

# WHEN PIGS FLY

an American opera

by W. Bruce Wright

Fiction's eyes will never see  
The light that truth  
Will bring to thee.

Civilization hasn't happened yet.

“We but half express ourselves, and are ashamed of that  
divine idea which each of us represents.”

Ralph Waldo Emerson,  
from Self Reliance

I inhaled.

Prologue: Saturday July 31, 2004

Fenway Park, Boston, MA. 3 AM dead in the middle of the night

## Who's yer Daddy?

Father Xavier Sebastian Plum was wearing traditional vestments under a black cope; but instead of the three cornered biretta he wore a Red Sox batting helmet. The red Boston "B" on the helmet's brow was totally obscured by a thick, lumpy, petrified accretion of dark brown pitch.

"How in the name of Christ did I let them talk me *into* this?" Father Plum exclaimed under his breath. He crossed himself very deliberately and knelt obediently in the dirt at home plate, looking not up at Heaven, but down at the reddish brown dirt.

"*What* was that, Father?" the groundskeeper asked, hearing him say something, but only sensing what it was he'd said. He was sure he'd heard the priest invoke the name of Christ. The groundskeeper noticed Father Plum had on a pair of baseball spikes, well broken in and caked with dirt, as if he had gone into the clubhouse and plucked the shoes right out of someone's locker. A fantasy baseball player, this priest.

The groundskeeper looked intently at the batting helmet, noting the buildup of pitch on the brow, where the batter had unconsciously but religiously adjusted his helmet over the course of the season, in the heat of play as he stood in at the plate. The Commissioner of Baseball actually had something to say about it, commenting on the flagrant use of pitch in the on-deck circle, long an accepted practice in the major leagues.

It looked like Nixon's gear. Come to think of it, the priest was about the size and build of Trot Nixon, perhaps the teams' biggest tar offender; and maybe the most deliberate abuser of pitch in the major leagues.

Trot Nixon was out on the disabled list and the Sox were away in Minnesota, which is why the groundskeeper was here under the lights in Fenway; with this priest, and these others, whom he had never laid eyes on before this wacky night. They arrived in a big black hearse, the three wise men, rolling in here after 1 AM in the wee hours of a Friday night, early Saturday morning actually; after closing time. Then the fantasy baseball priest showed up with the big boss man, Darth Vader, who was directing all the traffic here on ground zero.

The groundskeeper had been told to expect them. He had been told to obey without question, to speak nothing of what happens here, not ever; pain of death. That was the God awful extent of his mission tonight. None of it made sense to him. He'd been told to let them into the park. He'd been told to dig the hole, per instructions. Damnedest thing.

Newport, Rhode Island.  
Early March, 2004

### It had a nice ring to it

Ruiz said the pretty young Cuban girls would line up outside the clubs, sweet and supple and fresh as fruit hanging ripe on the tree; and you just pick the one you want. The Havana nightclub owners won't let the girls in unless they have an escort, especially a rich gringo who will buy drinks; so the girls line up and show off their fruit. You pick the one you want and she's yours for the night.

Carter liked to pronounce it Kuuba, not curling the "Cu" like *cucumber*; which is how the gringos say it; but with a hard Ku, like *Cool*. Kuuba. Must've been some TV show he'd watched. *Miami Vice*, or maybe *I Love Lucy*. That's how they pronounce it down there where we aren't allowed to go, because we're morally upright, law abiding American citizens and it would be fascist and unpatriotic to go down there, and against U.S. law as well. If you travel to Cuba, you can't fly in direct; and you don't want them to stamp your passport. We've had Cuba under embargo since 1959, when Castro booted Batista out of Havana and refashioned Cuba into a revolutionary embarrassment. Rebellions haven't been allowed in the Western hemisphere since 1776. Kuuba. Carter was gonna get a nice tan and a white linen suit. He was gonna be rich, and he was gonna make love to fresh young Kuuban girls. It was a wonderful plan they had.

Ruiz was a double agent. That's what Burns said. He defected in 1968, flew a Mig-17 into US airspace and walked away from Castro's Cuba. The U.S. government paid him a hundred grand. Standard offer back in those days, and quite a feather in our cap for a measly hundred grand; a full bird Cuban Colonel who aborted the revolution and a good poke in Castro's eye. Ruiz had a house in Jersey, and a hacienda in Havana. He went back and forth all the time, no problemo. Burns said he couldn't figure how a guy could so conspicuously defect in a fully armed Soviet fighter jet and then travel back and forth between enemy nations, what with the Commie bastards being so conspicuously evil and the object of the embargo and all; so he must be a double agent. Right? That's what they figured.

"Have another?"

They were sitting at the upstairs bar at the Brick Alley Pub.

"Can't walk on one leg," Carter answered.

"I think we've already got a coupla legs under us," Burns observed.

"Couple two tree."

"Roger that."

"Last one," Carter consented. "I'm cutting down."

They were drinking vodka. Burns preferred bank robbers. Carter took it on the rocks, straight in a snifter with a coupla lemon wedges. Voxx, if he could get it. He'd settle for Chopin or even Stoli if they didn't have the Voxx. Lotta places didn't. But it was catching on.

Burns would drink the cheap shit, but he didn't really want to put his body through it any more. He was evolving, just slowly and slightly against his will. Waste of energy. He was committed to the carnal pleasures of drinking and smoking; and it was now becoming apparent that quality makes sense. His body was speaking to him, this being his 52<sup>nd</sup> year and vodker being a poisonous substance he couldn't do without; so his mind was slowly coming 'round. Burns had his priorities, and life is a luxury he thoroughly enjoyed. He took another long drag on his cigarette. Squinting as the smoke hit him in the eye, Burns looked at his watch.

"My little wife Betty will be home at 6:30," he said, acknowledging the time. It was 6:45 PM. His eyes moved over the flanks of a filly strolling through the bar area. She was from one of the tables in the function room. Big party tonight. Narragansett Electric or some such. Lotta babes. She

was migrating to the bathroom. Carter was acquainted with the routine and watched Burns' eyes move until he determined that she'd sashayed far enough past them so he could turn conspicuously to his right as she walked by. No hiding it. He got the second half of the promenade.

This scenic world view would've been easier to enjoy if they'd taken a table up against the wall, but Carter and Burns liked sitting at the bar. It required them to have their backs to the crowd, which showed their good side; and was more convenient for drinking. Paddy the barman could pour a pint of vodka in a rock glass, a mystical trick he hadn't learned in bartending school. This gave him special powers, which weren't lost on Carter and Burns; although they talked every so often about the fact they were maybe drinking too much. It was a rhetorical observation.

