or something. There's nothing to worry about."

By the time they returned to the campsite Rachel and Chad each had a good amount of wood in their arms. John greeted them with a smile upon their return and the amount of wood they managed to find. Scavenging wood was never a fun or easy thing to do, especially when everything was wet and they didn't have a saw. The latter thought brought a smile to his face. He really stuck it to them on that one.

"Good to see you two didn't run off and leave me." While they were gone John finished setting up camp. He put up the two-man tent, cleared the area beneath the fallen tree and used a tarp to create a lean-to. He even had a small fire going from some of the scraps he found, proving they could've left him and he would've been fine.

Chad was never so happy to see John Hampton as he was right then and there. "No problem Mr. Hampton. With Rachel's help we gathered plenty of wood to keep the fire going all night.

John nodded, "I hope you're right." He gestured for them to sit the wood by the fire and have a seat. "Come on, time for dinner."

Dinner... Of all the words in the English language to use, that was the most deceptive one that could've been used. Beef jerky and snack bars washed down with warm water was their feast. John and Rachel ate heartily while Chad had trouble biting through the tough dried beef. After his third or fourth

bite he gave up and grabbed a couple of snack bars. Seeing Rachel slicing the jerky apart with a pocket knife and eating the smaller strips, he couldn't help but shake his head.

"How can you eat that?"

She looked at him in surprise. "It's good, and better for you than the packaged crap they sell in the stores." Her comment brought a chuckle from John and left Chad without much to say.

After a few seconds of quiet, John couldn't help but feel a bit of sympathy for the young man. Sure, he was stubborn and ignorant in the ways of the world, but what could he expect of a college graduate? At least he made a good living and would take care of his daughter. After a few minutes he noticed Chad looking around them into the darkening woods.

"What's got you so jumpy?"

Chad opened his mouth to answer then decided against it. Instead, Rachel snickered, answering for him. "We heard some noises when we were out getting wood. I never saw anyone go as white as he did." She chortled at the memory.

In an effort to limit the amount of damage to his pride, Chad ignored Rachel as best he could. "What kind of animals are in the mountains?"

John couldn't help but smile. "They're full of ones that make noise, son. You have to be more specific."

"It was like someone was hitting a tree with a bat over and over again." Rachel somehow controlled her laughter enough to get the sentence out before she slid off the front of the log from laughing.

John's eyes clouded over for a second or two, not enough for either of his party to notice. He heard rumors about such things before, but as most woodsmen, he didn't pay them any heed. Bigfoot, Sasquatch, whatever name one wanted to give them, he thought they were nothing more than the occasional bear someone saw and mistook for something else.

"I wouldn't worry about it. Probably some bear trying to shake something out of a tree or someone cutting a tree down. There's nothing to be worried about. Still, if it makes you feel better we'll take turns keeping a look out. I'll take the first watch."

That seemed to be what was needed to take away some of Chad's fears. As the hours

passed by the threesome were laughing at jokes and anecdotes about John's earlier days and even Rachel's embarrassing childhood moments. By the time they were ready for bed Chad and Rachel were beginning to fall asleep in each other's arms by the fire forcing John to chase them into the tent.

Once he was alone John settled in on his spot on the log. To help chase away the cold and sleepiness that threatened to overtake him, he pulled out a small packet of magic black powder and dumped some into his cup of water. After swirling it around in his hand he took a sip. The bitter taste caused him to grimace, but what did he expect? Coffee always tasted like that in the mountains and he didn't think he'd ever get used to it.

It didn't take long for the caffeine to fill him with a rush, which he controlled as best he could by whittling on a piece of wood from the firewood pile. With each passing minute he began to think they imagined hearing anything. While a creature such as Bigfoot could exist, he doubted the rumors as local propaganda. It was an old hunting technique where local residents claimed they saw a huge beast of some sort to scare away any competition. Fewer hunters meant more opportunities for them.

Shaking his head he turned his attention back to the piece of wood and knife in his hands. He was so engrossed in his carving that he didn't notice the sound coming from just outside the circle of light from the fire. At first when John paused to listen, he thought it was a deer or some other animal investigating them, but the sound was different. It wasn't difficult to hear the weight of the creature as it stomped through the snow. John's first thought was that it was a bear, but there wasn't the usual sniffing or casualness about its stride. Whoever or whatever it was it was cautious enough to stay outside his vision, but curious enough to come in close. To him that meant only one thing, it didn't have a fear of people and that was a dangerous recipe for a wild creature.

