



MATTIK THE ENLIGHTENER

By Etheridge Lovett

You don't know me but my name's Hank Garrett. Today, I can honestly say that I once lived in the past with my mind closed to many meaningful things before my encounter with the man I now know only as Mattik. Before I met him I had no genuine love and concern in my heart for those outside my own race. I must admit it, I was a cold-hearted racist, and was damn proud of it. I was like my father, and his father before him, raised to judge others based on something as simple as their skin color or ethnicity. There were no gray areas from the place I yielded from. You either believed as I did, or you were treated as an outcast. Being raised this way, I became the lord of my own thoughts... stubborn, rigid and unbending in my ways. But who could possibly judge me? I had no control over my rearing. Me, and those in my family, all thought pretty much the same. That was it. There were no priests to correct us... no room for faith. Our God was the weapons we purchased and used for hunting and protection, which generally kept us safe. These are the ways of the South where I was born, bred and raised... the land of flying Rebel flags, bars, fast cars and tough men. But all of this changed for me in one single day, the day I decided to move further South to Florida on a positive job prospect. While searching the Internet, Craigslist to be exact; I found a possible job opportunity to build and refurbish houses. I was always good at building things; that was my specialty in life. I landed an interview with a home refurbishing company in the Springfield historic district of Jacksonville, Florida. I decided to go alone since my wife, Clara, was four months

pregnant. I figured if I go and set up things, I'd be able to bring her down later. That was my original plan before my world was suddenly turned upside down. Saying good bye to my Clara was the toughest thing I'd ever done in my life, but I knew I had to say goodbye in order to make a better life for us. I hugged Clara tight; then I purchased a ticket and hopped on a Greyhound bus rolling out of Dothan, Alabama. I stared at Clara through the partially fogged windows of the well-air-conditioned bus as she waved back at me. I swear it's hard on a man being away from his wife. I lowered my head and wept for a brief moment, but I quickly sucked it up and held my head up high in pride. What am I doing? I asked myself... I wasn't raised to cry like a baby. The bus took off from the bus station and drove for hours it seems. We rode so long that my legs were as stiff as Georgia pine. I recently read an article stating that Greyhound improved its comfort level; but I swear I didn't feel it that day.



The bus slowed, finally stopping at a small Greyhound bus station just off I-10 South. We were finally allowed the chance to stretch our legs after riding for such a long time. Once the Greyhound servicemen loaded a few packages and checked a few extra riders in; we were loading up the bus to leave. The moment I sat down in my seat, a new rider, a middle-aged man; was getting on the bus. I noticed he bypassed several empty seats near the front of the bus while approaching me. He was tall, with short black curly hair, walking with a calm, graceful stride. He wore a dark-blue jumpsuit made of soft material. His face was stern, his deep—inset, light-gray eyes were serious to look upon, full of stories. He had no facial hairs. The oddest thing is that this Hispanic-looking man's skin appeared slightly blue in color. I figured he had some kind of rare blood condition so I tried my best not to stare at him. I didn't want to set him off. Then he glanced down and asked if he could sit beside me. At first, I was a little ticked off about it, because I'm already squirming and fighting for more leg room, but I gave in and

allowed him the privilege to sit down on the end seat while I scooted over near the window seat. Another rider also entered the bus, a tall black man; clean-shaven, well-pronounced muscles bulging everywhere. He held a small pouch and a newspaper in his hand. He was dressed in all black. I tell you, this guy could easily pass for an NFL football player. He sat down, leaning back in his seat while reading the daily news. I leaned my head back, closing my eyes to catch up on a little sleep when the guy beside me spoke, saying, "I know you're trying to relax, but please accept my deepest apologies for not introducing myself earlier... my name's Mattik, which means- the enlightener." The man extended his hand for an obvious handshake. Although I thought he was slightly mad, I reached over and shook his hand, saying, "I'm Hank Garrett." I swear the man's hand was cold as ice, slightly clammy to the touch, and he had no fingernails. Now I know he has some kind of serious sickness issue. Perhaps it's contagious, I thought. I quickly removed my hand from his, but he didn't take offense, he only smiled, leaning back in his seat. He glanced over at the black man reading his newspaper.

"This is madness—another unarmed young black kid was shot and killed yesterday in Brooklyn, New York...this is ridiculous," the black guy said.

"Why was he shot and killed? What's the story behind the shooting?" Mattik asked with a genuinely concerned look on his face. He leaned slightly over to the right as if trying to read the article.

"An innocent black kid, Chauncey Phillips, was walking down the street while leaving a friend's home and some trigger-happy white cop on patrol decided to stalk him and take shots at him for no reason at all. I swear this is a clear and open case of racial injustice," the black man expressed, his eyes reddening.

"It is always such a sad tragedy when any young child loses their life... Forgive me for not introducing myself earlier but my name's Mattik," the man said, extending his hand to the black man.

“My name’s Richard Jones,” the black guy replied, extending his own hand. When Richard shook Mattik’s hand, I could tell he was equally stunned at the coolness of his hands. I chuckled when I noticed Richard’s puzzled expression.

