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Father Christmas Must Die!!!

PATRICK WHITTAKER

NONE OF YOU KNEW ERICKSON IN LIFE, SO WHY believe you know him in death? You've seen his picture on television. You've read the lies in the newspapers. You've devoured every rumor and held it up as the absolute truth. And on the basis of these lies and half-truths you revile his name.

Even those who were acquainted with Erickson have but an inkling of his inner self. You can only guess at the torments that drove him on.

Yes, he was brash. But at heart he was a kindly, goodly soul who wanted nothing more than to rid the world of evil. And still you condemn him.

A pox on the lot of you.

I MET ERICKSON AT UNIVERSITY, WHERE HIS STAR shone bright and my own was a moonlet by comparison. I did little to distinguish myself. Shy and no great shakes at anything, I saw myself as one of those people put on Earth to make up the numbers.

I had no friends, but what else should I expect? Shy people are the invisible pariahs of this world. On the rare occasions we intrude upon the consciousness of others, we are dismissed as aloof. Because we can't reach out, it is assumed we have no wish to.

Let all who once lauded Erickson and now vilify his name, remember this: none of you ever thought to rescue me from my loneliness. Each time you walked past without so much as a nod of recognition, each time you threw a party without me, each time you excluded me from your conversation, your walks in the country, your trips into town — each time you did that, you did me an injury.

Not so Erickson.

We were barely aware of each other for the first months of my tenure. I knew there was some chap called Erickson who was looked up to by his fellows as he cut a rakish swath through the female Halls of Residence, but I scarce gave him a thought. He, for his own part, would have had no dealings with me but for *Lovejoy's Guide to the Occult, Volume 7*.

The evening we met, an awful storm, which had been threatening for days, finally broke. I found myself unable to study for the drumming of the rain and the unearthly lament of the wind.

I had just decided on an early night when Erickson knocked on my door. He had come for the Lovejoy.

As he walked in to the tiny room that served as my bedroom and study, I was impressed by his aristocratic bearing.

"Now, look here, Simpson," he said crisply. "I under-

stand you have the seventh volume of Lovejoy. You should have returned it weeks ago."

What a wretch I felt. Caught red-handed without an ounce of mitigation.

Meekly, I lifted the book from my desk and handed it over. Tucking it under his arm, Erickson fixed me with eyes as blue as the seas on which his Viking ancestors had sailed. "Properly speaking, you should return this to the library, but then some fool will only get to it before me. You can have it back in a couple of days."

Without asking if he might, he sat on my bed and leafed through the book. He stopped at my bookmark.

"Santa Claus?" He looked up. "Funnily enough, Simpson, it's the section on Santa that I'm after. Have you ever thought what lies behind this Kris Kringle business?"

"A tale to encourage children to be good."

Erickson snorted. "Do you know what a cargo cult is?"

"Well, yes, but—"

"Once a year, offerings of mince pies and warm milk are rendered to a being possessed of powers beyond our comprehension in return for a few baubles and a sense of well-being. What then is Santa if not a cargo cult?"

Slamming the book shut, Erickson got up and studied my CD collection. "Led Zeppelin? I had you marked as a Bach man."

"I hate Bach."

"There's hope for you yet." Erickson smacked his lips. "Get your coat. We've still time to hit the pub."

WHAT SEALED OUR FRIENDSHIP WAS A MUTUAL LOVE of bitter. Not for us the bland, gassy concoction called lager much beloved by the rest of the campus. We wanted real ale — cask conditioned, rampant with flavor and drawn from pumps.

Once he'd established my taste in beer, Erickson was forever badgering me to accompany him on weekend jaunts to breweries and pubs. More often than not, I acquiesced.

We remained friends until graduation day when we said farewell and promised to keep in touch. We both knew we wouldn't.

IT WAS NEVER MY AMBITION TO GO TO ANTARCTICA but that's where I found myself. I landed a job with a biotech company searching for novel sources of DNA. They assembled a team to probe the ice pack for remnants of extinct bacteria. The chances of success were remote; the potential rewards were great.

I was the junior member. To me fell the task of coax-

ing ancient spores back to life in petri dishes. Others got to play with electron microscopes, centrifuges and arcane machines which I was forbidden to go near.

My fellow team members — bearded, pipe-smoking, fanatical about chess — resented my presence and made sure I knew it. My BA meant nothing to these men of science with their doctorates and years of field experience. In their eyes I was little better than a lab rat.

And then there was the boredom. Six weeks in a plastic dome with no television, no opportunities for a casual stroll, no pub in which to seek refuge. Little wonder I went berserk. I must have been at breaking point when Byrd strolled into the recreation room and asked me to sit elsewhere. There were chairs aplenty, most of them empty, but I had chosen the chair he considered his own.

I gave vent to a scream like all the furies in Hell, and then I was on the floor, my hands around Byrd's throat, squeezing, tightening. Why Colins had a tranquilizer gun on him, I'll never know. It saved Byrd's life.

THE COMPANY WAS UNDERSTANDING. I WAS NOT THE first employee to crack beneath the tedium of life in their plastic bubble. After flying me back to London, they told me to take a three-month sabbatical and then see how I felt about returning to work.

Still on full pay, I rented a flat in London and divided my waking hours between studying and frequenting various pubs. Many an hour was spent gazing into a glass, perhaps in the hope of discerning my life's purpose. I was not sure I wanted a career in the bio-tech industry. But what else was there for me?

I never considered suicide as a serious option — but I did consider it.

LURKING AT THE BACK OF MY MIND IS THE MEMORY of a pub, of too many beers and a painful encounter with a wet pavement. Strong hands pulled me to my feet, threw me in a car and put me to bed. I awoke in an unfamiliar flat with a hangover and the bleak acceptance of more grim awakenings to come.

The smell of bacon and fresh coffee lured me to the kitchen where I found Erickson frying a breakfast of epic proportions. I sat down and wordlessly accepted a mug of coffee.

We exchanged only pleasantries until we had both eaten.

"Well, Simpson," said Erickson, popping the last of his toast in his mouth, "this is a fine pass you've come to."

And indeed it was, but Erickson was not being critical. He immediately added, "We make a right pair, you and me. In case you hadn't heard, I had a nervous breakdown in Peru."

I swished coffee around my mouth, savoring its bitter, no-nonsense flavor. "I can't imagine you cracking up. You were always so self-assured."

"It was the mosquitoes. That and a dozen patronizing, know-it-all geophysicists."

"Sounds like you and I had much the same experience. Did you come looking for me?"

"You bet. Somehow I knew I'd find you face down in the gutter."

"Thanks a bundle."

"I'm not having a dig, Simpson. God knows, I've seen enough of the pavement myself since I got back from the jungle." Erickson poured himself a cup of coffee. "Do you still dismiss Father Christmas as a childish myth?"

I thought he was making small talk. There was nothing to warn me I was about to answer one of the most crucial questions of my life. "I don't think I ever believed in him."

"Not ever?"

"Maybe once. I wrote him a letter saying what a good boy I was and please could I have any of the following. I don't recall what I asked for but I'm sure I didn't get it."

"So he let you down? It's a common occurrence."

"What is this fixation you have with Santa? It's like a private vendetta. What's he ever done to you?"

"A good question, Simpson." Erickson settled back in his chair. "When I was a boy, a remarkable thing happened to me. I was eight, I think — maybe nine. Anyway, it was Christmas Eve and I'd bought into the Father Christmas gag hook, line and sinker. Can you believe my naïveté?"

"Children that age believe anything their parents tell them."

Erickson's fist came down on the table like a hammer blow. "And that's just it, isn't it? That's how the vile bastard gets away with it. Catch them while they're young and they're yours forever. What insanity leads normally rational adults to tell their children that a creature of the night can be anything but evil?"

"Good people walk by day. They don't sneak into people's homes through their chimneys, do they?"

I had to concede they didn't. Maybe Erickson was on to something.

"Like I say," he continued, "it was Christmas Eve. I was a rich, spoiled kid and that's something I make no apologies for. I sat in my bedroom thinking about all the wondrous goodies dear old Santa was going to leave in my stocking. I'd asked for a pony, a train set, something made of gold, enough chocolate to fill a pantry and many other things. And I knew I was going to get them, but it wasn't enough."

"I'd recently heard from a cousin in Canada who'd bagged a miniature sports car for his birthday. It was a

replica Ferrari complete with two-stroke engine. And I wanted one. God, how I wanted one!

“But the silly sod didn’t tell me about it until after I’d sent my Christmas wish list. The only chance I had of gaining my heart’s new desire was to meet Santa face to face — and that’s exactly what I intended to do.

“I sucked ice cubes to keep awake. At eleven o’clock, I heard the servants say their goodnights before retiring. Shortly after, footsteps in the corridor told me my parents were on their way to bed.

“I was by now one tired little boy. My eyelids felt like they had monkeys hanging on them. Just one more hour, I told myself. That’s all that stood between me and happiness. I was bugged if I was going to wait another year to play catch-up with my Canadian cousin.

“It must have been close to midnight when I fell asleep. Damn it! If only I’d been stronger. My father always said I lacked discipline and he was right!