"Wow," Burns said. He didn't have to say any more. This gal must've gotten her pants out of an aerosol can. A'lotta women dress provocatively when they oughta know better, but *this* girl had a frame for it. Real talent, dipped in denim. Carter could smell her perfume, which hung in the air like someone had hit a skunk. He wondered why women thought it necessary to drown themselves in so much musk. She smelled like a French whore. Awful, he thought; although Carter had never been near a whore. He'd never been to France either. He'd driven through a brothel in Costa Rica once. The smell of this woman reminded him of that day in the heat of wherever it was, somewhere outside some place; a congregation of little concrete bunkers with the women hanging out in the doorways trying to lure them in. Coupla gringos in a rental car, and the good Catholic hookers standing in their doorways attempting to look provocative. That was pretty entertaining. A drive through brothel.

The trick was to catch this woman on the return leg, so he could get a good look at the rest of her equipment. It was delicate sport, and timing was key. "Unbelievable," Burns said appreciatively. "Wouldn't you like to just open her up like a fresssh flower," he said, grinning so he'd just won the lottery, "for dessert, with a glass of Courvoisier on the side..." Burns' drank Courvoisier about as much as he drank carpet nails. He puffed on his cigarette, pulling the smoke deep into his lungs. Burns needed to starve his brain of oxygen with some nice fresh tobacco smoke.

Paddy the barman was standing by. Their drinks needed a little freshening up, he thought. He'd leaned over the bar himself when *that* one walked by. There were some real hotties in here tonight. Burns picked up his glass and rattled the ice, then tipped his head back and drained the last of it. He had meaty paws, and thick skin of his hands was cracked in places and even bleeding a little bit. It looked rough. It happened every winter like this. Burns had been frostbit pretty bad, and his hands had dead spots, all dry and discolored sorta purplish and painful as hell.

Vodka helped.

Carter didn't make a regular point of concentrating on Burns' hands, but Burns was his best friend and they drank together; and hands are practical tools. You have to hold onto your drink.

"Bag balm," he advised again, like a mantra.

"Yeah, roger that," Burns acknowledged.

"Give 'em a chance to heal some." Carter winced. "Gotta care fer yer 'udders."

Gotta have hands. Sometimes you wonder what to do with 'em, you stick 'em in your pocket for lack of a better pose; but there were no options he cared to think about. Carter had a few potential bad spots on the top of his thumbs where the nail pushed through on each side. Sometimes in cold weather the skin got too dry and calloused, and it cracked open. Always a tiny, pink little lesion that didn't look like much to the uninitiated, but when it's *your* thumb; flared up and cracked open like a miniature caldera; the l'l fuggger hurts like holy hell. He used bag balm to help stave it off and salve the pain. It worked if he could keep the damned ointment on the sore spot, where it belonged. Band-aids never stay put. Carter picked up his snifter and fished for the lemons.

Thumbs are difficult to dress.

"Vodker helps," Burns mused sagely. He glanced over at the waitress on his immediate right. Carter was having trouble getting ahold of the lemon wedge. It was pretty evasive. He'd also noticed that nice little fresh young waitroid butt. He didn't miss much, but he kept fishin.' She was pulling napkins and silver from her station. Probably twenty-two years old,

this girl. Little perky pigtails. Push up breasts. Nice tight little ass. Not a sag in her. You could bounce quarters off that butt.

“I’ve got a whole can of the stuff,” Burns admitted. Carter knew that. He’d offered to give him *his* tin and Burns always told him he already had some in the medicine cabinet. Stupid bugger just never used it. Bag balm.

*There*, Carter thought. He’d gotten a hold on one of the wedges. He pulled it out and held it carefully, eyeballin’ it; sum’bitch, I got you now; working the lemon chunk until the wedge was positioned in his fingers just so. Then he put it up to his mouth and bit down. Employing his teeth precisely at the juncture of rind and fruit, he peeled the vodka soaked flesh into his mouth and chewed it, savoring it; then swallowed. Ummm, nice fresssh lemon. He gave it a twist and threw the naked garnish back into the snifter on top of the ice and dug his fingers back in to fish for the other wedge. Waste not want not, Carter thought.

He had a patch on the top of his right foot that got frostbit years ago. In Montana, he figured, although it was too far back and he wasn’t sure anymore. He’d lived up north all his life and spent a lotta time in the boonies, tramping around in the woods and skiing in the trees. Every once in awhile he’d get down in the tropics for a week or two in the wintertime, but he always came back up where he could get his feet wet and froze. Oughta go tropical for good one ‘a these days.

Kuuba. That patch on his foot got dry and sore and it itched like hell in the wintertime if he didn’t care for it. Great stuff, bag balm. For chapped teats, superficial scratches, abrasions, windburn, and sunburn. After each milking, the can advised, apply the BAG BALM thoroughly and allow a coating to remain on the surface. There were additional directions for the veterinarian, and it did have a precautionary statement on the can, advising “keep out of the reach of children. VETERINARY USE ONLY,” but Carter had been self medicating for years. One of the wonders of the world, right up there with duct tape. And vodker. Nice fresssh vodker.

“You guys ready?” Paddy finally asked. He’d been standing by for five endless minutes listening to the rattling ice cubes and waiting for the nod. He knew the answer, but he was brought up with manners and these two weren’t going anywhere. They didn’t seem to want anything to eat

tonight, but what the hell. They were steady and they always tipped out well if they could see straight.

“Just one more,” Burns said, and he checked his watch again.

“Knock-on-yah,” Carter replied. That's what the Mongol horsemen say when they're about to ride home after a long night of fireside drinking and revelry and they're almost ready to mount their horse. Knock-on-yah. "Thanks, Paddy." Almost ready now. Just one more.

One thing about horses. They know the way home, even if you don't. Last drink before you go home. Just one more. Knock-on-yah. He pushed his snifter towards the bottle. Carter needed a horse. Safer than his car. Can't drive without drinkin.'

Burns nodded and glanced to his right, still waiting for that hot babe to come back through the bar and return to her table. She'd been in the head for a while, definitely not a short timer. Could'a had a manicure.

Carter winked at Burns, who had an appreciative eye, Carter knew, but he was strict NATO policy. **No Action Talk Only.**

He was devoted to his little wife, Betty. A good woman is hard to find. Betty Burns. Carter liked the sound of her name. It had nice, hard lipped alliteration. Betty Burns.