“You know, I realize you think the kid is innocent, but cops don’t just go around firing upon black innocent kids in the neighborhood for mere sport... there must be a logical explanation behind the shooting. Maybe the kid broke into someone’s home and threatened them or maybe he committed some other heinous, senseless crime,” I interjected.

Hearing this, Richard became furious. He leaned forward in his seat as he peered beyond Mattik, staring directly at me, saying, “What do you mean by that ridiculous statement? Why don’t you come right out and say it—you think the kid deserved being shot and killed... you assume he’s a criminal because he’s black.”



“Well, you have the article in your hands; was he a criminal or what?” I questioned sarcastically. I could sense that my insensitive words were making Richard more furious by the second, but Mattik just sat listening, taking it all in.

“The article said that the kid was leaving the neighborhood park while on his way home. The cop simply felt the need to follow, threaten, then shoot and murder the kid in cold blood. Looks like me and my associates got to pay the city cops of Brooklyn New York a little visit. I can promise you, this will not be swept under the rug and forgotten,” Richard replied.

“I’m almost sure that the kid was probably asking for it,” I said in an almost whisper, which I didn’t think Richard would hear, but he did.

“What did you say?” Richard questioned, slamming the newspaper down on the seat beside him. He stood and began removing his jacket. When he did, I noticed the writing on his t-shirt that read; The Brotherhood Party. This was a newly formed black hate group that I heard about on the news one evening. I knew then that I’d just talked myself into a serious altercation. But I had made up in my mind that I was not going down without a fight.

“Did you hear me—what did you mean by that last statement?” Richard inquired again, lunging towards me. I then lunged towards him with every intention of inflicting some harm upon him. In a startling move, almost faster than my eyes could see, Mattik sprung to his feet and stood between me and Richard with his arms extended, shouting, “Fools—stop this madness upon each other!” His demanding voice seemed to pierce the depths of my very soul, and it seemed to have done the same to Richard.

“How long must this pathetic battle go on? Your world is on the brink of collapse due to senseless thinking such as this. It is your hate and ignorance that divides you, preventing you from reaching a higher level of thought, experiencing a more peaceful way of existence. Don’t you realize that everyone on this planet is tethered to each other in one way or another? Your hate and ignorance blinds you, preventing you from seeing your binding ties or the hope for your kind!” Mattik shouted; concern mixed with sheer anger clearly showing in his face. He reached out and clutched my right arm, along with Richards, then said, “Come with me and see what is possible when you learn to love and understand each other.” The moment his words crossed his lips, I felt nausea as if I was about to vomit. Everything around me was blocked out, except for Mattik and Richard, still clinging together with me. We seemed to be soaring at phenomenal speeds, hurtling away from Earth like a shooting star until our planet appeared as a small blue dot in space. I gasped as we passed other planets of various shapes, colors and sizes. We even passed many moons, stars and asteroids while entering another solar system similar to our own. I couldn’t

quite understand how any of this was possible or how I was able to breathe and live in outer space. This is not supposed to happen, but it did. We soared away, six hundred light-years away, finally approaching a massive planet two times wider than that of Earth, circling a star similar to our own sun. My mouth remained agape in awe. Tears of astonishment seeped from the side of my eyes when I looked upon the enormity of the universe and all of its splendid glory. At that very moment, I began to realize just how insignificant I really was compared to the whole of creation, but how important I am that this man, Mattik, would even care enough to bring me here to see this great sight. We drifted slowly down through the clouds, entering the atmosphere of this glorious world below us. Like curious angels, we descended then stopped in midair within a clear evening sky, looking down upon a modern world of untold beauty and wonder. Although the continents of this pristine world were separated by water as ours on Earth, they were joined together by several intricately designed, man-made transportation bridges designed like I’d never seen before. Such ingenuity would make any engineer or architect stare for days, or even months upon this great human achievement.

“Behold, my own beloved world, SARDON; a world your Astronomers on Earth call, Kepler 22b,” Maddik said, pointing down upon a peaceful, united society. “Come, there is much more to see... Don’t worry, no one can see you, but you can certainly see them,” Mattik said with a warm smile. While drifting downward, I noticed several large machines churning and channeling sections of their ocean through neatly designed waterways leading into several cities. I ventured to ask, “Mattik, what are the large machines that appear to be drawing the water from the ocean?” Mattik smiled while explaining, “Those machines are called DROMUNS... they are converting salt water into fresh drinking water. We’ve solved the shortage of fresh water issue many years ago.”

We then drifted towards one of their main cities. It is there that I saw people that resembled those on earth. They showed only slight differences in the shape of their ears,

eyes and hands. They were of various ethnicities, all with skin shades of every imaginable color. Even their facial features varied according to their ethnicity, but all were living and working together as one people, one global nation. There were interracial couples, and those who married their own, but maintained a genuine love and care for those around them. Young people of every nation laughed and played happily together upon the ocean's peaceful shore. Wheel-less vehicles soared on air, jetting to and from over many metallic highways lit up by colorful lights aligning its outer edge. At that very moment I understood why Mattik brought us here to this wondrous place. My heart and eyes began to open up to a grander understanding of life, not just on earth, but throughout the universe. Everything living... From the look on the face of Richard, I believe he's feeling pretty much the same way.