“I was woken by a groan. It was like nothing I had heard before. There was another groan and then someone cried out. The words were muffled, but I recognised my mother’s voice.

“A chill went through me as she screamed and screamed again. Without a thought for my own safety, I raced down the corridor and burst into my parents bedroom and there... there...” Erickson jabbed an accusing finger at something in his mind’s eye. “Damn it! Damn it to Hell!”

He fixed me with a look that raised the hairs on my neck.

“Listen, Simpson,” he hissed. “I’ve never told anybody this before, and the Devil knows why I’m telling you. If you breathe one word to anyone, I will kill you! Understood?”

I nodded. “You have my word, Erickson. This stays between you and me.”

Placated, Erickson took a deep breath and continued. “My mother was no longer screaming. She was gripping the headboard and sobbing. Her nightdress was — Well, I don’t have to spell it out, do I, Simpson? She was being violated by Father Christmas!”

I nearly fell off my chair. “Father Christmas! Are you sure?”

“I saw him with my own eyes — the beard, the red suit, his trousers around his ankles, his face pressed against my mother’s. It was him, all right.”

“Where was your father?”

“Dead. But I didn’t yet know it.”

“I TOOK MY FATHER’S SHOTGUN FROM THE WARDROBE,” Erickson said in an all-too-calm voice. “I loaded it and took aim. That’s when my mother opened her eyes and saw me. The look of horror and shame on her face will stay with me forever. It left me no choice.

“She took the first round, straight between the eyes. I was knocked to the floor by the recoil but leapt straight to my feet.

“The monster pleaded for his life. He spouted some nonsense about being my father, but my father didn’t have a beard. He didn’t wear red! And he certainly would not have defiled my mother.

“I rammed the gun into his mouth and let him have it. I killed Santa Claus. Or so I thought.”

I was shaking like a leaf, barely able to take in the full horror of Erickson’s tragedy. “You said your father was already dead?”

“Killed by Father Christmas. I don’t know all the details.”

“How ghastly!”

“They say it was the nanny who found me. Apparently I was sitting on the bed with the gun pressed to my throat. I really don’t remember.

“The police came and then some social workers and the next thing I recall was sitting in a cell wondering where my presents were. They told me I was insane. Well, is it any wonder, after what I’d been through?”

“I spent the next four years being shunted from one institution to another. Finally, I learned what it was the men in white coats wanted me to say and I said it. They let me out and I was taken care of by a maiden aunt in Winchester.”

This amazing story explained much that had puzzled me about Erickson. For as long as I’d known him, he’d carried some inner hurt, a mixture of bewilderment and anger. And here was the cause of it all: Father Christmas.

There was one thing that bothered me. “Surely if they had found Father Christmas dead, it would be common knowledge?”

Erickson laughed. “You don’t get it, do you, Simpson? It takes more than a shotgun to kill his kind. By the time the police arrived, he was on his way back to Lapland, or wherever the hell it is he lurks 364 days of the year. Think it through, Simpson. What kind of semi-human creature comes out at night and can only enter someone’s house if invited?”

The answer was obvious but I could not bring myself to voice it.

ALTHOUGH ERICKSON MADE NO ATTEMPT TO CONTACT me after our conversation, I went out of my way to avoid him. I changed my daily routine, drank in different pubs, stopped going to the supermarket.

It wasn’t that I was afraid of Erickson, or even that I had taken a dislike to him. What bothered me was the possibility that he had more dark secrets to unveil — secrets I couldn’t handle. I guess you’d call it cowardice.

THE MORNING I RECEIVED THE LETTER SEEMED LIKE any other until I noticed snow falling past my window. It must have been coming down all night because the streets and rooftops were inches thick in it.

The snow was an unwelcome reminder that Christmas was approaching, and I sat on my bed in gloomy introspection before remembering the envelope. Somehow I knew it was going to be bad news.

The company was dispensing with my services. There was a check in lieu of notice. It was enough to keep me in drink for another month. And then, like it or not, I was going to have to find a job.

BY OPENING TIME, THE SNOW HAD EASED UP, BUT not enough to tempt me further than the Ace of Spades, a small pub with oak beams and a menagerie of stuffed animals. Until my recent encounter with Erickson, I had treated it as a second living room, a place where I could lose myself in books and beer.

The landlord was taking the towels off the pumps as I walked in. I shook the snow off my shoes and warmed myself by the fire. Most days I was the first customer, but today there was somebody sitting in the snug by the window. I paid him no heed until he turned round.

Erickson looked pleased to see me.

It would have been ill-mannered to follow my impulse and head back into the snow. So I got two pints of bitter and joined him.

"I was wondering when you'd show," he said as I sat down. "I've been here every day for the past week."

"You should have called round."

"Don't flatter yourself, Simpson. As stimulating as I find your company, you're not the reason I'm here." He pointed across the road. "You see over there?"

"The department store?"

"Galloway's. One of the oldest shops in London."

"What of it?"

"At this time of year, it stays open till ten."

Erickson seemed to expect me to work out the rest for myself. I had no idea what his point was and indicated my ignorance with a shrug.

He let out an exasperated sigh. "Think, man. Think! What do these big stores do at this time of year?"

"Stay open late?"

"Don't be obtuse. They all play host to Father Christmas."

"Now hang on, Erickson. You do realize they're not real Santas?"

"Do you take me for an idiot?" Scowling, he pulled out a distressed photograph and threw it on the table. "I've had this since I was a boy. I think it was my father's."

I picked up the faded photograph. A sepia Father

Christmas looked out at me from across the years. He was standing beside a cardboard reindeer. Just another out of work actor making a seasonal buck — or so I thought.

"If you shift your thumb," said Erickson, "you'll see a date."

I moved my thumb. The date was faint but I could make it out. 1938.

Erickson took the snapshot and stuffed it back in his pocket. "The man in that photo must be very old — quite probably dead. Wouldn't you say?"

"Obviously."

"What if I told you he was neither of those?"

"You've lost me."

"He goes into that store every evening at ten minutes to eight."

"All Santas look the same."

"Not this one. This is the genuine article — Kris Kringle himself."

"Why would the real Father Christmas be working in a department store?"

"What better disguise than to pretend to be someone pretending to be you? Don't forget, Simpson, I've met the real Santa. I know what he looks like. If you want to see for yourself, come here at half past seven." Erickson knocked back his pint. "And for goodness sakes, be sober for once."

And with that, he got up and swept out into the cold and snow.

AFTER ERICKSON LEFT, THE ACE OF SPADES REMAINED charged with his presence. Some near-tangible residue of his anger and despair hung in the air. It made the fire cold and the beer flat.

The bar filled with shop workers and people taking a break from Christmas shopping. Strange faces everywhere. Normal people doing normal things.

As always, I was excluded. I was the dishevelled, slightly-unwashed loner sitting in the corner. The one to be ignored. The one everyone expected would still be there at closing time.

I was reminded that Erickson was the only friend I had in the world.

SQUEEZED OUT BY THE LUNCHTIME RUSH, I LEFT THE Ace of Spades and wandered around Galloway's.

Morbid curiosity drew me to the Toy Department where harassed parents sought to buy their offspring's love with expensive toys that would be forgotten within weeks. The line for Santa's grotto snaked around shelves loaded with shrink-wrapped joy.

Children waited to declare their virtue and claim their reward. Mothers and fathers clinging to tiny hands did

their best to dampen expectations. Already they were calculating their monthly repayments.

Erickson was right. Santa Claus was evil.

I RETURNED TO THE ACE OF SPADES AT THE APPOINTED time but didn't go in. Instead, I hid in a narrow passage cluttered with barrels and crates. It was snowing again.

The clock over the entrance to Galloway's showed a quarter to eight when I spotted my quarry in his red costume. If he wasn't Father Christmas, he was certainly equipped for the part. He had the right build and his beard looked real enough. With snow and shoppers spoiling my view, I couldn't be certain that this was the man in the photograph, but the resemblance was definitely there.

The thing that struck me most was the way his head tilted to one side as if he had an injury to his neck.

Shuffling into the pub, I found Erickson by the window. Although the bar was far from empty, he had a table to himself.

"I saw him," I said, handing Erickson a whisky and sitting down.

"So what do you think?"

"There was something about him."

"His neck?"

"Possibly."

"Even the Undead can't walk away unscathed from a shotgun blast." Erickson looked me in the eye. "What does your gut tell you?"

I savored a sip of whisky before answering. My gut had known from the start.

"He's our man, all right."

"It makes me sick to think of him walking amongst us, unnoticed, unmolested. All those children..." He broke off and downed his whisky. "I need your help, Simpson. Are you with me?"

My heart turned to lead. Whatever Erickson had in mind was sure to add to my woes. "Count me in."

"Remember we're doing this for all those children who once a year are told a big fat lie. Is it any wonder they grow up unable to tell good from evil? Finish your drink and come with me."

Erickson's car was parked around the corner. He opened the boot and stepped back to allow me to view its contents — two mallets and a clutch of wooden stakes.

"Tonight," he said. "Let's rid the world of this filth for once and for all."

KRIS KRINGLE LEFT GALLOWAY'S SHORTLY AFTER TEN o'clock. We traced his footsteps in the snow.