Meanwhile, the gal in the bathroom had seen them gaping at her and she didn't like it so much. She preened in the mirror and pursed her lips, examining the cut of her lipstick. As she leaned into it, she admired her magnificent cleavage. She bought her bras from Annabelle's and she really liked the way her breasts swelled out of her sweater.

“Why can't they just keep their eyes to themselves?” she considered self consciously. “They're so uncouth. I don't want them *looking* at me.”

She thought it was disgusting the way strange men stared straight at her, like they wanted to undress her. What are they *thinking*? She fluffed her hair, smiling at herself in the mirror, shaking her head to give herself a little hint of sexily disheveled. When would they ever learn? The she stood back and admired her booty, the skin tight jeans so form fitting you could almost see her Brazilian landing strip. When she left the powder room she went the other way, slipping down the back stairs to avoid them; and she sashayed provocatively through the main dining room to the front of the restaurant, causing more than a few other men to gawk shamelessly.

She made her way past the hostess, who watched her come through the crowd like she was the baton twirler in a marching band; then up the front stairs, so she wouldn't have to endure the leering Neanderthals at the upstairs bar.

Carter had forgotten about her. "Kuuban girls," he said to Burns, and raised his drink, poured by the attentive Paddy, who could dispense a pint in a rock glass. Have to ask him someday how he does that, Carter thought. "Ummmmm... Fresssh young Kuuban girls."

Carter was hoping the walls were lower in Kuuba. He just wanted to love them. He was a good and attentive lover, devoted to the art. That's what he liked to think; and he just wanted things between men and women to be fun and happy and mutually fulfilling. Hot monkey sex would be good too. It's a simple matter of giving each other love and care and respect, acknowledging each other's individual beauty, celebrating your similarities and honoring your differences, observing the golden rule, like we'd all been taught from childhood; most of us; the way things are supposed to be; a mutual feast of love and lust and life. Carter didn't identify with all the fear and loathing.

The ideal mate, said Neitsche, is the custodian of your partners' solitude. He still didn't understand that women are here to test and torture him, and it would never change. He wanted it to be easy. He just wanted to love them. All that talent wasted.

Burns hoisted his bank robber and swallowed a bit, then thinking better of it, tipped again and swallowed a little gulp more. He plucked his cigarette out of the ashtray. It had been lying there all the while smoking away, which is just what Carter loved about cigarettes. You don't even have to smoke the goddamned things and they'll kill you anyway. They could put it on his tombstone. Murdered by someone else's cigarette. Burns pulled the last drag deep into his lungs and then snubbed the butt out in the ashtray. The grey vapid smoke came out of his nose and mouth, and Carter tried to dodge it, but it was everywhere. Fucking cigarettes. No filter for him. He took it neat, right up the nose.

Burns was smoking Dunhills. A gentleman's cigarette. Very precisely rolled. Product of British engineering.

"So Ruiz gets back soon, eh?" Carter asked hopefully. Word was, Ruiz was down in Havana for a couple of weeks. They'd talked about getting together with him before he left for this last trip, but they hadn't reacted fast enough. He'd disembarked before they'd had a chance to set up a rendezvous; but it was no big deal, Burns said. Ruiz goes down to Cuba all the time. Carter already knew the answer to his own question. He just wanted to keep the seed growing inside Burns' brain.

Carter felt obliged to make sure he was on board with this Cuba thing. They were planning to go down there for a week or two, do a little research and development. Carter was restoring his house in Newport, expecting to sell it and take the capital gains exclusion. He figured he could plow some of the profit into Cuba. With a little luck, they might make out like Robin Hood. When Fidel kicks the bucket, Cuba is gonna blossom like hell in the hot season; although Fidel's brother Raoul was next in line, and he is a wild card. Everyone has gotten so accustomed to Fidel. He'd been in power longer than just about anybody. The Canadians and the Brits and the Dutch and the Japanese are already in there, developing hotels and marinas and probably casinos and everything.

The Bay of Pigs is being turned into a resort right now. That's what they'd heard. Kuuba. Only us God fearing Americans can't get in on the fun and profit, Carter thought, at least not openly; although lately there'd been a few exploratory Congressional delegations down there sucking up to Fidel. Jimmy Carter had made the trip. No relation. It was all unofficial. He was hip to Cuba.

Speaking of delegations, Carter had even drafted a letter to Fidel. It would be pretty cool to get an audience with El Presidenté. Carter wanted to call themselves the Sons of the American Revolution, S.A.R. for short. He liked the acronym, and suspected Fidel would relate. But there was already a group with that name, some American civic organization that's been around for a coupla hundred years or something. Carter's grandmother was in the Daughters of the American Revolution, the D.A.R.; so he knew the Sons were probably still armed and dangerous, lurking somewhere. You never heard from them, but they must be around, in little back room tribes; so he went out on the web and did some research and sure enough.

He knew Fidel wouldn't give a damn about the redundancy, but there might be some other way to capitalize on this idea, so they'd best just change the name, to be safe. Maybe he would put a website up, and if they could get a million people to join at ten bucks a year that's a nice fresh income stream. Carter and Burns had at least half a dozen schemes going on all the time. No sense in pissing off the Sons of the American Revolution.

He was one of them. He just wasn't paying dues. A good 'ol boy. He'd give 'em a fantastic one time only reciprocal membership opportunity. Join now, and no telemarketer will call.

Carter drafted a letter to Fidel and explained that a small delegation from their society of two (Fidel didn't need to know the specific details) was planning to visit Cuba on a little G.I. good will mission.

We are not a political organization, Carter claimed, and we don't represent a political body or any part of the United States Government. We are an independent group of American citizens, and we support the President of the United States, even if we didn't vote for the sum'bitch.

Carter thought President H.P. Bell was a goofball. We are not traitors, he added. And we despise terrorists. Important to say that. He might have said tourists, being from Newport; but he didn't. He said terrorists. None bigger than those on Capital Hill.

In Cuba they would be tourists el grandé, with Ruiz along, him being a double agent and all. The important thing to tell Fidel was they didn't agree with the Cuban embargo, which should be lifted so Americans could freely trade with Cuba and come and go as they please. Cuba has a place in the heart of the Western hemisphere. It isn't so much that the country is communist. Fidel supposedly had something to do with the assassination of JFK, and the U.S. won't forgive that, even if there isn't a shred of truth in the whole story. Unofficially, the gentry are pissed off because Castro booted Batista out, when things were so grand for the rich and famous. Batista repressed his people, rigged elections, and embraced the American CIA, taking the aid that flowed with their influence. Under his brutal and corrupt regime, he allowed American corporations to control much of the Cuban economy. He was on the gravy train.