"Mattik, tell me, how is so many nations and tongues able to come together to create all of this?" Richard inquired, gazing around at the magnificence of it all.

"Richard, my world has not always been like this, oh no... we had our dark years of similar racial, environmental, immigration and economic adversity, but we realized many years back that love, unity and knowledge, was the answer in resolving these issues and securing our world, and our futures. I brought you here so that you can see what is possible and go back to your own world and work towards this ultimate goal. You may even lose your lives trying to make this change come about, such as Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., Mahatma Ghandi, Mother Teresa, and so many others on your planet, but that is the precious price you pay for securing a positive change. What you didn't know is that I also made such a sacrifice... I was a great orator for positive change on my planet. It was for that reason I was assassinated many years ago in order to help secure the positive change you see here today. Now my spirit walks your world, seeking those who I could somehow inspire and enlighten in hope that your world will eventually survive as mine did. There are others on earth I must reach now before it's too late. I must return you to earth so that you

can help me change earth for the better. Never give up on love, knowledge, unity and understanding. Before we leave, I want you to hold out your arms," Mattik said.

Not knowing what he would do next, I reluctantly held out my arm beside that of Richards. Mattik reached out and quickly ran his finger along our arms, causing a thin stream of blood to run. I was stunned, snatching my arm back.



"I sense that you're both stunned and afraid, but please don't be alarmed," he said. "I wanted to prove to you that you're both of one blood... red human blood... You're much closer to each other than you think. One of earth's great thinkers, Friedrich Otto Hertz once said, *'At the heart of racism is the religious assertion that God made a creative mistake when He brought some people into being...'*" Another great thinker on earth, Albert Einstein, once said, "Peace cannot be kept by force. It can only be achieved by understanding." Now you must close your eyes and relax... we're finished here... My message is complete," Mattik said in a calm voice. No sooner than his words crossed his lips, pitch darkness engulfed us. In a single flash, we were back on the Greyhound bus as if waking from a dream, but Mattik was gone. In the pit of my stomach I felt nauseous as if I'd eaten a bad meal. I glanced over and noticed Richard was seemingly suffering the same thing. Did we really experience this encounter with Mattik? Was he real? At that very moment my arm started burning so I glanced down and noticed a thin scar where Mattik ran his finger down my arm. A sudden chill came over me. Now I know that it was certainly no dream... the encounter with this other worldly man was real. I stood, frantically looking around the bus for Mattik amongst other passengers, but he was gone. I assumed he was in the restroom in the back of the bus. When I scurried to the back restroom, it was empty. I went to the bus driver, asking did he make any recent stops, but he said no. As I walked back to my seat, I was confused, dumbfounded over the whole encounter.

"Did you locate Mattik?" Richard asked, looking at me with a puzzling stare. He then glanced down upon the similar scar on his own arm.

"I'm afraid he's gone for good, but he sure left us with a strange mark upon our arms and a lot of thoughts running through our minds. He also left us with a lot of work to accomplish," I said.

Richard stood to his feet, removing his Brotherhood Party t-shirt, putting on his jacket, saying, "He sure did so let's get started... we have many people to reach before it's too late." He then reached over and shook my hand with a firm handshake.

"After my encounter with Mattik, I want to reach so many people, but I'm married and I have a pregnant wife back home who needs my financial and moral support," I said, feeling disappointed inside.

"Listen... I played pro football for several years and I made some smart investments. Take this and go home and take care of your wife and child. You can meet up with me when you feel you're ready," Richard said, reaching into his pouch, pulling out a checkbook. He wrote me a check for fifty thousand dollars. I was shocked...so shocked that tears trickled from my eyes. I couldn't believe he'd care so much for me and my family in such a way, although he barely knew me.

"No. I can't take your money like this... you earned it, not me... it's not right," I said, handing the check back.

"You can, and you will take this check...besides, we're blood brothers now," Richard said, smiling. He tucked the check down in my pocket.

"Give me a week... I promise you that after I get things settled back home, we'll begin by visiting Brooklyn, New York and investigate the Chauncey shooting together," I said, standing and embracing Richard as one would a long lost brother.

“I’ll be looking forward to working with you, Hank,” Richard said.

We both sat beside each other during the remainder of our bus ride, coming up with a solid, strategic plan to effectively reach out and touch other lives and help change our world for the better, one person at a time, using the positive principles and teachings of the unique man we know only as, **Mattik** - the Enlightener.



It’s Complicated

By Edward White/CP Bialois

The sun sat surrounded by soft gray clouds just above the mountains. The young man watched it for a moment then checked his watch. With a sigh he looked back out the window as the old beat up pickup truck drove over a small outcropping in the road. The rise and sudden drop came as little surprise to him, it must’ve been then tenth or eleventh time it happened.

Outside the dingy gray light made the forest look like a scene from an old black and white movie. The vibrant green had long since disappeared except from the occasional pine trees. Despite their beauty he could barely stand the mountains in summer when they were full of life, but they were intolerable during the winter months when it was all but dead. Everything that had any sense was fast asleep in a burrow or away from there, everything but them.