After a few strides the sound stopped, by John's estimation, directly in front of him. The fire burning between them gave him a sense of safety as well as entrapment. He and the others had nowhere to go if the beast decided to attack. Whether it was a bear or a big cat, their fear of humans would only last so long as their hunger wasn't too bad.

Looking away from the fire John stared into the darkness around them trying to gain some night vision. When he was more comfortable he let his eyes settle on the patch of darkness outside of the circle of light. What he saw took his breath away. Across from him,

probably no more than twenty feet away, were a pair of large eyes reflecting the light of the fire. John sat watching the pair of eyes watching him, not sure what to do or could do. In the end his fear got the better of him so he remained where he was, only moving to put more wood on the fire.

At first he thought the eyes were tricks caused from looking over the fire, but when they remained unmoving, he was certain they were being watched. Worse still, he had the feeling the beast was crouching to look him in the eyes. The thought sent chills up his spine, but he remained where he was with his knife in his hand. Never before had he felt so ill-equipped to deal with a situation. All he could do was sit there as the hours ticked away hoping the beast didn't attack.

Shortly before daybreak John was relieved when the creature rose to its feet and strode into the fading night. While he was grateful it was gone, John couldn't bring himself to move at first. Not until Rachel and Chad opened the tent and stepped out into the early morning air.

"Dad, why didn't you wake one of us? You must be freezing." Rachel knelt next to him and put her arm around him.

For the first time since he saw those eyes hours earlier, John looked away and smiled when he saw his daughter's face. "It's alright sweetheart, you guys slept well I hope?" He pushed the ordeal of the night from his thoughts. The sun was up and they were safe.

Chad nodded while stretching, "Yeah but I'm starving."

John pushed himself to his feet, the feeling of his tight joints and stretching muscles brought a grunt from him. "Tell you what. Let's get this packed up and ready to go. I'll buy breakfast at Rhonda's. They have the best sausage and eggs I've ever eaten."

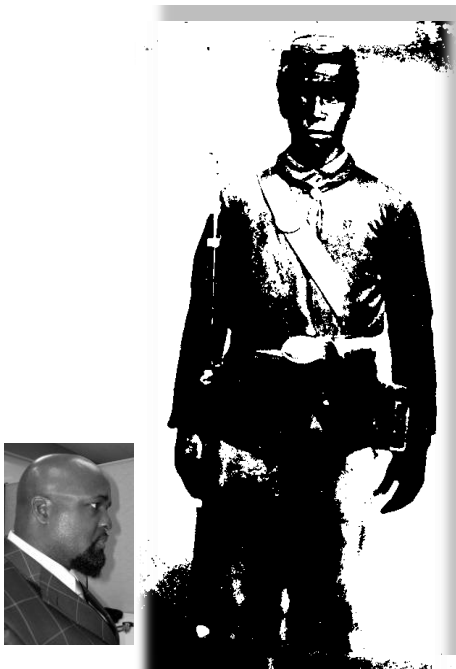
With the promise of a hot breakfast of eggs and sausage both Chad and Rachel took to packing their things with far more gusto than they showed coming up there. While they worked John had a bite of beef jerky and the last of his coffee. Once they were packed and ready Chad and Rachel began back along the path while John paused. He waited long enough so he could investigate the area where he saw the creature the night before.

Out of a need to understand it and ensure he wasn't imagining things, he bent over a section of trampled-down snow. It was about where he imagined the beast to be sitting last

night. Around the area he saw several footprints much larger than he ever saw before. He scanned the surrounding woods with his eyes but he didn't see anything, not that he expected to. Not wanting to let his daughter and her boyfriend get too far ahead of him he turned and hurried to catch up.

His fear diminished as they walked and he felt the peacefulness of the woods engulf him once more. Anyone else would've had that shattered by the creature, but he understood how nature worked. It came to him to watch and not to harm them. So long as he continued to respect the creature, and have a loaded gun, he had little to fear. In a strange sort of way he was sorry when they reached the Ranger's Station and their parked car. The more he thought about it the better it sounded for him to wait until they got home to tell Rachel and Chad about what he saw. They'd either think he was making it up or be terrified. Either one worked for him, he'd show those kids something yet.

THE GUARDIAN



BY Etheridge G. Lovett

"Mom, slow down... I'm almost sure that's the house in the photo over there," twelve year old Sarah Lewis said with excitement beaming from her young face. She pointed out the passenger side window at an old wooden cabin, sitting upon bricks, with a slightly rusty tin roof, nestled near the edge of the forest just off the highway. The cabin stood half a mile east of the Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park in Georgia. The popular

tourist park was established to preserve a Civil War battleground of the Atlanta Campaign.