Batista got rich, his cronies got richer; and the Cuban people suffered grievously. Just the sort of principled dictator our government likes to cozy up to. Anything for the advancement of American corporate interests.

Fidel showed up in 1959 and ruined everything. The Cuban aristocracy was forced to flee, and most of them took to Miami, where the anti Castro movement remains as fanatical and virulent as ever. It's obvious the U.S. doesn't mind Cuba so much, or they would've gone in and liberated the place a long time ago, wouldn't you think? We have Guantanamo, right in the belly of the monster. Real party house these days.

There's no changing hardline policy now; not with so much invested in the argument; even though there were Congressmen and ex Presidents flying down there lately schmoozing with Castro and all. This is a pretty clear sign, because if anyone is gonna get first in line to capitalize on Cuba it will be the honorable members of the United States Congress.

Pretty hypocritical to have an embargo after all this time, Carter thought. Silly after all these years, we being such close chums with Russia now, and even China having favored nation status. What a conspicuous sham. Cuba doesn't have all that much to offer. No industry to speak of. Coffee. Bananas. Cigars. Women. Music. Sunshine. Communism.

No oil in Cuba. So it turned out to be a nice, safe haven for revolutionaries, and another social experiment relatively free of outside interference from the U.S. military industrial complex and the ruling elite.

When Ruiz flew into US airspace back in 1968, he didn't call ahead and tell the U.S. aerospace command he was on his way. He didn't know what he was supposed to do. Defection isn't in the manual. He couldn't broadcast the fact that he was going to change sides. Funny thing is, no one in US air defense even saw him coming! He'd gotten in under our radar. Ruiz was flying a Soviet MIG 17, streaking over the downtown Miami skyline with a red star on the fuselage and fat bombs hanging off his wings. That turned a few heads on Collins Avenue.

So, having made his presence known to the citizens on the street, he flew back down to Key West. Here was a Mig 17 calling the control tower and asking for a runway. The air traffic controller at the Key West airport couldn't believe his ears.

*Chief...? I think we need the cone of silence...*

The jet lands and out climbs Ruiz in his Cuban airforce greens. The State Department called Havana and told them all about it. Believe it or not, there is specific protocol to follow when there is a defection like that. You can keep the defector, but you are obligated to return the hardware. That's the rules. Unless you're at war. Then you keep the plane too, along with the pilot. But in the case of Cuba, we're just sworn antagonists. Everyone behaved like gentlemen. Absolute Ivy League. So the U.S. embassy made arrangements for a Cuban pilot to fly over to Key West and pick up the Mig and return it to Castro's island. Amazing, Carter thought, but Burns said the military didn't want the Mig in the first place. It's old technology. Then they put Ruiz in quarantine and grilled the Cuban Colonel till his head shrank. Carter didn't mention any of this in his letter to Fidel.

They were planning to visit Cuba on a little G.I. research and development mission, and Carter figured \$50K in the right place now might eventually be worth a half a mill when Fidel kicked the bucket and the Cuban economy went ballistic. He was dreaming. He was thinking Ruiz might want to take part in the venture, seeing as he was a Cuban national and a double agent. He was pretty well connected. Ruiz lived a charmed life. Both sides were watching him, and both sides were letting him come and go as he pleased. He had to be a double agent. So they won't fuck with us if Ruiz is on board. That's what Carter figured.

He was reading a book about Cuba now. It was full of information on the revolution, with one of his old business cards stuck in it for a place marker. Good cigars in Cuba. Nothing like a hand rolled Cuban, except mebbe a hand rolled Dominican. The Cuban tobacco industry had been compromised like everything else down there. Viva la revolution. Carter hated cigarettes, but every so often he'd smoke a cigar just so he could have the grand experience of blowing that thick blue smoke around.

Amazing how it pissed people off; especially women. They'd be sucking cigarettes and filling the room with emphysema, but they'd object to him contentedly puffing on a nice, hand rolled Dominican. They'd give him the look, like he was foul or something. Carter thought it was funny as hell.

The book was called “Castro’s Final Hour,” written by some gringo journalist who went down there and lived with the commie bastards and dug all the dirt. Carter had read about a hundred pages so far, and he’d looked at the black and white photographs. He didn’t really know squat about Cuba; not really; except the citizens were still poor and repressed; but from what he’d heard, the people seemed really happy. They supposedly loved Fidel. The booze was cold and the women were warm and the music was hot. Former holiday capital of the Eastern hemisphere. Hemmingway’s choice. Most of what Carter knew about Cuba wasn’t in the book.

It could be a very dangerous place if you got on the wrong side of Fidel. Even if you were a hero of the revolution, you weren’t safe; not if he or his brother Raoul got a hair across their ass; so you had to be careful. That was clear enough to make you nervous. But if we can keep it all together, Carter thought, we’ll come out smelling like a rose.

They were gonna get rich. Then there are the Cuban girls. Ummmm. Prettiest women he ever saw were from Cuba. Maybe. Or the Philippines. It’s the Spanish blood mixed with their native root. Never mind the thoroughbreds. Carter was hoping girls were different in Kuuba. He wanted a woman that hadn’t been Americanized, pumped up with demons and demands and attitude. Yah. Fresssh young Kuuban girls. You just picked the one you wanted and she was yours for the night. It was a really wonderful plan they had.

“Kuuba...” They hoisted their glasses again. Burns checked his watch. It was 7:50 PM. His little wife Betty was definitely home now. She always went to the gym on Friday nights after work. Betty had a cute figure and she wanted to stay in shape.

Burns never went to the gym. That interfered with his drinking and smoking. “Have another?” Burns lit a fresh Dunhill. He drained his glass and set it down on the bar.

“Just one more.”

They figured to fly down to Jamaica first, or the Bahamas; and then make their way over to Cuba from there. They would meet Ruiz in Havana if they didn’t all travel together.

## Once upon a time

On April 30, 1639 Nicholas Easton and his son Peter rowed out from the settlement of Pocasset to the southern end of Aquidneck Island, where they were later joined by William Coddington, John Clarke, William Brenton, and some thirty others who were the principal founders of Newport, Rhode Island. A general meeting was held two weeks hence on May 15, and having discovered a fresh water spring, it was determined "*that the towne shall be built up on both sides of the spring, and by the seaside southward.*"

\*

No one left behind.