Halfway down an alley, he sensed our presence and turned. I should have waited for Erickson's order, but fear got the better of me. I swung the mallet blindly. Chance

guided it to the side of Kringle's head. His neck straightened with a sound like damp kindling on a fire.

Santa staggered, went down.

Erickson was immediately upon him. I stood helpless as they thrashed in the snow. For a moment it seemed that two had become one. Erickson and Santa — an amalgam of limbs and heads.

Father Christmas got hold of Erickson's hair and lunged at his neck.

And then Erickson was on top. He gouged Kringle's eyes and took him by the throat.

"Now, Simpson! In the name of God!"

I threw myself at Father Christmas and drove my stake through his heart. Blood fountained. It spread across the snow like the shadow of an eclipse.

Red and white. The colors of Father Christmas.

I was shaking as we walked away.

SOMEHOW THE POLICE TRACKED US DOWN. I KNOW WE left footprints in the snow but once on the main street we walked in the gutter. No snow there. No footprints.

And yet the police were outside the Ace of Spades before we'd finished our pints.

Erickson saw them first. He pointed to the panda cars outside the window. Then he pointed to the gents.

By the time the police entered the bar, we were in the alleyway and headed in opposite directions.

MY SEVERANCE CHECK REMAINED UNCASHED. I LIVED on my wits and the kindness of strangers. The shyness which made me all but invisible proved a boon.

I walked to Manchester, surviving on scraps and sleeping in fields. By the time I got there, I was just another bum. Nobody gave me a second look. I was a scrap of sub-humanity, unworthy of attention.

After six months, I decided it was safe to associate with other hobos, to share their makeshift homes in underground car parks and empty shops. Soup and bread from the Salvation Army kept me alive. The indefatigable humor of my fellow vagrants kept me sane.

There were nights when I welcomed the cold because it took my mind off the hunger, and there were nights when I welcomed the hunger because it took my mind off the cold.

Once in a while, I'd find myself being kicked and pumelled by inebriated youths. And I didn't mind so long as they left me unconscious.

Every meal was eaten with the thought that it might be my last. When I lay down to sleep, I wondered if I would see another dawn.

I suppose I could have given myself up. Freedom is a base currency when it's the freedom to starve, to shiver

in the dark, to be the plaything of lager louts. And yet it never occurred to me to do so.

I just got on with my semblance of life.

IT WAS DECEMBER AGAIN, DAYS SHORT OF THE anniversary of the night I'd become a fugitive. I was standing outside the Manchester branch of Galloway's, daring myself to go in just long enough to drive the cold from my bones.

That was when Father Christmas came shuffling along with the gait of an old man. It was dark. He had his head down. A white beard obscured his face.

He walked beneath a streetlight. I saw something familiar in his eyes - a mix of ice and fire. Just a momentary glimpse before he disappeared through the staff entrance.

My mind reeled. Could it really have been Erickson? I tried to dismiss the thought as idle fancy, a longing to once again share his company.

The next two and a half hours were a torment. I stood outside the staff entrance, taking a stroll now and then to avoid being arrested.

At ten o'clock, the store shut its doors. By a quarter past, the last customers had been persuaded to leave. The exodus of staff began minutes later.

Father Christmas, still in his costume, came out at about half past and this time there could be no doubt. It was Erickson.

I followed him along the High Street. He hesitated outside a pub then walked on. Wary of attracting attention, I waited until he turned down a small road before coming up alongside.

"Erickson," I whispered. "It's me. Simpson."

He glanced at me without breaking his stride. "Bugger off, Simpson. You'll blow my cover."

I continued to dog him, matching him step for urgent step, until he turned and grabbed my lapels.

"Damn it, Simpson! Just how stupid can you get?" He caught my odor and pushed me away. His beard could not disguise his disgust. "I thought we'd agreed we could never meet again!"

It was true, but then I hadn't expected him to be in Manchester, dressed as Father Christmas of all people.

"I'm sorry, Erickson. It's just that..." My voice trailed off.

He shook his head and smiled. "I've often wondered what became of you. I had this notion of you going to South America to fleece gullible tourists. I suppose I should have known better."

"Not one of life's success stories, am I?"

Erickson pointed down the road. "I have a room. We'll stick you under the shower, burn those rags you're wear-

ing and tog you out in something vaguely decent. It won't be Saville Row — but then, I am a fugitive."

ERICKSON'S ROOM WAS IN THE ATTIC OF A LARGE Victorian house.

While he went through a suitcase pulling out crumpled clothes, I wondered if there was any way back to normality. Other people had assumed false identities and started new lives in foreign countries. Why couldn't I?

Erickson handed me some cricket whites. As he closed his case I caught sight of a cricket set — bat, ball, stumps and bails. It was, I suppose, Erickson's way of maintaining contact with his previous life.

The room across the hallway was unoccupied, so I was able to take my shower with little danger of discovery. Erickson's clothes were a poor fit, but at least I was clean.

When I returned to Erickson, he was in his pajamas, sitting on the bed, nursing a glass of whisky. The Father Christmas suit lay folded on the dressing table, but the beard remained. It was not, as I'd assumed, fake.

"I take it you'll be happy with the couch," he said, pouring me a drink. "It's a bit lumpy, but it must be better than what you're used to."

Nodding meekly, I sat on the couch. The thought of a good night's sleep in warmth and safety brought home to me how tired I was. A couple of sips of whisky and I was unable to stifle a yawn.

Erickson chuckled. "I'm as bushed as you are. Let's get our heads down. We can catch up with each other in the morning."

I was asleep before he'd put out the light.

HEARTBURN WOKE ME JUST BEFORE DAWN.

Sometimes a man can only find himself in the dark. I was Eric Simpson, fugitive, Santa Slayer. Whether the Universe liked it or not, I existed — a fact I chewed over for some time. If there was truly a God in Heaven, then he had let me down badly. I had risked my life to rid the world of a great evil. Where, then, was my reward?

Too angry to sleep, I got up and huddled against the radiator.

Erickson slept on. I listened to his gentle snoring and told myself that here was a man I would truly give my life for.

But the beard bothered me. It was white and bushy. I saw now as my eyes adjusted to the dark that he was wearing a cravat. And I thought back to events immediately after we'd sent Kris Kringle's soul to Hell.

As we fled the scene, Erickson clutched his neck. In the Ace of Spades, he sat with his collar turned up. Climbing out of the toilet window, I'd caught a flash of crimson.

I went to the suitcase and took out the cricket bat and a stump.

Erickson awoke as I pressed the metal tip to his chest and raised the bat. His lips moved the slightest amount. I think he was trying to say, "Thank you."

"Goodbye, old friend," I said, delivering the blow which laid his soul to rest.

AND THAT'S THE WHOLE STORY. I PHONED THE POLICE and went quietly. Of course, they thought me mad. You all think me mad. You point and whisper behind my back: "See how he quickly he has become accustomed to his cell? He is happy here. Surely there can be no greater proof of insanity."

A pox on the lot of you.

PATRICK WHITTAKER

Is an English screenwriter living in Wales. He has several short films to his name.

The Legion of Lost Gnomes

T.G. BROWNING

AS CRIME WAVES RAN, IT COULDN'T REALLY BE called much of a wave. A rivulet, perhaps, hardly a wave. But when faced with the obvious, even the primally stubborn can be convinced and that's what Doris was. *Convinced*. Now, the only problem she saw, was that she wasn't sure if it was a good thing or a bad thing.

Somebody was stealing lawn gnomes.

Doris shuffled the three reports a second time and laid them out carefully, side by side. The first was from Jimmy and was a model of quiet police efficiency. Short, concise in the way short things should be but often aren't, and totally deadpan. No twists. Nothing to indicate that Jimmy found any of the incidents to be slightly on the broken side of Serious City.

The second was Marla's report and it, too, was a good example of police work, though there were twists and slants to the narrative that caused Doris to suspect that Marla had had a *hard* time keeping a straight face when she took the information. That little tiny doodle in the lower left corner that looked suspiciously like an inebriated squirrel hanging upside down from a branch was only the most obvious indication.

Still, all the facts were there and dutifully cataloged with direct quotes from the crime victim listed here and there as appropriate.

They also cracked Doris up. "Well, you don't think they just up and walked off by themselves, now do you missy?"

Doris could just see the victim, Gretchen Reinhart, canting her head to the side and looking up at Marla as she spoke.

The last of the three was from Mort, Doris's problem child in the office. Mort tried very hard but lacked that certain something that gives one confidence in someone allowed to carry a gun in public. He'd been improving steadily and this particular report couldn't have been easy for him, improvements or no. In a way, Doris was touched at the inner police officer it revealed. He obviously believed everything this latest victim of crime had to say and since that included a few scatological references to neighbors who just *had* to be guilty of *something*, Doris figured that Mort could probably keep busy with the follow-up all the way through Christmas.

Since it was currently the month of May, Doris figured she'd have to keep an eye on Mort. Doris looked back at the reports one final time, mentally added up how much the stuff taken could have been worth and then chucked them all into a basket she kept for things not finished and not really in need of finishing. By her reckoning, all the thefts taken together couldn't have cost the victims more

than \$300 and a bit of wounded pride.