"Thank God, we finally have a cozy place to lay our heads instead of sleeping inside this old van. We were truly blessed that your grandfather left this cabin in his will for us when he passed away. After Mama died, Dad continued to live here for years all alone... I'm amazed that no one ever tried to cause him any harm while living out here," Sarah said, pulling up in front of the cabin.

"Mama, did grandfather build this cabin?" Sarah asked.

"Goodness no, honey... this cabin has been here since the 1800's... It was here so long that I once played in front of it when I was a little girl. Dad told me that this cabin was built by your great-great-grandfather who fought in the Civil War. He was a handsome Union soldier who fought bravely against the Confederates during the Civil War," Anna said.

"Oh—was he a hero during the war?" Sarah asked.

"The finest kind," Anna replied.

"Mama, I wish Dad could've been here to see our new home," Sarah said.

Hearing her daughter's words, Anna dropped her head as warm tears fell from her brown eyes down her dark-hued cheeks. She looked out of the window at the golden clouds drifting over the red Georgia hills in the distance, whispering, "Your father's with the Lord now... He's in a far better home than this one. I believe he's smiling down on us right now."

Sarah reached over and hugged her mother tight, saying, "I know he is, Mama. I just know he is..." They held each other for a moment.

"Baby, we've cried long enough... It's time we rejoice and celebrate instead... Let's unload some of our things and go inside our own home. We got a lot of cleaning and fixing up to do," Anna said, wiping the tears from her eyes.

They stepped out of the worn-down van into the warmth of the Southern sunshine beaming through the leaves of several towering oak trees. Birds greeted them with their morning song. They approached the front porch of the peaceful cabin.

"I know I placed the keys to the front door of the cabin here somewhere," Anna

mumbled, searching her pocket. "Here they are," she said, pulling the keys from her back pocket.

"Cool!" Sarah blurted out, displaying her uncontrollable anticipation to see the inside of their home.

Anna stepped upon the squeaky, wooden porch and turned the key in the lock. She pushed the front door inward. The door whined like the voice of an old hag as it swung to one side, revealing the comfortable antique furnishings within the cabin, passed down from generation to generation. The smell of Georgia pine and cigar smoke filled the corridors of their nostrils the moment they entered.

"This place seems exactly as Dad had left it... I could feel his presence all around us in here," Anna said, looking around the quaint cabin.

To the right, there was a large window facing the Kennesaw Mountain National Battlefield Park. The window allowed the golden sunshine the freedom to beam in through its silky white curtains. In the corner of the room on the right sat several old farming tools, dating back to the 1800's. There also stood a large, sturdy brick-laid fireplace. Upon its shelf sat an old black and white photo of Anna's great-grandfather, John Hunter, proudly dressed in his Union uniform. His eyes were piercing, serious, full of stories... Upon his head he wore a floppy-crowned forage cap, made of wool broadcloth with a leather visor. The cap was adorned with brass letters of his regiment and company to which he belonged. In his right hand he held a Springfield rifle. Above the black and white photo framed inside a gold frame was the actual antique rifle that he held in the photo below, neatly resting upon two hooks attached to the bricks above the fireplace. To the left of the fireplace, there stood a black potbelly stove. In front of the stove sat a well-used leather recliner. A small chess table sat beside the recliner where Anna's father, Henry Hunter spent his final moments on earth. The chess game appeared incomplete, revealing his final chess move, frozen in time the moment Henry drew his last breath.

"Imagine that... Dad never finished his chess game," Anna whispered, gazing upon the small handmade chess board and its intricately carved wooden pieces.

Sarah walked over, picked up one of the chess pieces and examined it while saying, "I'll never forget when grandfather tried to teach me how to play chess in one day... It was so funny... He loved beating me and calling out,

check mate... He really loved to play the game of chess."

"He sure did honey," Anna said, smiling. She continued to investigate the home. She stumbled upon an old handmade wooden box. She unhooked the rusty latch and opened the box, finding the Union uniform and medals belonging to her great-grandfather, neatly tucked away.

"Wow—look at that!" Sarah gasped. She watched her mother pull the blue wool uniform from the box, holding it up in the sunrays streaming through the windows.

Mama, how did great-great-granddaddy die?" Sarah questioned.