Behind the wheel of his trusty ‘56 Chevy Justin Mathews looked over at his son. His heart cried for him, he’d done everything he could to mend the bridge between them. It’d been a long time since they had last enjoyed each other’s company and even longer since they’d been at the cabin together. At least ten years if he remembered right, at that

time Trevor has wanted to be just like his dad. It’d been a fleeting moment of joy that he rarely got to experience anymore. The memories brought a tear to his eye, they were all happy back then. The tear ran down his cheek, funneled through the lines that creased his face until he wiped it away. His son hadn’t noticed. “We’ll be there soon. Remember all the fun we had up there?”

Instead of answering Trevor kept his gaze locked on what was outside his window. After a moment his father turned his attention back to the dirt road they were on. He hadn’t gotten his son to say more than a handful of words over the last couple of hours. He’d about given up any hope of conversation when he thought he heard something. “What was that?” It had been faint and difficult to hear over the vibrating sound that old truck made.

“I said it’s bumpy. Why not get a new truck?” Trevor responded agitated

It wasn’t what he’d expected, but at least they were talking. “Trucks today couldn’t handle roads like this. Naw, they’re built for highways, this here’s built for working in fields and such.”

Trevor went quiet for a minute, “What about a jeep?”

Justin let out a low breath, sometime the boy just didn’t understand that not everyone could afford a new truck nowadays. “There’s nothing wrong with it. I’ve kept it in good shape, it’ll be around long after you and I are dead.”

Trevor rolled his eyes, he couldn’t understand what his father had against technology and progress. He hadn’t even learned how to use a debit card until a few years earlier, a DVD player had proven to be more of a doorstop than a source of entertainment. With nothing more to say he went back to the bouncing view outside his window. His father glanced at him for a moment then turned his attention back to the road. Trevor hadn’t noticed. The scene outside never changed except that a few trees had fallen here and there. The rest of their journey went by without another spoken word.



It hadn’t been much later when they reached their destination, a small log cabin that overlooked a large lake and forest. The scene was impressive during the summer but lifeless in the winter despite it’s otherworldly beauty. A thick layer of snow covered the entire scene, even the lake far below. “Smell that air.” His father slammed the truck door

closed and took a deep breath of the cold mountain air. The feel of it was intoxicating, something that Justin had missed everyday he lived in the city.

Trevor slid out of his seat and gave the door a halfhearted shove, the door didn’t latch when it closed and swung slightly open. Irritated he pulled it open and slammed it shut, the impact knocked some snow from the wheel well. That time the latch caught and the door remained closed. The dark blue paint stood out against the dull background and aggravated him even more.

“Grab your stuff, you’re old enough to earn your keep.” Justin picked up his old military bag that had weathered the years as well as he had, it was his lone possession from his time in Vietnam. It’d weathered the years as well as he had, in some instances better her reckoned. He appeared casual but in reality his eyes took in everything, the mark of a hunter, his son’s attitude was the most obvious as he lifted his own bag out of the truck bed.

Trevor’s mind was focused on his father for the first time that day as he felt anger swell up inside him. Why did his father always push him? “I do earn my keep.”

“Do you now?” Justin glanced at him curiously.

Trevor’s eyes locked on his father’s, “You know damn well I do.”

His father nodded, “You do at work,” he glanced around and motioned to the land around them, “but up here there’s no time clock.” He turned and hefted his canvas bag over his shoulder. “Best get a move on, we need to get a fire started before the cold settles in.”

Trevor watched him for a moment, his father was everything he didn’t want to be. He had dreams of becoming a computer genius and video game designer, something far more than a simple country boy. Despite those dreams and his desire to pull away, he felt the urge to move closer. He’d avoided spending time with his father for the last five years, ever since his mother had died. Everything he was he felt he owed to her, his father had been more interested in working at the Steel Foundry then spending time with his own son.

To Hell with him, he thought as his old man disappeared through the cabin’s door. Saying that, even to himself, felt like a door that had been barring his way had suddenly been kicked open. In a strange way it helped him feel free of some oppressive weight he’d been carrying but it had hurt as well. Did his father really deserve that? With his mind twisted in it’s thoughts Trevor carried his things to the cabin.

He paused just before the three steps that led to the cabin's porch. Aside from some new windows and roof it was the same he remembered from ten years before. His mind went back to the stores his father had told him about the cabin's history, about how he and his uncle Fred had been born there in the forties and how it dated back several generations more to its construction just before the Civil War. A new life, as his father had always been happy to point out, it had been passed down through the generations where each one maintained it through the years.

The weight of the history bore down on Trevor's shoulders like a lead weight. His mind remained focused on the memory of it being the beginning of a new life. The thought that his father was being symbolic hadn't occurred to him before, he barely contained the laughter that threatened to come out. Him, the smart guy had been outsmarted by a man he'd often felt superior to. Maybe his anger didn't deserve to go to his father, just maybe he had done so to avoid it himself. With a shake of his head he stepped onto the porch and opened the cabin door.