## Drought and Plague in the Land of the Plug

“Famine,” Carter muttered to no one but himself. Drought and dust and locusts in Sudan. It was a matter of fact in that part of the world. Seemed like they never escaped the pitiless cycle of squalor and death in that part of the world. He was sitting at his dining room table, reading the Pro Jo with his cuppa fresh ground, cream no sugar, enjoying the day. Filtered by the big Norway maple in his backyard, the early light was pouring in the East window behind him, giving cool light to the morning’s news. He had the pane open a few inches, and he could hear a black and white warbler twittering with inspired song, melodically espousing what was on his happy, bird brain. An early Spring blessing, sun shining, cool morning zephyrs cavorting in the whispering green leaves, plenty of fattened bugs to catch, thistle in the feeders; a warbler’s delight. You can never be sure they don’t feel completely glorious on a day like this, wildly happy, the way they sing for the sheer joy of singing.

Carter’s inner city yard was on a songbird flyway of sorts, a delicate but sumptuous leafy thread between Congdon and Hall Avenues, where the backyards formed a greenbelt that was favorably connected to the outer countryside. He had many avian visitors in his yard who would not otherwise find refuge in the city. Carter lived on the same street as the infamous Major Dugan, same side of Congdon, just a few houses down. That’s how they’d met, he and Dugan, way back. Kids in the street.

He'd put up a six foot high stockade fence on the property line to further enclose his kingdom. A small lean to greenhouse nestled in the corner of the yard. A patch of grass, not too much. He could mow it with a weed whacker. He had an old reel mower in the cellar he dragged up the concrete steps every so often, when he was feeling organic and didn't want to fend with the long extension cord and the whine of the twine. There was a fire pit in the middle of the yard, with a big galvanized tub to hold the burn, redwood lawn chairs circled round, a picnic table to one side underneath the big red cedar that had a rose climbing into it's upper branches. Every year that red rose flowered a little higher up, reaching for heaven. A pink althea bloomed next to the cellar door. Beneath that squatted a gas grill on the concrete pad under the outside floodlight. Carter had potted plants all about the yard, exotic cultivars of rhododendrons and azaleas, iris and hosta in the shade, peonies and lilies on the front stoop, tomatoes in the sunny spot on the back steps, his plentiful private retreat.

Drought and dust and locusts in Sudan. He flapped the newspaper with both hands to get the center crease to behave, looking intently again at the black and whites showing a filthy warren of threadbare blankets and goat skins and plastic sheeting and cardboard hung up and balanced on bent sticks, anything that would offer a little shelter and shade to the countless refugees, one on top of another, hip to hip, tens of thousands displaced by famine and civil war; and now locusts, not a blade of green to be seen.

Gaunt, stick figure mothers stared without expression at the camera lens, holding little brown babies too weak to suckle at their dried up paps. These women are a metaphor for the land, their eyes large and doe-like, so peaceful a pose amongst such bitter tragedy. An intense envelope of searing sub Sahara heat and high pressure was lying over the region like an anvil that might have cracked the horn of Africa clean off and dumped this plagued portion of the sub Sahara right into the Indian Ocean.

Another photo showed the locusts literally blanketing the fields. Thin black men looked out upon the bleak landscape, dark silhouettes on the edge of life; resigned to their vacant, hungry fate; the land bare and the crops gone. Not even the locusts had enough to eat now, having consumed everything in their path; and their eggs hatched like animated grains of rice in the parched brown Earth. The only thing to eat were the locusts themselves. The weather

merely aided their reproductive cycle. So much unwanted life on the dead land.

Carter put down the paper and sat for a long moment, listening to the sweet silence issuing from his fertile backyard, the birds singing, the hum of the refrigerator. His lot is a long ways from Sudan.

In the tent city, refugees swatted at the flies and locusts in a feeble attempt to drive them away. The air was full of stink, a vulgar cloud, and out in the fields the ground was covered so the earth moved underfoot; a crawling mass of bugs. You were forced to wonder where the hell they all came from, there were so many, billions upon billions of locusts crawling all over each other, and more eggs hatching underneath. You wondered if they had to breed, if they actually engaged in bug sex; or if every goddamned one of them male and female both could drop fertile eggs like bombs onto the ground, where they'd hatch from nothing and take flight. The ju ju men had never seen locusts reproduce with more vigorous cycles.

Every step taken on that ground was a grim and biblical illustration of Darwinian selection; or was it intelligent design? A plague, either way. The more alert and vigorous locusts flew up and away from danger before your foot came down, each step resulting in more and more locusts flying up in your face like a cloud of pestilence; then the unmistakable crunch of the weaker individuals crushed underfoot. Not fast enough. Only the strong are selected to survive in an environment like this, to breed stronger still; and every step reminds you that the locusts are better equipped. If anything survived in this Godforsaken land, it would be the bugs.

At that very moment, four men were grouped around a table in the great global maproom of the very top secret Agency for National Defense. AND. They were discussing the crisis in Africa, and what to do about it. A covert arm of Homeland Security, this elite unit is responsible for international intelligence gathering and timely recommendations for national policy and retaliation on any perceived threat to Truth, Justice, and the American Way. They are the cutting edge of the Bell administration.

"This is always a trouble spot," the General remarked professionally, looking with a practiced eye up at the big, flat screen LCD monitors. The general wore pressed and starched olive drab fatigues, obviously a man of action. The other three had on conservative suit and tie.

They had been going over a laundry list of evils world wide, and when they arrived at the growing predicament in Northeast Africa, they stared in somber silence at the live satellite feed. The image was crystal clear. The defense industry has optics that can look a locust in the eye.

“It just never goes away,” one observed. “Somalia and Sudan are always ugly.” He shook his head sadly. In between you have Ethiopia, and Eritrea, Djibouti, that whole miserable, impoverished, drought and famine stricken coastline along the Red Sea. Americans know little to nothing about this part of the world. It all runs together like one piece of hell.

“Roger that.” Big trouble spot. Sudan has a land area nearly as big as a quarter of the continental U.S., sharing a border with Egypt and Libya to the North, Chad and the Central African Republic to the West; the Congo, Uganda, and Kenya to the South, with Ethiopia and Eritrea to the East. It has 853 km. of coastline on the Red Sea. Sudan is twice the size of Texas, with Somalia being slightly smaller than Texas, and so on.

Something about Texas.

Each is featureless, barren, with almost no arable land; rife with social and political unrest; trying to fend with independence after a colonial period when they were ruled, raped, spindled, and mutilated by one or more of the major European powers.

“Military regimes favoring Islamic-oriented governments have dominated national politics in Sudan ever since independence from the UK in 1956. Sudan has been embroiled in a civil war for all but 10 years of this period. Since 1983, the war and famine-related effects have led to more than two million deaths, and over 4 million people displaced.