"Well, after the Civil War ended, he bought this property and decided to build this cabin and settle down here with my great-grandmother, Essie. On one quiet night, great-granddaddy was sitting on the front porch enjoying the evening breeze wafting through the tall oak trees. Great-grandmother was inside cooking up one of her tasty meals. She suddenly heard a single loud gunshot ring out. She dropped everything and ran to the front porch only to find great-granddaddy sprawled out upon the porch with a gunshot wound to his chest. It is here, on the front porch of the cabin he built with his own hands, where your great-great-granddaddy died. Some believed it was the Klan that killed him, but no evidence was ever found to support the claim, so no one was ever arrested and charged for the murder. It is considered as an unsolved murder mystery to this very day," Anna explained.

One single tear trickled from Sarah's eyes as she thought of the death of her great-great-grandfather. She approached his photo, staring into his eyes gazing back at her from the photo. Sarah whispered, "My great-great-granddaddy was a brave and good man... He didn't deserve to die like that."

"He sure didn't honey—especially after surviving the hell unleashed during the Civil War only to settle down and die by a coward's bullet... There's just no logic or justice in it at all," Anna said.

Noticing the bedroom's door slightly ajar, Anna cautiously entered the sun-lit bedroom. Her eyes fell upon an old brass bed, fashioned and designed during the Civil War era, with its original large pillows and mattress still intact. Sunbeams streamed through the window just above it, causing streaks of sunlight to rest upon the handmade colorful quilt.

"This is our room where we'll finally get some well-needed rest," Anna said, placing some of her bags upon the soft bed. She opened the closet door. The smell of her father's presence wafted up from his clothing hanging neatly inside. She hesitated for a moment, thinking of her father. She then pushed back his clothing to make room for her own. She hung her, and her daughter's clothing inside the closet.

While singing a joyful song to herself, Sarah unpacked several bags, placing the remaining clothing inside the dressers on the opposite sides of the bed. As they continued to unpack, a loud knock was heard at the front door.

"Imagine that... our first guests... I wonder who that could be," Anna said. She stopped what she was doing and hurried towards the front door to see who it was knocking. When she pulled back the white curtains and gazed out of the front window, she saw two young men standing outside. They both seemed anxious, jittery. One of the men; the tallest of the two, had a shaved head. He wore a tattoo of a black dragon etched upon his right arm. His skin was pecan in color and sweaty. His deep inset brown eyes were menacing in appearance. His body was long, but muscular. He wore dingy overalls, black boots with a white t-shirt. The skin tone of the man standing behind him was milk-pale. He had freckled cheeks and wore dark shades, with a red bandana tied around his neck. He sported a scraggly red beard, with small blue eyes that seemed suspicious. He had a tattoo of a dragon and a black skull etched upon his chest. His jeans were also dingy and baggy, dangling halfway off of his buttocks.

With the security chain still attached to the door, Anna opened the door slightly until the chain stretched taut, preventing the door from opening further. She asked through the opening, "May I help you gentlemen with something?"

"Evening—Ma'am... We noticed you were unloading your vehicle and moving in so we just wanted to offer some help and kindly welcome you to the neighborhood... Is the man of the house in?" the taller of the two men asked. The other gazed around to see if anyone was watching.

Hearing this and studying their body movement, Anna began to feel uneasy about the men. She lied to them, hoping to throw them off by saying, "My husband just called... said he's just down the street on his way home from the store, he'll be here any minute now... He'll talk to you then."

The tall black man glanced back at his friend, then he looked down the highway, then back at Anna's frightened face in the partially cracked door, saying, "All we need from you and your daughter is just a minute of your time... I promise we won't take too long." A menacing smile formed upon the man's face as he stood back, preparing to kick in the door with his steel-toe boots.

"Sarah—Come with me!" Anna yelled, slamming the door shut. She ran towards the bedroom in a mad dash, dropping her cell phone by mistake, causing the video feature to activate. She slammed the bedroom door shut then shoved her daughter inside the closet. She heard a loud banging sound, then the sound of the two men laughing aloud once they kicked the front door in and entered the cabin. They banged and kicked upon the bedroom door, over and over again, but Anna had placed a wooden chair underneath the doorknob to prevent the door from opening.

"Woman, I know you can't stay in there all night... Me and my boy got all evening to do whatever we want to with you and your daughter!" the tall man said through the door, laughing.

"Get the hell out of my house!" Anna shouted from the depths of her soul, tears streaming from her reddened eyes. All she could do is to think of her father who had given her the cabin as a gift. She couldn't believe that such a peaceful place could be so easily violated.