The first sight that greeted him had been a familiar one where his father worked over a small flame in the fireplace off to his left. In front of it sat a pair of chairs separated by a small end table, a bookcase on the far wall and a small cupboard that was filled with dishes and canned food. In the center of the room was a table with four chairs made of oak that Justin and Fred Mathews had built nearly forty years earlier. Everything about the room screamed that they'd just gone back in time, back to when everything was simpler. The most extraordinary part of the room to him was the five foot tall ladder that led to the loft where he'd slept during his child hood when they'd been on their camping trips. Next to it was the door that led to the main bedroom and where his parents had slept.



"Glad you could make it." His father looked up from the small fire that fought fiercely to grow. "Wanna hand me that lamp?" He motioned to the table and the old oil lamp that sat in its center.

Trevor glanced at it, his mood darkened immediately, "Yeah." he picked up the lamp and carried it over to his father. Justin picked up a burning brand from the fireplace and lit the wick, a moment later the lamp flared to life, its soft yellow light easily filled

the room. Until then Trevor hadn't realized how dark it'd become since he'd been on the porch. It'd been so long since he'd been in the country around snow he forgot how well it reflected the light, often it was clearer with the moonlight than during the day. He remembered something his father had told him when he was a kid. 'Whatever you do, shelter is the first thing you find. Winter doesn't fool around in the mountains.' It suddenly dawned on him that he was smiling, it was the first time since his father had picked him up for this little journey.

Justin noticed the smile on his boy but he didn't comment on it, instead he put another piece of wood on the growing fire. "There, that should do it." With a grunt he pushed himself off the cold foot of the fireplace and stretched out his back. "Weather's not so bad, too bad we didn't bring any rifles. We could have some venison for dinner."

Trevor shook his head, "Is that all you think about?"

"No, but it's hard not to when your hungry." Justin let his eyes remain on the beautiful dance of the flames.

Trevor looked at him for a minute disgusted, "Why do you have to start with that?"

Justin looked at him with tired irritation, "With what?"

Trevor threw up his hands exasperated. "You know damn well what! You always do that!"

"Damn it boy stop being so hard headed. I'm not in the mood to fight, can't you just learn to keep your mouth shut?" With that he strode past his son and out of the cabin. Once he was outside Justin let out a deep breath and pulled a pack of cigarettes from the breast pocket of his denim work shirt and lit one.

The taste of the tobacco was like an old friend that had been away far too long. He closed his eyes when he exhaled and wondered what he was expected to do in the situation he'd gotten himself into. He'd always done his best to make sure his family had everything they needed. He'd met the woman that would become his wife in a local bar of all places. She'd been there with some of her friends, high society types that had no use for a country boy like himself. He still remembered how she had tried to trick him into thinking she was married by turning the ring she wore around to hide the rose that had been crafted onto the band. He didn't believe her and after a couple hours, that amounted to him stalking her, she finally agreed to have a drink with

him.

How time flew, as clear as that day was in his mind it paled in comparison to the day Trevor had been born. One of the three happiest days of his life had brought new challenges as he had to feed a family of three. The days of him working on farms were over, he needed something that paid better and he found it in a neighboring town. A Steel Foundry had been in operation for over a hundred years and was looking for new laborers. Justin was one of the first new hires and he quickly began to work twelve hour days and volunteered for a sixth whenever possible. It meant that he wouldn't see his family much, but for them to have everything he didn't when he was growing up was a burden he could manage.



Justin's wife and son never went hungry, they never had to worry about having enough money to pay the bills; in fact they had everything they could ever want or need. Justin took a final drag on his cigarette then tossed it onto a pile of snow by the steps. He'd tried to quit more times than he could count but it'd always been tough because his wife had been the ultimate chain smoker. 'Tough to quit when you're living with a chimney' he'd always tell people. He just shook his head at the memories and wiped the tear from his eye before it had a chance to fully form. Tough guys don't cry, that was how he'd been raised and that was how he lived his life. "Damn kid, it'd probably kill him to listen to somebody." He turned back to the cabin door, it'd been too long since they'd been a family. When he opened the door he was greeted by a sight that he thought he'd never see, Trevor was cooking food over the fire.

At the sound or the opening door Trevor glanced over his shoulder at his father and shrugged. "It was getting late, I found a can of beans in the cabinet." He turned back to the fire and stirred the beans in the scalding pot. If they sat for more than a few seconds they'd burn onto the cast iron and cleaning that was a hassle he never wanted to deal with again.

Justin glanced over his son's shoulder and nodded his approval, "Looks like you picked up a couple of things after all."

Trevor smiled, "I guess it couldn't be helped. I've been around it so much." He heard his father moving around behind him but he didn't pay much attention to what he was doing until a large slice of cornbread appeared on the hearth next to the fire.

"It's better warmed up some,

otherwise the beans won't be as good going down."

Trevor chuckled a little, "What else d'you bring?" He wasn't sure but he thought he'd just slipped into country talk. He was amazed at how often he'd imitated his father as a laugh with his friends, and how ashamed he suddenly felt.

Justin didn't seem to notice as he opened a large box that he'd had in his bag and began to set its contents on the table. "Oh just the essentials... let's see... ah, some beef jerky... oh and of course coffee. Can't forget that, it's the most important thing. And some of the good stuff." He lifted a cooler from under the table and set it on top.