She figured that what they had was an art teacher who'd been working too hard and needed a break. Conjectured art teacher probably snatched the little guys and then *offed* them with a small but sturdy hammer. The ex-gnomes were probably rounded hunks of concrete in the nearest landfill.

In Doris's worldview, justice wasn't really blind, just slow to balance.

DORIS OFTEN WENT HOME FOR LUNCH SINCE SHE ONLY lived ten blocks away. It gave her a chance to look things over as she went, though she rarely saw anything more interesting than someone parked too far from the curb. But, she also figured that establishing a visible presence around town never hurt and she got the bonus of a hot meal with no interruptions from townspeople upset about parking or speeding tickets.

Just a block away from home, she spotted two of her neighbors, Cissy Brown and Verla Manning, talking animatedly. Doris had already started to give them her friendly, neighborhood cop *I-see-you-but-I'm-busy* wave when the animation speed jumped a couple of notches and the two women *both* started yelling, waving their arms, and moving with reckless speed in her direction. Doris sighed, pulled over and parked. She made a point of not getting out of the squad car.

Cissy Brown was in the lead in the race to get Doris's ear first. She had an advantage over her competitor since she had longer legs under a fairly trim body, kept in shape by fending off the attacks of a set of seven-year-old triplets vaguely rumored to be hers. She wore a bright blue t-shirt, shorts and, oddly enough, jogging shoes — though the progress she was making toward the car would more properly be termed sprinting.

Verla Manning, Doris's other neighbor, was within easy striking distance behind Cissy and her legs were shorter and would remind one of tree trunks, had tree trunks been wearing faded denim this year. She was one of those people who had the misfortune to have large internal organs with shoulders to match. She resembled an Albanian weightlifter with a perm. Even so, Doris would have put money on Cissy over Verla but only if Verla wasn't looking.

"Doris, I want her—" Cissy got in first from about ten feet out.

"Damn it, Cissy, will you just—"

"—arrested. She stole—"

"—did not!"

"Did too, you—"

Both stopped abruptly when Doris started playing with the shotgun racked on the passenger side of the squad car. Doris had the good fortune to witness a rare phenome-

non: Both women with their mouths open and no sounds coming out. Doris wished she had a videocam since she doubted she'd ever be so fortunate again. She got out of the squad car and leaned on the door.

In a mild voice, Doris asked, "Something you two need? I'm on my lunch break if you don't mind. I'd like to have chance to at least open the refrigerator before heading back to the office."

This time Verla got in the first shot. "Cissy's been robbed. She thinks I did it but I haven't touched any of her stuff." Verla glared at her next-door neighbor. This might not be the worst fight the two of them had had, but it was going to go down as one of the more official ones, if Verla had anything to say about it. Doris had the grim feeling that living six houses away from the conflict wouldn't be far enough if Cissy didn't apologize and damn soon.

"You always hated . . ." Cissy snapped back, now glaring at Verla.

"Maybe, but I'm no *thief*. If you want tacky little concrete goblins—"

"Gnomes!"

"—whatever, hiding in your rose bushes, that's your look out."

"*Judas Priest!*" Both of the women snapped their heads back to stare at Doris. Her expression must have been a shade grim because they both took a step backward. They had just discovered what small European nations felt when bus loads of Prussians stop for border checks. Without another word, Doris got on the radio.

THAT NIGHT AFTER SUPPER, DORIS WANDERED OUT into the front yard, a bottle of Conceited Sonnavabitch Stout in hand, thinking dark thoughts. The stout didn't exactly help. Once opened, she'd committed to drinking it and frankly, as far as she could tell, this particular stout had nothing to be conceited about.

Milt, her husband and chief of police for the neighboring town of Newport, ambled out after a few minutes, wiping his hands on a dishrag and wondering why Doris had his bottle of C-SOBS. As far as he knew, she hated stout. He stopped for a moment, considered that, and then frowned.

The only way that would happen would be if Doris was in conference with her subconscious and not paying attention. He watched while she finally sat down on the grass under the hawthorne tree and looked disgusted.

"You want me to finish that? And maybe get you something you actually like?"

Doris blinked twice, looked at the bottle and then nodded gravely. "That would probably help. Then I got a couple of questions for you."

"Weird stuff?"

“Weird stuff.”

Milt sighed and complied. Within a minute he plopped his wiry frame down beside his wife and braced himself.

“Okay. What’s up?”

“Gnomes.”

“I beg your pardon?”

“Lawn gnomes. You have any thefts of lawn gnomes in Newport lately?”

“Not that I know about. But I rarely have time to go over more than half the reports these days. Too much court time. Unless Jesse flags it for me, I generally don’t see it. Why? You missing some?”

“We are, not to put too fine a point on it, missing battalions. Legions. Whatever the hell you’d call a bunch of the little suckers.”

“Well, they can’t get far.”

Doris glared at him. “Not funny.”

“Sure it is. Listen to yourself. Lawn gnomes indeed.”

Doris regarded him with a less than charitable expression. “Milt, I nearly had two neighbors who aren’t particularly friendly go to war this afternoon because a couple of the concrete goobers are missing. Cissy Brown figured Verla had stolen them and probably dumped them in the Bay or possibly taken a sledgehammer to them. I don’t need neighbor fights here in town, especially within six houses of where I try to sleep.”

Milt looked thoughtful. “Why would anybody want to take them? They’re not that expensive.”

“Only thing I can figure is that somebody thinks they’re tacky and hates them even more than I do.”

“You don’t think anybody would ... ah ... just use them?”

“Milt, people who’d take and actually use at least 12 or 13 of them are too sick to function in society. They’d never be able to plan a getaway. And they’d give themselves a hernia, to boot.”

“That the only stuff that’s been taken?” Inside the house he heard the sound of the dishwasher abruptly end with a rattle that meant the locking mechanism had come unlatched. Milt got up.

Doris twisted the top off her beer and drank some. She shook her head as she looked up at him. “No. One house was missing a pink flamingo and two ceramic toadstools.” Doris sat up and started to drink a bit more beer and then stopped. “I’m kind of surprised you haven’t had any taken.”

“Guess Toledo and Newport have different hunting seasons.” He started walking backward toward the front door, left hand gripping his stout, the right ready to fend off any attack from Doris.

“You’re cruisin’, Milt ... ” she warned, standing up as she tried to roll up one sleeve while still holding her

beer. Milt got what he figured was enough lead and then split for the front door. Now if he could just get it locked before she got there ...

DORIS DIDN’T ENJOY HOLIDAY WEEKENDS. NO POLICE officer does, really, since it always means a lot of extra work keeping people from hamburgerizing themselves and near relatives in some car crash. The Toledo PD was short handed for this particular Memorial Day since Fred Vasquez had requested special holiday leave to visit family in Powell Butte, Oregon. With his accrued vacation leave, Doris couldn’t see any way to deny him the vacation. The last time he’d taken off for more than a day had been during the first Reagan Administration.

Friday and Saturday nights went down smoothly enough. Doris issued several tickets for speeding, one DUI and one warning ticket for following too close. Considering the driver was tailgating a Southern Pacific Railroad train as it moseyed into the pulp mill, Doris couldn’t talk herself into a full ticket.

Sunday night, Doris made several long, elliptical loops that meandered across the Yaquina River a couple of times and took in the Kauri Street Annex, Alder Lane—which doubled for Toledo’s Nob Hill—the High School, and finally finished up with a brisk cruise down the US 20 bypass of Toledo. Every other time she’d park, get out the radar and clock a few cars as they bypassed the town.

It was nearly midnight and one of the rare, fine evenings just behind the Pacific Coast when the sky was clear as a bell and one could count meteors were one inclined and upwind of the Georgia-Pacific pulp mill. Milt, Doris figured, was undoubtedly enjoying the rustic moodiness one finds in coast towns with a surfeit of fog. Throw in that there was quite a lot of Newport stretched out along the coast and Doris figured he’d not only be home late but be in need of a cheery face once he got home.

Doris noticed lights behind her and readied the radar gun. Before squinting through the sight, it occurred to her that the car lights had come on, rather than appeared. Since the vehicle had come out of Cemetery Loop Road, the driver must have been rolling with the lights off before he hit the intersection.

The vehicle passed by her without any tell-tale red flashes from the brake lights but Doris figured the driver to have taken his foot off the gas—the radar gave out two readings, one after the other: 58 mph followed by 54.

Doris dumped the radar and pulled out after the car—a red SUV that vaguely looked familiar—and quickly discovered that their speed had dropped even further—the SUV was now doing under 50. After another 30 seconds, the car’s right turn signal came on as it slowed and the driver turned onto the Siletz Highway, leaving Doris with

a choice of following or not.

Not. No matter how suspicious Doris felt, she had no real reason to pull them over and the random hassling of motorists didn't happen to be one of her faults.

Still, she did take one final, quick glance as she passed the Siletz Highway turn-off and slowed to turn left onto Old Highway 20. The lighting wasn't great but she could see enough to recognize a back seat packed with three or four kids, each seat-belted into immobility. She even thought she saw one of the little buggers flip her off. She certainly saw one arm up in the air, though she couldn't tell how many fingers the rugrat had extended.