“Locusts,” said another, like a cuss word, but the four were of a single mind. Something must be done to liberate those poor people down there. On the monitors, the refugees looked like bugs themselves.

“Has that area been prospected?” one of the suits asked.

“Oil throughout the region,” said the statistician in the group. “Oil, gas, uranium, gold, platinum, silver,” he noted, running down the list of natural resources in that part of Northeast Africa. He needn’t mention iron ore, copper, chromium, zinc, tungsten, mica, tin, gypsum, bauxite, salt, and the other miscellaneous etceteras. He had an encyclopedic knowledge.

“I thought so,” said the first, who was just beginning to recognize the value in that poor, dusty land. Right under their feet.

“Poor buggers would’t know if they’re sittin’ on a diamond, they’re so busy starvin’ and gettin’ exterminated by their cousins.”

“Mostly Sunni Muslims,” the statistician quoted from memory. “The latest ruling military junta, an authoritarian regime, took power in 1989. The government is run by an alliance of the military and the National Congress Party (NCP), formerly the National Islamic Front (NIF), which espouses an Islamist platform and has a national ethnic cleansing policy of eradicating all non Muslims, most of whom live in the South, and in the capital city of Khartoum. These non Muslims are a small minority of Christians, with the remainder having indigenous beliefs, including animism.

“The official language is Arabic,” he continued, “but native tongues include Nubian, Ta Bedawie, with diverse dialects of Nilotic, Nilo-Hamitic, and Sudanic languages,” as if the educated minds he was speaking to had the slightest clue what he was talking about. “English is spoken in some of the Christian enclaves, more likely in Khartoum; and it is worth noting that there is a government sanctioned program of “Arabization” in process.”

“Arabization?” questioned another of the suits.

“Non compliance isn’t healthy,” the statistician observed.

“Religious cleansing,” chipped in one of the others cleverly.

“The largest country in all of Africa, Sudan is bisected by the Nile River, the so called White Nile, its tributaries flowing out of Uganda from the South; and the Blue Nile, whose source is the big lake T’ana Hayk in Ethiopia, to the East. Tropical in the South, arid desert in the North, with a rainy season that varies by region; it is a flat, featureless plain; with mountains in the far South and the West; while desert dominates the North. Current environmental issues include inadequate supplies of potable water, wildlife populations threatened by excessive hunting, soil erosion, desertification, and periodic drought.” Famine and pestilence.

“Regular garden of Eden.”

“That's where they hung up bin Laden, isn't it?” one asked, referring to the famous terrorist Salaam bin Laden, who had been martyred not long ago. The statistician nodded. Affirmative. They had been watching the growing shrine, South of Khartoum, keeping an official eye on how *that* was developing. The other three heads nodded in unison.

“Sudan faces formidable economic problems, starting with its low level of per capita output and extending to its devastating civil strife.

“In 1999, Sudan began exporting crude oil, and in the last quarter of 1999 recorded its first trade surplus, which, along with monetary policy, has stabilized the exchange rate. Increased oil production, revived light industry, and expanded export processing zones helped sustain GDP growth at 6.1% in 2003 and an estimated 7% in 2004,” the statistician said.

“Agricultural production remains Sudan's most important sector, employing 80% of the work force and contributing 39% of GDP, despite the fact that less than 7% of the land is arable. Most farms have no irrigation and are susceptible to drought. Chronic instability, including the long-standing civil war between the Muslim North and the Christian/pagan South, the ethnic purges in Darfur; and adverse weather, dry as a dead bone,” he added metaphorical color to the landscape. “Weak agricultural prices ensure that much of the population will remain below the poverty line for years.” Officially, poverty in Africa is easily attainable, and can be had for less than a few hundred dollars a year.

“Close enough,” General Tex Arlee replied. He liked a bulls eye where he could see it, especially if there's an oil field nearby.

“Can we get a team in there?” came the strategic question.

“You can't let these incidents go unchallenged.”

“These damned people obviously need our aid.”

“Point of honor,” stated another solemnly. It's our duty. “Can't let the bugs take over.” The man had a world of brotherly love in his heart. All these people at risk in the otherwise inhospitable desert asshole of the world. You can't believe anyone chose to live in such a pestilential fleapit, when there were so many nicer places to be safe, fat, and happy. Born in that patch of hell, they knew little else, and were genetically committed. The lens panned first to the North, and then to the South, with the squalid tent city stretching as far as the camera could discern. Zooming in, they could see the despair on the faces of the people; the withered children, the barren land, covered in drought and locusts and famine. Kind of like Haiti, in our own hemisphere. Every tree cut down.

People are eating dirt in Haiti.

“We should order a geosynchronous orbit for this,” General Arlee remarked sagely, suggesting they should dedicate a satellite run and keep a close eye on this situation as it developed.

“Looks like a job for Achilles,” added one of the suits gratuitously, and you could see a sudden insight swarm between them.

“You might have something there,” said another.

“Take a righteous pile of insecticide to kill all those locusts,” remarked the last, looking again at the monitors. “Jesus.”

“S’lotta hostiles.” The AND had it’s own dedicated war room

“A massive application,” one voice droned in an underground bunker, somewhere in Virginia.

They all nodded in accord.

“Thankfully, this isn't Nam,” said the scion of the family Achilles, owners of huge petro chemical plants in Wilmington, Delaware; a land once farmed by happy immigrant Swedes, now home to mutant three eyed fish in the estuaries, frogs who had extra legs growing out of their backsides, PCB’s oozing into the habitat. The ground water in some places is so toxic now, not even mosquito larvae can survive the chemical soup. Silent Spring.

“Nope. We can take the gloves off in Sudan.” Open season. No pesky environmental or human rights groups except in Darfur. They would steer clear of Darfur.

“How’s Somalia fit in the picture?” asked one of the suits. Up to now, he thought the two went together, like twins.

“It’s over on the other side of Ethiopia, on the horn.”

“No common border?” He thought they were neighbors.

“Bout a thousand miles to the East.” Big trouble spot.

They were getting to the kernel of the issue.

“Poor bastards,” one said benevolently, looking intently at the screen. “They deserve to get their land back, pest free.” The U.S. had sent billions of dollars in relief to Sudan, and we looked the other way when it came to President Omar al-Bashir’s dictatorship; and the cleansing non Muslim eradication program underway in Darfur. It made big news sometimes, all those ugly deaths and refugees; millions murdered and more displaced; but it was easy to look the other way once the cameras were turned off. Just a mob of impoverished blacks.