Trevor watched him and shook his head, his uncle must've been up there earlier and left the cooler for them. He eyed it with a wary eye. "Beer."

For as long as he could remember his father had always had two things in his hands, a beer and a cigarette. He could smell the remains of the smoke on him from across the room but he thought his father had quit drinking a couple of months earlier.

"No smartass," he lifted a six pack of Coke from inside the cooler, "any more insights you'd like to enlighten me with?" Justin's tone was casual, he was just kidding with his son and any other time it may have backfired but Trevor had begun looking at himself in a new light during the last hour or so.

In Justin's defense he'd always been a heavy drinker but he drank for the taste, not to get drunk. Simply put, while he appeared to be an alcoholic he really wasn't. In fact the only time he had a beer was on the weekend when he wasn't working at the Steel Foundry, unfortunately that was the only time Trevor got to see him. Coffee was his drink of choice, the caffeine had very little effect on him but again, he loved the taste.

"Since when did you start to drink soda?" Trevor asked smiling.

Justin smiled and shrugged, "Always did, just not as much as now. Want a cold one?"

Trevor nodded and rose as Justin walked over and handed him one before he sat in the chair to the right of the fire. He just watched his old man for a minute before he followed his lead and took a seat in the other chair. It could've been the magic of the cabin or the memories of them all being there years earlier but whatever the reason Trevor had begun to look at his father in a different light. He felt he'd sorely misjudged him for years when he looked upon him, now all he saw was something he could admire. They were too

much alike, both would fight if they believed they were right and stubborn enough not to ever back down. He took a sip of his soda and reached out to stir the beans as they began to boil. Dinner was ready.



The Coyote

By Jamie White

Sunlight shone in through the window, lighting up Suzanna Hawk's face as she slowly woke up. She stretched her arms out, a yawn escaping her lips. It had been a long night with a lot of travel. She was part of a traveling circus making its way through the west. As she looked outside the window of her small train car, she noticed the other members of her troupe busily preparing for the night's show. They had finally arrived in Abilene, Kansas, the next stop on their tour. She loved traveling with the show. Although her act never changed, she still never knew exactly what her day was going to be like from one day to the next. There were always new places to explore and people to meet. Even the best

planned acts would have last minute changes that made it fun for her to sit in the audience and watch, no matter how many times she'd seen the performers. She'd been with the show for almost six years now. She had left her home on the Sioux reservation when she was only sixteen years old to join the show and she'd never looked back. She loved everything about it; the travel, the applause, the people.

Suzanna dressed and headed outside to help with the daily chores. There were tents to set up, animals to tend and rehearsals. Her act in particular needed to be carefully planned out. She was known as the Woman Who Can't Be Killed. The visiting crowd was told she had a spirit guide that protected her from being harmed, even when she was shot several times. Firing the gun was the job of her husband, Alan Strongbow. He was very meticulous about his job. He always checked the blanks closely before putting them in his breast pocket the day of the performance. The gun was always loaded with the blanks after another check just before he went on stage to make sure no real bullets could get in by mistake.

"Morning," Suzanna said, walking up to her husband and kissing him on the cheek.

"Morning. I was afraid you were gonna sleep the day away. There's much work to get done before the show tonight."

"I know. I'm sorry about that.... I don't know what got into me. I was so tired after the show last night I could hardly keep my eyes open. What should I do first?"

"Elisabeth could use some help getting the horses fed and groomed. Why don't you start with that? She's the first act anyway."

Suzanna nodded and walked off to help the horseback rider prepare the animals. For hours, the troupe tended the animals and made last minute preparations to make sure all the tents were ready for the locals before squeezing in a little rehearsal time. Finally, it was time for the show. Suzanna watched the acts from the stands as she always did before joining her husband backstage. As she stepped up to the curtain, sneaking a peak at the audience, she felt the usual rush of adrenaline that hit her right before a performance. It was one thing to sit in the audience and take in the show. It was another thing entirely to look at them from the stage. It made the crowd seem much larger than it really was.

"And now.... The moment you've been waiting for. Please give a warm welcome to Miss Suzanna Hawk, the woman who can't be killed!" The audience exploded into

applause with her husband's grand introduction.

She stepped out onto the stage, bowing briefly before taking her place on the stage. The lights dimmed and the audience fell into a deafening silence. Her husband stood several feet away from her, readying his weapon, taking aim at her chest. The gun was fired, all six rounds seemed to strike their target. Despite her swaying she never fell. With their act successfully over she and her husband bowed to the cheering crowd.

As with any other night they took a few moments to talk to some of the townspeople before cleaning up. They knew they were going to be there for another day, so there was no packing to do, at least. They finished their chores quickly and before she knew it she and her husband were heading for their train car to get some sleep. Well... she was about to get some sleep anyway. Her husband was too worked up to sleep that night.