DORIS HAD JUST TURNED ONTO MAIN STREET WHEN the radio crackled. Meg, the Toledo Dispatcher, keyed in.

"...units—" Doris laughed. Toledo had five squad cars and only had two on patrol at any one time. Even on Memorial Day Weekend. "—we have a robbery at 233 East Ridgemont."

Doris grabbed the mike. "Base, this is Doris—how long ago did it happen?" Doris's subconscious had started yammering in the corner.

"About ten minutes ago. That's the Cutter house—Maude Cutter phoned it in."

"Did she see anything—anybody?"

"Not really. Just caught a glimpse of a car headed down the road."

"Eastbound?"

"Affirmative." Meg sounded miffed. She hated it when Doris second-guessed her so effortlessly.

"Base, this is Jimmy. I'm west of Butler Bridge—it'll take me a while to get there."

None of the three of them took advantage of the clear airwaves for several seconds and then Doris keyed in and off, paused and keyed in. "I'll take it, Jimmy. Meg, get in touch with the State Police. I think I saw the vehicle. It was a red SUV and they turned onto the Siletz Highway about five minutes ago. I didn't have any real reason to stop them then." Doris could have kicked herself but refrained. That could come later.

"Base, what was taken?"

There was a pause before Meg answered. "Three or four lawn gnomes and a urinating cherub birdbath."

Doris pulled over and ground her teeth a couple of times. It figured. What else could it have been?

COPS DON'T REALLY HAVE A SPECIAL WAY OF thinking. And of course, every cop is different and uses what mental equipment they have in the most expeditious way. Jimmy, for example, was a great linear thinker. He could leap-frog two or three steps if they happened to be in a straight line but throw a slow curve left into the mix

and you'd see brake lights. Milt was better than Jimmy with any sort of randomized, slow to medium curve and he could second-guess the average person three times out of four.

Doris had a marvelously skewed set of brains. When events ran in twisted curves, she barreled along overtaking and even, occasionally, jumped the track to get in front. Like now.

Item: Three or four concrete goobers strapped in the back of a SUV.

Item: One of them flipping her off.

Conclusion: Since concrete doesn't bend very well, the upraised arm would have to have been a permanent gesture. After a little thought, Doris did recall having encountered at one time or another a couple of the tackier lawn eyesores posed to be waving *bye-bye* or its mercantile equivalent, *check please*, depending upon one's penchant for gruesome detail.

Item: Memorial Day. Doris shelved it for the moment. It was important, but at this point she wasn't sure how or why.

Possibly related item: Subject SUV last seen headed north-by-northeast along the Siletz Highway. Which, by happenstance and bad roadway was connected in two spots with the old Pioneer Mountain Road, which fed back in before the by-pass, about a mile east of it.

Before you could say Pioneer Mountain, Doris had the squad car turned and was making speed heading eastbound on Old Hwy. 20, all lights flashing, but no siren.

There was one cemetery Doris could think of in that direction and it got damn few visitors, ever. Doris was headed for it, all the while thinking how peculiar a concrete gnome looked, asking for a dinner check. That may not be what she seen but the image kind of fit somehow.

The clincher was that Memorial Day had already arrived, since it was already past midnight and that *particular* holiday was one of only two holidays carefully and religiously observed by the owner of that one rather private cemetery.

When Doris had taken US History from him in high school, he'd always made an effort to remind the kids of the point behind Veteran's Day and Memorial Day. He also owned a red SUV, now that Doris thought about it, but he hadn't been driving it much this last year or so because of poor health.

Judas Priest, she thought. *Now why in hell did Tom have to steal them? He couldn't have just borrowed a few from friends or neighbors if he didn't have enough. Now I'll have to take steps.*

A moment later, another circuit cut in and Doris nodded even more grimly. *Mick's got to be handling it for him; Tom wouldn't have lifted the buggers. Besides, it's much*

too slick an operation for anybody else but Mick.

Long ago Doris had learned an interesting secret of life: Codgers get to *be* codgers, by devious, sneaky means. Some more sneaky than others.

Doris knew enough about Mick's history to piece together part of the puzzle. She just wondered what pieces Tom Smythe had in *his* past.

DORIS KILLED THE FLASHERS AS SHE TURNED ONTO Pioneer Mountain Road and went to sub-light speed. The road was tricky and had, back before 1960, been the original route of the Corvallis-Newport Highway—code name US 20 by the uninitiated. It sported all of the trappings of coast road building from that era, including steeply banked, back to back, narrow curves that were a blast to take on a motorcycle if you weren't subject to motion sickness. Doris didn't figure she needed any more thrills for the evening so she took them at the granny speed indicated by the mph riders of the curve signs. After a mile, she slowed even further, figuring she wanted to make damn sure she didn't get to the house first. She wanted to give them enough time to get the little guys unloaded—hopefully getting a strained back in the process. These two needed some sort of lingering aftereffect to mark this particular idiot notion.

One set of ugly curves back from Doris's intended destination, she slowed to a stop and considered her next move. She briefly considered turning off her own headlights but then sighed. What would be the point?

Just as surely as she could figure out what was going on, Mick could figure out just how long it would take Doris to figure it out. She had no doubt that he was currently sitting on either the front porch bench glide or was leaning against a tree in front of the house.

She shrugged, put the car in gear and moseyed around the curve to turn into 14480 Old Pioneer Mountain Road and possibly into an ugly situation.

As she had figured, Mick Reeves was sitting on the front porch. Had to be. Only Mick could have pulled any of this off.

Mick was closing in on 90 years old and had that wiry gauntness you see in old people who have been straight-arming the grim reaper for years, successfully. He had never been a big man, which was almost a given, considering his former line of work: Espionage—first for the old OSS during WWII and then later on, for the CIA up through the beginning of the 60's. Nondescript was probably the only adjective Mick would have aspired to and he more or less achieved it—barring anybody taking a close look at his deep-set cold, gray eyes. Those eyes gave everybody, including Doris the willies occasionally. He wore a pair of canvas deck shoes, corduroy pants with

more than the usual number of pockets, a light blue polo shirt and a sardonic expression. Doris got out and leaned on the car door, to stare back at him.

After a few moments, she asked, "Where's Tom, Mick? Out back? I'd think you'd need to be helping him unload—Tom's not in that good a shape."

Mick nodded companionably. "Gene's helping him. They should be about done by now."

"Gene?" Doris repeated in a musing tone. "Oh, right. Gene Van Horn. Jeez, I would have thought he had more sense than this."

For the first time in her life, Doris saw a spasm of anger flicker across Mick's face. It was gone quickly but for a moment, Doris could believe some of the more unbelievable stories she'd heard about Mick and exploding German staff cars. His normally bland expression did yeoman work concealing the professional field agent.

"There are some remarks, Doris, you'd be wise to leave unsaid." He got up and came down the short stoop of four steps. "C'mon. I told the two of them to be expecting you."

Doris fell in step beside him and thought. She didn't see any way she could avoid shoving all three of the vets in jail and she was just going to *hate* doing that.

Tom Smythe stood to one side of Gene Van Horn as the latter finished smoothing out what could only be described as a miniature grave. Immediately to Gene's right was an already dug hole the same size, only this one had the chubby, jovial face of a lawn gnome peeking out of it.

That explained the lawn gnomes, Doris thought. She took a quick glance around.

This was only the third time Doris had ever been in Tom's backyard and he'd made a number of changes. While she had expected the garden hillside of terraces and flowers painstakingly tended to, she hadn't expected to see one third of the hillside dotted with small white crosses. The last three on the bottom right were brand new and only now was Gene finishing the internment.

The last time she'd been here, there had only been the seven pioneer graves Tom had showed her that time she'd visited, all of which were marked with weathered granite markers.

Over his shoulder without looking, Van Horn called out. "Thanks for coming, Doris. It's much appreciated."

Doris stopped, shook her head and then regarded Tom. "Evening, Tom. You guys look like you're just about done."

Tom looked puzzled but came over and offered his hand to her. "What's that, Doris? Fun? Not really ..."

Mick said in a stage whisper. "His hearing aids aren't working too well, Doris. You better speak up."

Van Horn shot her a glance and then dropped down

into the last, still open grave and started to lay 1' 8" of tacky sculpture to symbolic eternal rest. He paused for a moment and then softly and slowly brushed a few particles of soil away from the gnome's face. Doris found herself sighing.

"Right—Gene, stop that. Climb up out of there and come sit down. We have a few things to discuss."

Gene nodded but looked at Mick. "I think she's upset with us."

Doris just shook her head.

"OKAY, GUYS, WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU'RE doing? You know I'm going to have to arrest and throw the lot of you into a cell, don't you? You can't go around ripping off lawn ornaments even if they do deserve to be buried face down in concrete. You're going to end up in jail ... "

Tom had been fiddling around with his left hearing aid and apparently, got most of Doris's little speech. "What do you mean, stolen? These were donated. Every single one of them."

Doris looked at Mick who shrugged before she replied, "Not hardly, Tom. I've got theft reports going back a couple of weeks or so." Tom looked puzzled for a moment and then shot an accusatory glance at Mick, who shrugged once again.

Mick held up a hand. "We—Gene and I—would have returned them over the next couple of weeks. It isn't like we were planning on keeping them."