"We'll get the hell out of your house when you come out and escort us out!" the men shouted back at Anna and her terrified daughter.

Anna could hear the men rummaging through items inside the cabin, tossing things around the room. She also heard glass shattering. Then she heard one of the men fire off his pistol several times, then she heard the shuffling and stomping of footsteps. Suddenly, everything went silent for the span of several minutes. Anna didn't know what to make of it.

"Get out of my house!" Anna shouted again, but there was no response. Only dead silence remained... Anna fell to her knees and peeped through the quarter inch opening underneath the bedroom door to see if anyone was moving about outside the door, but she only saw the front door of the cabin standing wide open as if the men had ran away.

She slowly removed the chair from underneath the doorknob then unlocked the

bedroom door. She opened the door and peeked out of the bedroom.

In a split second, one of the men ran from behind the door, grabbing Anna's wooly hair, pulling her further out of the room as he laughed.

"Run Sarah!" Anna screamed. She fought and kicked for release. The men continued to laugh as they struggled to tie Anna up and gag her mouth.

Hearing her mother's terrified screams; Sarah opened the closet door and made a quick dash for the front door that was still open. One of the men caught her, pulling her down on the wooden floor of the cabin. He slammed the front door shut, locking it tight.

"Welcome to the neighborhood ladies... We're here to offer you a little Southern hospitality," the tall man said, brandishing a hunting knife he pulled from his side pocket.

Anna tried to stand, but one of the men struck her across the face with a strong backhand blow, causing her to land across the room. When she regained consciousness, she was staring in the face of her grandfather on the old photo on the ground with the glass frame broken up into pieces. Her grandfather's eyes seemed to be staring directly into hers.

"We'll start with the young girl first and work our way up to her Mom," one of the men said, laughing aloud, displaying his crooked teeth. The other joined in the laughter.

The laughing was soon cut short by distinct, heavy footsteps on the front porch outside. The footsteps grew louder. The men grabbed their weapons and headed for the window to see who was walking around outside on the front porch of the cabin. Before the nervous men could reach the window, they saw through the thin silky curtains, a tall figure of a man, with thick lips, high cheekbones, skin black as the darkest midnight, wearing a Union uniform. He passed by the window with heavy steps.

When the men pulled back the curtains to get a better look, no one was standing outside, but the footsteps on the porch became more defined, more pronounced. The footsteps suddenly stopped at the front door. There was dead silence for the span of ten seconds... Then the front door swung open with great force as if kicked in with the hind legs of a bucking horse. Although it was midsummer, a sudden cold breeze blew inside the cabin, twirling around the room. When the breeze entered the room, Anna smelled gunpowder

and smoke. She felt someone un-gagging her mouth and untying her hands. The two men also saw the wrappings falling away from Sarah's mouth and hands.

Sitting straight up with a cold, non-blinking stare on her face, Anna gazed at the men, shouting with a deep gurgling voice like that of a man, "Get out of my cabin!"

The men were stunned when they heard the deep commanding voice and noticed Anna appearing as if someone had taken over her being. One of the men aimed his weapon to fire upon the young woman and her daughter. That is when the apparition of John Hunter appeared in the doorway, fully dressed in his Union uniform and floppy-crowned forage cap.

"Look—it's the soldier on the old photo... It's a ghost!" one of the men shouted with terror distorting his face. He swung his handgun around, firing upon the towering soldier, but the bullets went right through the Union soldier, striking the wooden doorframe behind him.

John reached out his broad hands towards his rifle hung above the fireplace. The rifle flew across the room, landing in his wide grasp. In mere seconds, he loaded and primed the weapon, aiming it at the young man, firing once. Blinding fire flew from the barrel of the rifle, lighting up the cabin. The steel ball plowed a large hole through one of the criminal's chest, ending his life.

"Joe!" the remaining criminal shouted over to his dead friend. He pulled a hunting knife from his side, wielding it at the Union soldier. John swung his rifle to the side, swiping the man off his feet with the butt of the weapon, plunging his bayonet knife directly into the man's side, pinning him to the ground.

"Please... I'm sorry for what I done... Spare me!" the criminal cried out with his arms raised in submission.

"Remember this as you go to your maker... There's no yellowbelly-pleading during wartime," John replied. He fired his rifle once more, lighting up the cabin with the powerful explosion from the barrel, killing the second man.