Night after night, they did their act and the townsfolk showered his wife with praise and admiration, barely giving credit to the gunman. He felt he should be getting as much adulation, if not more, than her. More pay, as well. Sure, he just fired a blank at her but all she did was pretend to fall back a little. As far as he was concerned they had equal jobs and he was tired of her getting more spoils. He even came up with the mysterious story for their act...all she had done was tell him about some legends among her people. Like many Indian tribes, her people believed in spirit guides and totems. He didn't. As far as he was concerned, those stories were just make believe, silly superstitions that meant nothing. He laid awake for hours, filled with the resentment that had been building for weeks now. The few times he had brought it up to her (that night included) she had brushed his concerns off. After all, the money all went to the same place. She couldn't understand why he was so worried about it. She didn't understand that as the man, he was supposed to be the one with the status and the power. He didn't know what to do about it, but he was tired of always having to play second fiddle. He also was a bit bored of the whole magical spirits nonsense. He knew better than to believe that stuff and was tired of listening to Suzanna and some of the others speak as though they were real. At least it brought the money in. It never ceased to amaze him what people were willing to spend money on.

The next morning, Suzanna was up and dressed early, ready to help with the daily chores. The early night had done wonders for her and she was full of energy that day. Alan was already out there, cleaning his pistol.

"Mornin'," she said, wrapping her arms around him in a hug.

"Mornin'," he replied in a cold tone, pulling back to continue his task.

"Are you alright?," she asked. He seemed a bit off this morning. She wondered if he was still stewing over their argument the night before. It was a familiar one and one she was tired of. She just didn't know how to fix it. It wasn't her fault if people wanted to talk to her more and give her a bigger piece of the profits.

"Yeah, I'm fine," he said. "Just got a lot to get done. Why don't you head on over to the stable and get those horses ready again? They took to you real good yesterday."

Suzanna nodded and walked over to the stables, still not sure that the trouble wasn't over. She figured if she gave him some time to stew on his own, it would all blow over eventually.

Later that night, Alan stood behind the curtain, doing his usual pre-show routine. This time, however, He had an odd sense of dread about him. He wasn't sure where it came from. Maybe he was still feeling a bit worked up from their argument the night before. Whatever the reason, he never wanted to walk onto that stage less than he did that night. Ever the showman, though, he put on the big smile and let the fake enthusiasm enter his voice.

"Evenin' folks!," he greeted the crowd. "It's time again for the act you've been hearin' about. Please give a warm welcome to Miss Suzanna Hawk..."

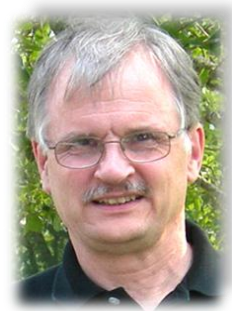
Suzanna walked out onto the stage and took her normal place. Alan turned to her, pistol in hand. Just as they did every night, the audience became deadly silent, their anticipation and nervousness filling the air. Alan pointed the gun at Suzanna, preparing to fire, anticipating her fake stumble. As he pulled the trigger, his eyes widened in surprise. Instead of Suzanna's face, he saw a coyote staring back at him. Its eyes flashed and he saw a snarl form as Suzanna fell back. The imagine lasted only an instant and he shook it off. Must've been his imagination. He blinked, wondering what on earth could've cause him to see that..

As always, Suzanna straightened up, turning to the crowd with a wide smile on her face. To Alan's surprise, she was holding a wooden bullet in her hand. The audience went

wild, jumping to their feet and cheering loudly. Suzanna looked down at the wooden plug and back over at Alan, confusion crossing her features. How did she manage to catch it in her hand? Quickly composing herself, she turned to the audience to take her bow, a wide smile crossing her features that never quite reached her eyes. She had had the strangest feeling come over her. Like she'd been outside of her body looking in for a moment. Several feet away, Alan had a similar look on his face... although he seemed a little more spooked than she did. Out of the corner of her eye, she saw the transparent figure of a coyote disappear behind the curtain.

They never spoke of that night and Alan comments about phony spirits and magical mumbo jumbo came to an end. It was sort of an unspoken agreement between them, He wasn't entirely sure what had happened that night under the big top, but he figured it was best not to take his chances.

To Life



By Rick Weber

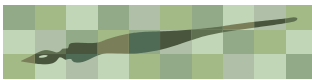
I am now an old man and have lived a full life, full in every aspect. I have experienced deprivation, humiliation, and pain but, I have also known fulfillment, acknowledgement, and joy. My youth was taken from me by a power bent on destruction when that force sent me to a place of despair. There I saw my family members die around me. Our names were taken from us and we were given numbers. I should have not made it out of that place but, I did. I did because there were others around me with the same fate who gave me hope. In the end, I survived and I knew I had to go forward with living.

I was given the opportunity to move far away from the place of my birth to a land which gave me hope. Many others, who like me, had faced the darkness now

traveled into the light. We went into the sun knowing that the abyss would always loom around us.

With this new life came the responsibility to preserve what had been entrusted to us. I found my niche in the form of being a civil servant who had taken an oath to protect our new homeland. I was committed to my new position with everything my being had to offer but I was still young and in need of someone to help me achieve my potential.

I found this person in the mostly unlikely form of an individual. He was a man who stood only about five foot tall with a nebbish persona to match his stature. He was known to have said that he only took orders from two people, the country's leader and his wife. Yet, this man was my boss and I got to know his other side. I was recruited by him personally not too long after I set down my roots in my new home. He molded me into the professional that I would become and added to the person whom I am.