Doris shook her head in disgust. "So? Damn it, Mick! I've had neighbors getting ready to go to war with each other all because you have some weird idea of observing Memorial Day. Jeez, why couldn't you guys have simply asked people? Chances are people would have let you borrow them."

Gene shook his head. "Come on, Doris. You know better than that. If you think it's a goofy idea, do you honestly believe anybody would loan them to us? Besides, this is private business."

"In any event, Mick and I did plan on returning them so what harm is there?"

"What—" Doris broke off. "Pink flamingos and lawn frogs too? The birdbath you lifted tonight?"

"Birdbath?" This was from an increasingly confused Tom Smythe. He frowned. "Doris, I owed it to them..."

"Owed ..."

"... owed it to my mates. Damn it, there were only three of us that got out. I'm the last of them and I ain't likely to see another winter, let alone another spring or Memorial Day."

For the first time, Doris's expression softened. "I'm sorry, Tom—I don't... I mean, I didn't know—"

Mick shook his head and caught her attention. "I'll explain. I sent word to Allied Command of the situation and so, in a sense, I was a member of the team." Mick glanced at his two contemporaries, got the high sign and began.

"It was sixty-one years ago day before yesterday. The Germans were planning on bombing the hell out of the Allies in North Africa and had decided to test a special bomb they'd been working on for years. It was designed to blow up over a city and spread anthrax spores all over hell.

"I learned about it and discovered the location of the facility where they were doing the research about five weeks before they planned to deploy for the test. I passed all of that on to Allied Command, who quickly rustled up a team to go in and blow up the lab. Tom was the second in command of the commando unit that was sent in.

"To cut to the chase, they accomplished their mission even though they lost sixteen of the nineteen men on the team. Tom barely pulled through himself—he spent the whole summer recovering while we shifted him from safe house to safe house until he healed up enough to travel and we had a suitable route set up.

"They never released the information and Tom and the other two were ordered to keep their mouths shut—and like patriotic soldiers they did."

"Why on Earth did they do that?"

Mick shrugged. "Because they were worried our own attempts along those lines might surface if the word of the raid got out. The Nazis weren't that much further along then we were."

Doris sighed. "Okay, I can see where this is headed." She thought quickly for a minute and then shook her head. "I'm still going to have to take you all in ... "

Van Horn spoke up. "The US honors the dead of the Indianapolis and that ship carried two atomic bombs. We killed thousands with those bombs. Here Tom and his mates stop the use of biological warfare and get nothing. No word of thanks, no acknowledgement of sacrifice, not even medical disability for what they suffered. Those that survived were badly shot up—Tom included—and all had long term health problems stemming from those wounds. You know what sort of shape I was in after I got liberated from the Japanese POW camp I was in. Tom was nearly in as bad a shape. The VA wouldn't even look at them. The government ignored them completely."

Doris glanced at Smythe. He nodded. "It's true. What money I get from a pension is from the school district and Social Security." He glanced over at the memorial the three of them had constructed. "Brian and Rob never got anything either and when Rob died earlier this year, I..."

"...had to make some acknowledgement. Ah, crap..."

Doris sagged back in her seat. Doing the right thing is sometimes the wrong thing, especially whenever large-scale bureaucracies are involved.

Very softly, Mick added, “Where’s the harm, Doris? Really, who’s been hurt here?”

The owners, you sawed-of Mephistopheles, she thought. The neighbors who aren’t speaking to each other anymore and are thinking of setting up razor-wire fences.

She didn’t say anything for several seconds and then looked at Mick. “Why gnomes?”

“It seemed appropriate. The code name for the operation was Gnome King.”

Doris closed her eyes and shook her head before she looked away toward the hillside that sported eighteen symbolic representations of doing one’s duty. She looked at Smythe, the only living representation of how a nation rewards inconvenient to remember service.

Click. It should only have been audible to Doris since it was merely a mental affectation, but she watched Mick stiffen with a certain amount of pleasure. “Okay, guys, you got me. I can’t force myself to haul you in. However ... “Doris let the pause linger and stared at Mick, “here’s what you’re going to do ...”

Mick didn’t like it one bit, but he saw the symmetry of it. Not any of the humor but he *did* see the symmetry. Score: Doris 3, Mick 1, called in the ninth inning because of common sense and perhaps, a touch of justice.

IT TOOK THEM TEN DAYS AND COST THEM \$992.31 but every one of the lawn doodads and grass eyesores got returned. The owner would step outdoors and crack a shin on the little blighters, but all that would be forgotten when they noticed the envelope stuffed with rental money and a written apology. And all of the owners went to their graves wondering about the name and rank on the tag on each lawn gnome. At least this legion of now found gnomes would not be unknown soldiers.

Tom Smythe died comfortably fifty-nine days later, in his sleep one hot, bright, summer afternoon as he relaxed in the hammock which stood between two birch trees at the foot of the private memorial,

And Doris never explained to Milt why she brought home a rather jaunty lawn gnome, with one arm upraised and one finger extended. She faced him eastward the day after Tom died, under the apple tree and declined comment.

E v e n i n g T i d e

NEAL GORDON

DODGE IS WORKING AT THE KITCHEN TABLE, GOING over the figures from the big telescope on Cerro Tolelo. The numbers, in precise columns and rows, speak to him of an exactness that he finds reassuring. He thinks that the numbers depend on him to give them meaning, and for this dependency, he is grateful. There was a time when his family needed him. A time when a new bride, a new job, a child and then another demanded his strength. But those times are gone and now only the numbers need him, and Dodge needs to be needed. He concentrates on the numbers, seeing the slow trends and wave-like patterns that they represent, and for a moment he feels how insignificant his life is in comparison.

Annie removes the lid from the kettle and steam rises from the hot shells. Using tongs, she lifts the open shells from the pot and places them in a clear glass bowl. She covers the pan and leaves the shells that are not open to sit above the hot liquid. “They’re perfect,” she says, as she carries the brimming bowl to the table, “Just perfect.”

Dodge eyes the clams for a moment. They need to be cooked exactly, he thinks. Because he has shown her how to do this many times in the past twenty-three years, he

knows that they will be overdone. He says, “Yes, they look wonderful,” as he moves several onto his paper plate.

Annie sits down opposite him and takes a half dozen of the clams onto her plate. “You’re going fishing with Charlie in the morning?” she asks.

“Yes. He’s got Will for the weekend,” he says, and uses his fork to pull one of the clams free from its shell. When he begins to chew the clam, he feels that it is nearly right, and knows that he should have cooked them.

“Ok?” Annie asks, brushing back the long strands of her hair from the sides of her mouth.

She tucks the hair behind her ear smoothly and Dodge sees the precision in this gesture, the automaticness of it, how her middle finger catches the strands and tucks them away. He smiles, mumbles a yes, picks up his pencil and crosses out a line of calculations.

“I heard that there might be a storm,” she says.

“It’s supposed to stall inland. The high pressure will stop it,” he says without looking up.

In a while, Dodge realizes that Annie is crying. The sound of her breathing, so shallow, tells him clearer than words. “I need to talk to you,” she says.

"I'm listening," he says, adding a number to one of the columns.

"No, Dodge," she says, putting a hand on his writing hand. "With you. I need to talk with you."

Although he dislikes the distraction, he sets the pencil down and removes his glasses saying, "You know I trust you, just get whatever it is you think we need."

"It's not that kind of thing," she says.

He can see now that her eyes are brimming. A slow fear comes to him like the paw of an enormous bear, pressing him into his chair. "You don't need to ask my permission," he says, trying to comfort her by patting her hand.

"You don't listen," she says and feels the words on her dry lips.

"Yes. I'm listening. Go ahead. Tell me."

"I'm going," she says, flatly, and laughs.

"Where to? Maybe I'll tag along."

"No. I'm going away from you."

"I don't understand," Dodge hears himself say.

"Divorce. I'm going to get a divorce from you," she says and uses the heels of her palms to wipe the tears from her cheeks.

"But you're my wife."

"Not for long," she says and pushes back from the table. A glass topples over and spills water across the page of calculations. Annie stands and goes out the back door to the beach.

Dodge sits in silence because he does not know how to act, does not know how to solve the problem that is suddenly before him. When he stands, he begins to clear the dishes from the table.

He does not understand his wife; cannot get a bearing on her, he thinks as he folds the paper plates into the garbage. What he understands is numbers. Raw data, clean and comprehensible. The numbers that come from the Vax computer, long strings that indicate the locations of the stars. Numbers that predict, indicate, and display the stars that he knows by number and name.

He remembers when the house settled. It happened in the fall of sixty-two, with Dodge in his new teaching position at Penn. An early autumn storm hammered the island. The wind and water rose up and pulled almost fifteen feet of sand from under the foundation. He and Anne drove down from the city. Their first son, David, was due in a few weeks, but Dodge had wanted to check on the house. When they got to the island, the bridges were washed out. Dodge hired a small whaler that drove them from the bay to the beach side. The pilot identified the wrecked homes that stood sideways in streets, upended on the beach, or half buried in the water. So many had simply been washed away.

Dodge's father, John, was standing where the half

basement of their beach house should have been. Dodge clambered out of the boat and was halfway to the bulkhead that separated their backyard from the long public beach when he saw the old man's stern look. Obediently, Dodge turned around, came back, and helped her out of the small boat.