"They deserve to achieve political independence, religious freedom, supervised democratic elections, and a nice fat loan from the IMF." Never mind food and water, or a peaceful little mud hut that hadn't been burned by government troops after they'd slaughtered the residents. Every so often we'd be informed of what is going on in Darfur.

"We need a catchy slogan."

"I've got it," said one.

"Let's hear it."

"No locust left behind." Blame it on the bugs. They won't complain.

"That works." It sounded vaguely familiar and very presidential.

This was pure, inspired stream of consciousness at work now, the four men in spiritual sync, their minds joined like a well drilled chorus line, high kicking in the orchestra pit of our nation's moral heartbeat.

"No litigants." That's the key.

"And no Congressional interference."

"Zero tolerance." They nodded all together, of a mind. Revelation.

"We have complete autonomy in a national emergency." In Sudan.

"If we don't have one, we can make one."

"Any need to alert the State Department?"

"Who...?" They all chuckled. The AND was a governmental super agency the government didn't even officially know about. They operated outside the umbrella of the Homeland Security box, because the more centralized the government becomes, the more there is a need for the discipline of non bureaucratic creative thinking. Guys like them.

"How about the sovereign government of Sudan?" and Omar al-Bashir. The other three looked at him oddly. There's a thought.

"We'll need a helluva bug spray," said another, on board now.

"Agent green," the scion of Achilles qualified his choice of poisons authoritatively. New and improved. Economical. Fast acting. Toxic as hell," he said, "agent green is a systemic broad spectrum multi purpose pesticide originally developed alongside a number of infamous herbicides used in the Vietnam war." Gooks were confirmed pests, the trees were in the way; and collateral damage was unavoidable. We were at war. "Aerial spraying is the deployment of choice," he intoned, so we've set a precedent.

“We’ve found agent green to be an effective control against all carbon based life forms,” he added. All they need to dispense it is compressed air and water. Soluble as hell, it volatilizes into tiny droplets that hang in the air for hours, especially in a humid environment like Nam. Breathe that shit and you’re debilitated for life. A Machiavellian marvel. Never mind the native non combatants or the land. Fish. Animals. Crops. Water sources. Trees. Indigenous people. Breathe enough of it and you won’t live long enough to collect a military pension, no matter who's uniform you're wearing.

“We’ve never tested it on locusts specifically, of course,” he said, but it sure as hell works on humans. This was well demonstrated in the 1960's. "I’m pretty certain it’ll do the job in Sudan.” About time we used it up, he considered happily. They had tons of it in storage, quite a feather in his cap if he could sell it to the military for quadruple retail. He'd get a bonus for this.

Such exotic compounds required dedicated experiment in the field, on living specimens. It isn’t doing us any good sitting there in all those rotting fifty gallon drums back home, he considered happily. We need to find a suitable place for it before any more of the stuff leaks into the ground in Wilmington.

They had other wonders too, all kinds of poisons developed for the blackest market on Earth; wonderfully diabolical creations, growth inhibitors and pheromones designed for insect eradication and maybe a little collateral human population control.

Lately they'd been conducting some really inspiring tests with sprays that genetically engineer target human populations, changing their biological makeup as easy as moving a piece of their genetic address from one place in the phone book to another. And we can do it without their knowledge, he thought smugly. All we need is an agricultural emergency, an outbreak of some little pest that's gonna damage a vital food source, for instance; something the public can't really argue with. For the good of civilization. We can have crop dusters flying over the land like they're knitting a blanket. Officially, we'll be spraying to control the bugs, and the people will never know what hit them. Of course, on a larger scale, they could just use the U.S Air Force. If people get out of line, we'll have to maintain order.

“We have to design a delivery system,” he added out loud, “something on the scale of the C 123’s used in Nam.” He was talking to his cohorts at the secret headquarters for the AND, but secretly he was marveling at the insight of his competitors at Dow and Monsanto, if anyone knew enough to make the connection, with whom he could be directly linked.

Monsanto's official company mantra is "No Food Shall be Grown that We Don't Own."

*Those* guys are the cutting edge, he thought with admiration. (Selfish commercialism)<sup>2</sup>. They're gonna have a patent on every seed planted by every farmer in the world, and they'll own a piece of every commercial agricultural crop on Earth. Amazing. Nothing like patent law, he thought. Archimedes had the lever, but we have the law.

There's never been anything so exciting as the thought of owning a piece of every human being on planet Earth, he thought. Wow. His brain was swooning. Now *that's* what I call a renewable resource. Before too long, he reasoned, there will be food riots, because the price of grain and staples will rise so high that people won't be able to afford to eat; and then we can swoop in as benevolent saviors with our new genetically engineered seed, and generously save the developing world..! We can feed the poor, and stop the riots; good will towards man; and as soon as farmers plant our proprietary seed, they've sown the industrialization of agriculture. Someday we'll control the human population completely, he thought, and he began to dream of his prominent place in the food chain.

Genetically modified crops are the substance of *unsustainable* agriculture, encouraging massive reliance on petro chemicals to contain weeds, diesel fuel to power expensive agricultural machinery, and toxic petro chemical pesticides; making the farmer more and more dependent upon artificial products and chemicals for his livelihood. Farming will therefore become more and more expensive and dangerous and complicated; more and more prohibitive; and yields will be increased at the expense of biodiversity. Never mind the health of consumers and the well being of the planet.

Instead of focusing on local organic produce, fair trade, restoring seed and grain banks, land reform, and institutions to spread the knowledge of indigenous farmers, the system will simply call for more production and higher yields. We gotta eat. Instead of recognizing the systemic failures of the global market, we will champion better technology and investment as the means to *produce* humanity out of its nutritional crisis. So many disadvantaged, hungry people. Science is the answer!

One day, the small family farmer will be statistically extinct, replaced by agribusiness! Cover the Earth.

The final solution is easy. All we need do is *get* to people, through their food, their water, the air they breathe; even the clothes they wear; and we're learning more and more about it all the time. The public has no idea. With nano particle technology and the appropriate delivery system, we can administer tailor made 'adjustments' for each target population group as needed, on a case by case basis.

We could make everyone in an entire state bark like a dog; or *vote* for one, he considered gleefully. This will require a whole new generation of administrative thinking. He could smell huge profit in the air, government contracts and Congressional pork barrel spending sprees. Give us a place to stand, he thought, returning metaphorically to Archimedes.

"No problem," General Arlee answered, way ahead of him. "We have the assets in place. C 17's equipped with stem to stern fuselage tanks and wing mounted high pressure atomizing spray nozzles. We'll fly out of Ramstein, with KC 135's as support." *Hooo rah.*

They instinctively liked the sound of it. They didn't have the slightest notion of what Arlee was talking about. He was the military genius.