One of my colleagues remarked that one look from the boss made him feel that he was already in prison but I disagreed. He held us, his subordinates, to the highest moral and professional standards. Misjudgments by any of us would be dealt swiftly and harshly by him but yet, if one of us ended up in the hands of our adversaries, he would go to no end to rescue the person in trouble. His qualities bred loyalty, which all of us had toward him. His eye for talent ensured that we complemented each other in our efforts. He was a leader unafraid to get his hands dirty.

After working for him for several years, he would present us with what I would deem the ultimate test of our work skills and also of our souls. None of us knew how long he had been planning our mission. His obsession with secrecy was also our obsession. We never asked any questions beyond what we needed to know to get a certain job done. When he made us privy to this new operation,

everyone knew that this would be the greatest challenge of our careers.

Our target was to go out and capture the man whose past actions were beyond demonic. The number of lives he extinguished and the damage he had inflicted were beyond comprehension. At first, we thought that we would simply go out and neutralize this perpetrator but we were wrong. The boss told us that this target had to be brought to justice. This order was hard to grasp and even harder for me to believe that I would follow it. The boss, our mentor, was trusted and we would have to put our faith in him.

He was the first to tell us that this would be a most difficult undertaking in an operation which would be rife with many obstacles to overcome. He stated that our nation depended on us. To me, nothing more needed to be said. I had to put my rage and my nightmares aside. A day still does not go by when I do not have flashbacks from my dark past but, in this instance I found myself fortunate that I could draw support my coworkers who lived through the same experience. Although the boss was not one to give a shoulder to cry on, his leadership supplied each of us with the fortitude we needed.

Other entities supplied resources for our mission. The operation was to take place thousands of miles away on another continent. Our target had been in hiding for a decade and a half. Twice before he had been captured but was able to slip out of the grasp of justice. He moved like a chameleon across one continent and then on to another with the aid of others and his ability to blend into his new environment.

Our information was that our prey had held a variety of occupations from farmer to factory worker, much different occupations from the high position he once maintained. His goal to remain hidden had served him well over the years but now fate was about to intervene.

The plan for his final detention was now in motion. Our boss was its architect and he would be with us to carry it out. Each of us made our way to the site where it would be initiated. A plan like this had not been carried out before. The logistics

alone were overwhelming. With the boss in charge, I felt certain that we would be successful in this endeavor.

With our target's daily routine in hand, we were ready to proceed with the operation. The location was on the street where he lived, a street ironically named for a foreign military man who has his own tribulations. It was evening when the target was accosted by us as he walked home from a bus stop. His transfer to a secure location went relatively well and he already resigned himself to the process that awaited him even before his identity was confirmed by the team. Interrogations began prior to his removal from his adopted country to ours for the next phase.

I found the most revolting admission from this pitiful excuse of a human being was that he was only following orders when it came to his past deeds. Any vigilante thoughts we harbored were long extinguished by the intervention of the boss. We were committed to bringing him to our courts. We smuggled him out of the country and delivered him to face justice.

There was diplomatic fall out about the rendition of this man to our country. The outcry was tremendous from his adopted home rising to the attention of international circles. The reality was that the only people who missed him were his immediate family. Others hiding there from similar pasts feared for their own captures and did not care about him. For us, we had done our jobs. Our talents were now needed for other operations but this did not keep us from monitoring the defendant's progress through the criminal justice system.

Almost a year after his arrival on our soil, his trial began. After months of testimony and evidence being presented, he was found guilty and sentence to death. I spoke with my colleagues and we wondered when the sentence would be carried out. Due to the high profile nature of the case, we knew that it would be done in secret. Only one of us asked to be present. As for me, I did my job. During this man's tenure, I had seen death firsthand, many times by those who

carried out his orders. I had no desire to see death again, even though death was part of my chosen profession.

Two years after our operation, the execution was carried out. His body was then immediately cremated and his ashes were later scattered at sea beyond our country's territorial limits. In the end, he would go the way in which he had sent so many. I felt nothing for him, neither sadness nor joy from his demise.

I still grieve every day for those whose lives were cut short by this man and his co-conspirators. I recently saw a media report recounting the fiftieth anniversary of his execution. I needed nothing to remind me of that date because it was forever etched in my mind.

I once lived in darkness but I was given a second chance at life, a chance bolstered by a fine mentor. I look ahead even though my own time is coming near its end. The way along my new life has not always been smooth. I married and had two sons. Both served our country in war but only one came home. The other would establish himself professionally, marry, and give us grandchildren. My wife died a few years back but my grandchildren had children of their own.

As I stated, I am an old man but, I am still able to live on my own. Although I am alone at night, my days are filled with the laughter of my grandchildren and my great grandchildren in my home. Much of this, I owe to the boss who gave me a sense of purpose and kept me focused on that which was important. Besides teaching me my job, he also taught me about life. Here's to Life!



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Editors of the Portal Pamphlet, South Regional/Broward College Library 7300 Pines Blvd. Pembroke Pines, FL. 33024. Telephone: 954-201-8297.

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