Anna and Sarah were shocked when they saw the towering Union soldier place his rifle aside and dragged the bodies of the two men out of the cabin, tossing them in the front yard. He walked back into the cabin, saying to Anna, "Don't ever be afraid to stay in a cabin that I built with my sweat and bare hands." Saying this, John Hunter reached down and

picked up his rifle, holding it over his chest. He gazed upward towards heaven and slowly vanished.

Moments later, Georgia police officers pulled up in front of the cabin with their guns drawn after receiving an emergency call from tourists reporting that there were loud gunshots fired inside the old cabin.

"This is the Georgia state police... Come out with your hands up!" Detective Roderick Brown shouted.

Anna grabbed her daughter by the hand. They both exited the front door of the cabin with their hands held up high. They cautiously stepped passed the two dead men stretched out in front of the cabin.

"Officers... there's no one else inside the cabin," Anna said. Detective Brown approached her and her daughter.

"Ma'am, I'm Detective Brown... Please understand that until I get to the bottom of what happened out here, I must handcuff you and place you and your daughter inside my squad car," Officer Brown said, pulling out his handcuffs.

"I understand Detective Brown... I'm just glad to see your face," Anna said, still trembling from the encounter.

Other officers went into the cabin to see if there were others, but they came out, saying, "All is clear... But we'll need the crime scene team in here with a mop and bucket... This place is a bloody mess!"

Hearing this, Detective Brown looked at Anna, asking, "Tell me, what on earth happened in that cabin?"

"If I told you Detective, you wouldn't believe me," Anna said, gazing at the cabin, then at the men lying dead before it.

"Take your time... I got all day... I'm all ears," Brown said, folding his arms over his chest.

Anna told Detective Brown what transpired leading up to the death of the two men. When she finished her story, the police officers who were standing around listening, were all stunned at her words spoken. Several of them chuckled at her story.

"Wait a minute... Now, let me get this straight... you're telling me that some Union soldier, your great-grandfather's ghost from the 1800's, killed these men and tossed their

remains out of the cabin because he built the cabin with his own hands?" Brown asked.

"I swear to you—that's exactly what happened," Anna said.

Detective Brown read Anna her rights and placed her under arrest. Anna and Sarah began to weep.

Several detectives went inside the cabin to gather evidence. One of them exited the cabin, shouting, "Detective Brown—I think you should see this!" They held the cell phone in their hand as they ran over to Brown. "Press rewind and I think you'll find your murderer... It certainly wasn't the two poor souls you have in your squad car... This was apparently recording during the incident," the one detective said.

Detective Brown pressed rewind then pressed play. His heart started racing when he saw the two men trying to rape the women then the towering apparition of the Union soldier appeared, killing the two men. "Unbelievable," Detective Brown whispered when watched the Union soldier vanished. He turned off the video, handing it to one of his officers, saying, "Wrap this up as evidence."

Another investigating officer walked over to Detective Brown to tell him, "Sir, I just examined the bodies of the two men and you won't believe this... They were shot with a weapon used during the Civil War campaign."

Detective Brown looked at the old cabin sitting off in the distance, then at the men dead in front of it. He then turned and gazed upon Anna and her daughter sitting inside the police vehicle, saying, "Remove their handcuffs and let them go... We have the evidence we need, and our murderer... And get the coroner to get rid of these bodies. We need to have this cabin cleaned up and made livable again for these two women who have suffered greatly.

"Will do, Sir," one of the officers replied.

As Detective Brown turned to approach his vehicle, someone moving about in the woods nearby caught his attention. His eyes fell upon a tall black Union soldier standing in the woods in the distance, watching his every move. Only the upper part of the soldier's body from the knees up was seen. His legs were completely invisible.

"Well I'll be damned... it was a ghost," Detective Brown whispered under his breath. He watched the soldier hold up his Springfield rifle high above his head, then slowly vanished.

FEATURED POEM



By Emiliano Moreno

"In Bright Eternity"

She slumbers in bright eternity
And though she has gone far
My heart swells at the thought of her
I was in the valley before she departed
Hollywood over me, emotions as yet not
wild
It hadn't started
So I moved through the crowd
But when the music ceased
I lost more than one
Before it had even begun

In bright eternity she does sleep
Yet we often meet
Her light brown eyes haunt me still
The full red lips dispel the chill

Fate that never met
Oh, yes, there is regret
When her vision appears
I see not the Forest Lawn dusk, shady green
grass, and silent breezes
In their stead there are
Green hills, lofty Washington palms, a land
where nothing ever freezes

Oceans of time
Two worlds collide
Should it matter if I go out of my mind?
You see, for her I've lost my heart
I have no choice now
But to play the part



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