"You shouldn't have come down," John said as they walked up the beach.

"I was worried about the house," Dodge said.

His father kissed her on the cheek and put an arm around her, helping her on the soft sand. "You have some other things to worry about," he said, putting a hand on her swollen stomach as Dodge followed behind the two of them. "You can repair architecture, but you can't replace family, Dodge," the old man said without looking at his son.

They had been lucky during the storm; the water took several yards of sand behind the bulkhead. Washed it away: reminded everyone that the island was nothing more than a big sandbar. The old house sat on forty foot pilings. It was one of the only houses on the island that had been built that way. John was from the mid-west, and although he loved the ocean, he had always been wary of it; insisting on what the contractors considered needless safety standards. He liked to err on the side of caution.

They were one of five houses at this end of the island that were still standing. They had the foundation rebuilt that fall, after the baby came. While the contractors waited for other home owners to collect relief and insurance from the federal government, they were happy to have the work, and unwilling to look John in the eye.

INSIDE THE HOUSE, DODGE FINISHES THE DISHES, collects his work from the table, and closes the numbers into his briefcase. He opens the back door and steps down the stairs to the cool sand, hoping to find Annie. He knows that he must find the thing to say to her now, must find the key to the equation that will produce the correct solution.

The moon shine on the sand sparkles like diamonds. Dodge sees a figure walking ahead of him and knows that it must be her by the way she walks. He smiles at the pleasure of the recognition. I know how she walks. He begins to hurry towards her. I must have seen her walk a thousand miles, he thinks.

When he reaches her, he catches her elbow and she stops. "What can I do?" he asks.

"There is nothing to do," she says. She does not pull away from him. She stands as if her elbow as detached from her body.

"Tell me how to make this okay."

"You can't."

"We've been married twenty-two years. There's got to be

an answer in twenty-two years,” he says, feeling the edge that comes with the unsolvable, the unexplainable.

“There’s no answer.” she asks, pulling clear of the tightening hand.

“Let me try to find an answer.” He reaches out a hand to her, but she doesn’t take it.

“You don’t even understand what I’m talking about,” she says touching her forehead.

“I understand that you’re upset.” He puts a hand on her shoulder.

“Obviously I’m upset,” she says and leaves his hand where it is. He feels how warm she is through the thin shirt. It is as if she is burning up. As if the speed with which she is moving away from her is creating friction.

“And I want to help,” Dodge says.

“You don’t even know what’s wrong and you expect to help?”

“If you tell me the problem, I’ll try to find a solution.” Dodge feels the cold wind through his sweater, and he moves closer to her, trying to shield her from the wind.

“I don’t want that.”

“Then let me give you what you want,” he says looking down into her long blonde hair.

“I want you to understand this, not solve it. I don’t want to be a damn problem for you to solve,” she pleads to him.

“Then what do you want?”

“I want you to understand. Just try to understand.”

“That you want a divorce?” he asks, squeezing her shoulder.

“No, that there’s a problem.” She nods her head to him.

“I don’t understand,” he says and reaches his other hand towards her.

“I know,” she says as she pulls free from him and runs towards the house as if pushed away.

Dodge watches her run away from him. He watches closely as she steps up the back stairs and goes in. A chill stirs him to walk and he goes toward the house where he grew up, not knowing where else he should go.

His father left him the house, along with everything the old man owned when he died. Dodge kept the house exactly as it was. With the money left him, Dodge bought a large fishing boat like his Dad had always wanted. It seemed a concrete way to spend the money that the old man had worked so hard to make and never enjoyed.

The boat came fully equipped; a beautiful teak deck, snorkeling and scuba equipment, a little bathroom, a weather radio for emergencies. Dodge’s one major addition was an antique bronze mariner’s compass. The compass sits high in the center of the of the rear deck, its clear glass like a jewel. It weighs almost forty pounds and came out of a luxury liner from the twenties. It is exactly

what a compass should be, accurate and reliable. Dodge thinks of the compass now, and wishes the compass was attached to Annie.

When he gets back into the house, Dodge sits in the kitchen, listening to his wife in the rooms above him. He looks at the worn plank flooring of the kitchen and sees the way the house leans from front to back. How it always has, even before the hurricane when Dad died. If you drop a marble down in the living room, it’ll roll towards the beach, just as it did when he was a child and when his children were children. He thinks, I know each of these rooms, know which get the sun in the morning, know which windows get the cool breezes from the salt marshes, know which mattresses are lumpier than others. I have slept in all of the bedrooms, gradually moving up to the third floor as I grew away from my parents, just as my children grew away from me. And as my wife now has.

Because he does not know what to say to her, does not know how to solve her problem, he goes upstairs to their bedroom that overlooks the beach, pulls the curtains, and undresses. After he puts on his pajama bottoms, he stops and listens to his wife on the third floor, in the boys’ rooms. Dodge opens the curtains and climbs into bed between the covers. The bed is very cold, and he turns up the electric blanket to compensate for his wife whom he knows is not coming to join him.

As he falls asleep, images of Annie’s white skin pass through his mind. Her skin so white that it glows pink, as if it thinly veils the blood below. The image of her body, across shoulder blade, under arm, to curve of breast comes to him. Her skin is smooth and clean and even though he is on the edge of sleep, he knows that the image is an old one, from when they were both young. He sees her breast, smooth and white, it’s light pink areola like the color of her lips. He sees how her breast pulls away from the body when she lies on her side, how its weight pulls the skin taught from the side of her rib cage.

BEFORE SUNRISE, DODGE WAKES TO THE SOUND OF his boys in the rooms above him. He smiles a turns to Annie, smelling the sweet smell of her long blonde hair on the pillow. It is a long mournful moment when he realizes that Annie is not next to him. She is upstairs in one of the spare bedrooms.

He gets up and goes to the bathroom. He starts a hot shower, undresses, and steps in. The water runs over the back of his neck and down over his shoulders. The water falls across him like warm rain and he stays under it as it begins to grow cold. Because he cannot face what is outside the bathroom, the water is cold before he reaches to turn it off.

When he gets out of the shower, he hears Charlie Stevens

yelling downstairs.

"Let's go, Dodge old man," he calls.

Dodge wants to yell down to him, but the stillness of the room, the tired calmness he feels, would be shattered. Instead, he wraps a towel around himself and goes to the steps. "Give me a minute to get some clothes on," he calls from halfway down the stairs.

"Where's Annie?" Charlie asks.

"I don't know," Dodge croaks, feeling the words tighten in his throat.

"She won't care if I make some coffee, will she?" Charlie asks and steps toward the kitchen. Charlie's boy, Will, is standing by the front door. He is a bored thirteen year old, with stiff short hair.

"No, she won't," Dodge says and turns to go back upstairs.

Annie is standing at the top of the stairs, holding her suitcase. "You're going fishing?" she asks him.

"I have to. They can't go without me," Dodge says.

"Fine," she says gritting her teeth and not wanting to look at him, "I'm taking the sedan."

"Can we talk about this for a moment?"

Feeling that she shouldn't, she sets the case down next to the banister, turns and walks to the master bedroom. Dodge follows, trying to think of what to say.

The curtains are open, Dodge notices, and he pulls the bedroom door closed.

"What do you want to talk about," she says, and Dodge hears a harshness in her voice.

"Can I get dressed?"

"No. I won't be here that long."

"You can't leave me, Anne," Dodge says, sitting on the made-up bed.

"And why not?" Annie steps to the window, watching the arc of the sun break the horizon.

"Where will you go?"

"That's not your concern."

"Do you have any money?" Dodge asks.

"Our combined account balance was seventy-three thousand dollars. I took half and put it into an account at another bank."

"Thirty-six five," Dodge says, running a hand through his wet hair. He feels strange sitting in a towel with the curtain open.

"I'm taking the sedan, but I won't bother you about the house. I'll come by in a few days and get the rest of my things," Annie laughs.

"The furniture?"

"Only those items which I found, bought, or refinished. They have no value without my effort," she says and dismisses the question with a wave.

"So you're taking whatever you feel you have a right to,"

Dodge says, leaning back on his hands. He feels the towel slip and reaches forward, rewrapping it at his waist.

She turns to him then, feeling strong. "Complain and I'll ask for half equity in the house."

Dodge stands. "Please don't do this. You have no where to go," he says, opening his arms.

"It's already done. I took an apartment."

"Anne, please, be reasonable."

"Like you?"

"Yes, reasonable," he says. As he steps toward her, the towel slips from his waist and he catches it in one hand, holding it in front of him.

"Drop the towel," she says.

He can't. He tells himself to do it. To do what she says, but he can't quite manage it. "I can't," he says.

"You're a cold fish, Dodge," she says, hurrying past him to the hallway, wanting to run.

Dodge stands still for a moment. When he hears her shoes on the stairs, he drops the towel. "I dropped it," he yells. He hears voices below him. A door close. For the first time, Dodge recognizes what is happening. That his wife is leaving, now. He feels his testicles tighten against his naked body. In a spasm of movement he runs after her.

"You about ready to go?" Charlie calls from the kitchen.

"Nearly," he says as he stops halfway down the steps. Will is standing next to the front door looking at him as if he is seeing something that he understands too well.

Dodge turns and goes back to the bedroom. He picks up the clammy towel, finishes drying off, and gets dressed, not knowing what else to do.

DODGE STEERS OUT BEYOND THE POINT AND THEN turns east into the ocean, letting the boat carry itself. He runs the engine way up, skimming the boat over the waves as the smell of the water and gas combine with the bright sun to clear his head. His mind wanders over the green grey water. The boat skips off the surface and he drives forward, hearing the engines rap up and up. The wind whips the tears from his eyes and he realizes that he is crying, but can't put words to the reason why. As the engine screams, and the boat slices ahead, he is overwhelmed.

Charlie steps up onto the bow and pats Dodge on the shoulder. Dodge doesn't turn and Charlie points past him to the sonar screen that shows the ghost of a large school of fish. Dodge eases off the throttle, realizing that he does not know how long he has been driving.

As Charlie and Will set out the fishing lines, Dodge spreads his work on the small table in the center of the deck. He begins to recopy the figures from the previous night, collecting his thoughts and focusing in on the new work, finding comfort. The ocean is so quiet that he

loses himself among the rows of numbers, shutting out the real world.

When Will leans over the table where Dodge is working, his shadow is cast straight down across the white pages of numbers.

Dodge blinks a few times at the starkness of the contrast and then looks up at the young boy. "Is it lunchtime already?"

Will shakes his head no and says, "I think we have some clouds coming." He points towards the horizon.

"Let's have a look," Dodge says and stands. For a moment Dodge is disoriented. How long have I been working, he thinks. The boat must have drifted. It is getting on to afternoon, the sun at apex. Which direction are we facing?

Will points to an angry black stripe running parallel to the horizon.

"Good eye. We need to get back in," Dodge says and walks over to the compass. According to the compass, the storm is coming from the northwest, Dodge sees. Even though the direction feels completely wrong to him, he turns the boat due west, reasoning that he will find the harbor after he finds a recognizable point on land. The compass is irrefutable.

As they sail diagonal towards the front, they see red and green heat lightening, boiling in the smokey black clouds. "Hail," Dodge says to Will. "See the lightening? That's hail." Both Will and Charlie nod, as if they are joined together.

Father and son take in the lines, stow the tackle. Charlie drinks a beer, quickly.

When the face of the front approaches, the air begins to cool. Dodge feels the heat being sucked off the surface of the water and lifted into the sky. Will begins to rub his arms with his hands, and Charlie puts his arms around the boy.

Dodge pulls out sweatshirts from under the seats. Charlie and Will seem glad to have them, but Dodge knows they are thinking what he is thinking: they should be within sight of landfall by now. The boat moves under the edge of the front.

"Are we going the right way?" Will asks Charlie in a shaky voice, but loud enough for Dodge to hear.

"Are we?" Charlie asks. His voice has an edge to it. He pulls out a life jacket from beneath the back seat and hands it to his son, nodding.

"Well, unless I read wrong."

Dodge checks the compass. Tries to estimate the ocean current. It's dragging us what? East? South? he wonders. He checks the compass and changes course, heading more south, away from the cloud bank. According to the compass, west, southwest.

The wind comes up, and the boat rides in and out of the

waves. Dodge tries to keep the boat between the swells. Every few swells, a wave breaks into spray over the gunwale. The boat takes on a bit of water and the bilge pump kicks on below deck. Dodge watches as Charlie motions for Will, who seems to be crying, to sit on the deck.

In ten minutes, it is apparent to Dodge that they are not going in the right direction. "We must have drifted a long way out," Dodge says, trying to laugh.

"You'd better get on the radio and call someone to come get us," Charlie says.

"I only have a receiver. I don't usually go out so far that I need a transmitter."

"Well you did this time," Charlie says. Dodge cannot miss the anger in his voice.

Will pulls his knees up under the sweatshirt and cuddles against his father's legs. The boy is wet. They are all wet, Dodge thinks. He checks the compass again, seeing Charlie rubbing his son's shoulders. The boy is crying hard now, Dodge sees. It is then that Dodge makes eye contact with Charlie. In Charlie's cold stare, Dodge sees that, for this moment, Charlie hates him. It is the hate of a father who is protecting his only child.

Rather than cringing, what Dodge feels then is connection. What he sees in Charlie's eyes is a feeling that he knows and understands. It is the feeling of responsibility he felt that first few years with the new appointment, the baby, his father's death, another baby right away. How it had seemed that he was the only thing that stood between his family and oblivion. The incredible strain of it.

Dodge understands why Annie has left as he recognizes that he misses the responsibility of having so many people depend on him. That with the loss of pressure on him, he has come ungrounded. He has let a space between them open up rather than letting the vacuum of the children's absence draw them together.

In frustration, Dodge clinches his fist and punches the compass. The dial spins wildly inside the glass ball, and Dodge runs to the wheel, turning the boat directly into the storm. He steers by what feels right to him, pushing the throttle wide open.

"What the hell are you doing?" Charlie yells.

"Going home," Dodge says, not looking back.

For ten minutes the air grows darker and colder until Dodge lets out a yell, and steers straight into the harbor. As he hurries the boat toward the dock, he cannot help but mentally plot the course that he must have taken, how the tide must have carried him down the coast, how with each increment of ease in his life he sailed further away from Annie.

As they tie up, the storm lets loose. Rain falls in thick vertical waves. Charlie and Will run to their car without a word. In the minute or so that it takes Dodge to get to his

car, he is soaked. The rain is grey and emerald green and so heavy that the windshield wipers merely slosh it around. The car crawls through the streets on the way home.

When he gets home, the house echoes with the noise of the storm. Dodge goes to the master bedroom. Through the windows, he watches as the waves come up ever higher, crashing against the bulkhead between the house and the beach. The water is covered in froth, the foam so thick that it looks like brown shaving cream.

Shivering, he strips off his wet clothes and pulls on a heavy sweatsuit and climbs into the bed, freezing. The bed is cold and he turns the electric blanket up further and lays there, listening to the storm front beat out its fury against the house.

WHEN HE WAKES, HE IS BROILING. EVERYTHING IS quiet and he knows instantly that the storm has stopped. The digital clock blinks midnight, and Dodge realizes that the power must have gone out, too.

He gets up and goes to the windows. There are stars out and he sees them reflected on the surface of the ocean. The stars twinkle on and off in the gentle waves. It is a new moon. Dodge strips off his sweaty clothes and goes, naked, downstairs and out to the sea.

He steps into the cool ocean and swims out into the stars that he loves so much. Out in the waves, he laughs

as he realizes that the stars are actually tiny ctenafores, washed up by the storm. As they die, their small jelly bodies luminesce sparks of green. The water is refreshing, and he swims in and out of the tiny glowing stars around him.

When the salt in the water begins to irritate his skin, he walks out of the surf and back up to the house. He turns on the outside shower and feels the warm water wash away the salt from his body. He thinks about how long it has been since he's been naked outside. There was a time when he had done this kind of thing regularly. When he and Annie had enjoyed the house rather than just lived in it.

It was when the children were young, when he felt as if he was under such pressure. He had been able to relax then. Everything had seemed so ridiculously impossible that he felt at ease about it. As the children grew, as the job became easier, as the pressures decreased, he felt less able to relax. Instead of impossibilities ahead of him, everything seemed possible, and less interesting. It was only his work that pushed him on.

He snaps off the shower and walks up the back stairs to the kitchen. Inside, he catches a glimpse of himself in the hallway mirror. His skin is covered with quarter-sized ctenafore stings. His flesh begins to itch as he realizes the high price he has paid.

L a s t T e x t

JASON SNELL

WHEN I STARTED *INTERTEXT*, I WAS A COLLEGE student with too much time on my hands. I always figured that once I had children, that would be the queue to stop doing *InterText*. As it turned out, having kids did coincide with the right time to stop doing this magazine.

A lot of other life events interceded, too. My job continues to offer me more and more challenges that leave me less time for outside-work pursuits. My interests on the Internet have changed, too: I've got several other Web projects that fit more with my interests as a 34-year-old, while *InterText* fit much better in my life when I was 20.

Doing *InterText* as a short story magazine was always a lot of fun, but this will be the final issue. I will transform *intertext.com* into something different, pursuing that which interests me today. But it's my intent to keep *InterText* online at www.intertext.com/magazine into the future.

As I wrap things up, I want to thank a few people: Geoff Duncan, without whom this whole thing would never have gotten off the ground and certainly wouldn't have stayed airborne for as long as it did; Jeff Quan, who created such amazing cover art over the years; Joe Dudley and the rest of the submissions panel, who kept *InterText* alive much longer than it would have lasted if I had to read every submission myself; to all our loyal readers who have enjoyed the interesting and quirky collections of stories we've published over the year; and finally, to the writers of those stories, without whom there would be have been no *InterText*. Not a single one of them got a single penny from us for their stories; that they contributed them to the cause of online publishing is something we should never forget.

Goodbye, and good luck.

—JASON SNELL

Hello — I must be going. I cannot stay, I came to say, I must be going. I'm glad I came, but just the same I must be going.