"One massive application, blanketing the landscape, stem to stern," added one of the blue suits. A humanitarian mission.

"I can spread it like manure on Abraham's fields," the General declared.

"Mix it with wildflower seeds and we'll turn the joint into a goddamned garden paradise." No need to mention our name. No markings on the aircraft, Arlee thought wisely. They were totally altruistic.

“Place needs a makeover,” said the third, looking at the locusts crawling on the ground. He was focused on the problem. “We might need colonists when we’re finished.” Top secret.

“Healthy, well fed white people.”

That was what was missing in Darfur. An infusion of white skinned righteousness. There had to be some downtrodden whites somewhere who’d jump at the chance to go abroad. Brave new world.

This is really exciting, the four men thought simultaneously. This is the sort of inspired long range strategic judgment that explained why the Federal Government didn’t have them on the general accounting payroll. They were deep up the black hole of the NSA. Timely intelligence and insight, resulting in shrewd policy directives.

“We’ll call it Operation Eden,” the general offered.

“Sent down by the hand of God.” Power of the almighty.

“Swing low, sweet chariot.”

Look therefore to this day. – the Sanskrit

## Murder

“Highball...”

Burns was coming up on the porch. Carter heard his Audi plow into the driveway. The snow was melting quickly now that the cold front had passed, and the windows were open to let in the sweet night air. Weatherman said another front was barreling in like a freight train, big winds and torrential rain on the way; but that was tomorrow night, they said; and for the moment, it was quite balmy. There was a break in the clouds. Winter was on the ground, but for five minutes or so, Spring was in the air. Carter heard the car door shut and he watched Burns appear in the window as he came up the stairs and on to the piazza. His swarthy face cracked a grin as he looked in the bay window. He could see Carter sitting in the living room with the television on.

“Highball...” Burns said again as he reached for the handle of the storm door. Carter pointed the remote and turned off the tele and got up out of the chair. Burns came in the door with his big grin beaming and he held out a meaty paw. He was wearing his usual uniform. Jeans and a light pink sweater pulled over his turtleneck; boat shoes, no socks. Newporters don't wear socks.

“Could use a highball.”

Burns is a guy who can get away with wearing pink. Carter shook his hand and the two of them looked each other in the eye, happy to be together again after another boring string of weekdays. With Friday being one night that showed promise, they always tried to get together for drinks and whatever happened along the way. Any other night was a bonus. Most of the time they did their own thing during the week, and Burns always reserved Saturday nights for his little wife Betty. But Friday was boys night out.

“A little highball,” Burns said again and he barely broke stride, walking through the handshake like a tai chi master and blending into Carter’s kitchen. Rooted in the Earth, suspended from Heaven. He went straightaway for the freezer, haven to the ice and vodka. Burns took a measured look at a frosted bottle of Svedka while Carter slipped by him and reached into the cupboard for a coupla tall glasses.

“A small boost,” Burns admonished, nodding at what was left of it. About three fingers in the bottom of the bottle, enough to get the pump primed, but pretty shy of what he had in mind. Burns pulled the ice cubes out, after the bottle, which went on the countertop with the ice; and then he opened the fridge and grabbed the Tropicana not from concentrate with lots of pulp and began to give the carton a good, hearty G.I. agitation. Important to shake it vigorously for proper consistency and holistic alcoholic oxygenation. Burns can't spell holistic if it doesn't have vodka in it. Carter cracked the ice cube trays and deposited four or five cubes in each glass so as to leave plenty of room for fuel, then poured a generous infusion of vodker over the ice. Burns fluidly dispensed the OJ for a little color. Sunlight. Teamwork. The smile never left their faces.

It was a familiar dance. Carter pulled a butter knife out of the silverware drawer and stirred the drinks. They had things squared away pretty quick. He pushed one towards Burns and picked up the other. Drinks raised and smiles wide, they touched glasses.

“Nasdorovyé!” they saluted simultaneously. Eyeball to eyeball, they toasted each other in complete friendship, and then they drank. No need to be in a hurry. Outa vodker now though. Have to make a packy run.

“Ahhhh,” first public quaff of the day.

Drinking alone is no fun at all.

“Focking traffic,” Burns mused. They lived only a mile apart, but in Newport a few blocks could be a long haul in a motorcar. Carter always rode a bicycle around town, but Burns wasn’t too keen on exercise. He didn’t cater to physical exertion, so the Audi was his horse. He paid for it in time and petrol, but he had a good attitude about the inalienable facts of life.

“Nice weather for a few hours and the place fills up with tourists,” he said. He might have said terrorists. “Bumper to bumper out to the Sakonnet River Bridge.”

“Carnivaal,” Carter acknowledged. They planned to venture downtown, wade into the crowd and wander around a bit, have a squat and a swallow at the Tropical. They liked to camp out at the window table and watch the talent. First they would go over to the Officer's Club for a couple, and see who was around from the latest NSC class. Friday nights they served free grub, so that was a good place to start, and Burns had already made plans to meet a couple of the lads.

Carter was kinda sick of the O’Club. The food gave him heartburn, but it was free and there was a cute little waitress he had a hard on for, even if he didn’t have a chance in hell. She was too young, but so sweet to fantasize at with her tight little toned up twenty four year old body; and she always aimed her come hither smile at him because she knew he would tip her better if she titillated him a bit. Carter knew she knew, and he didn’t care. Burns saw it and didn’t take long to pick up on his friend’s infatuation.

“Wouldn’t you like to stick your fingers in that...?”

They had a coupla cold ones, and some sorta nondescript little deep fried balls of dough with mushrooms in them; then another big heaping tray of deep fried balls of dough with some kinda corn mush in the midst. Tonight was a deep fried dough ball theme. They didn’t taste too bad. There was home made pizza too. They loaded up a few plates, because the O’Club has piles of all their happy hour food and they put out little paper plates about the size of a fig leaf just to taunt you; and you try to balance all your free food on these flimsy paper plates, which stimulates a lotta second and third trips to the banquet table if you don’t keel over dead from the first helping. Something about free food isn’t it? Makes you eat shit if they give it to you.

There were seven countries represented at the table. The lads from Eastern Europe were conspicuously absent, but the Pacific rim was well accounted for, with a little Middle Eastern Arabic and deep down Caribbean thrown in for spice, along with a coupla token Americans in Carter and Burns. Singapore, Taiwan, New Zealand, Bahrain, Trinidad and Tobago, and Tonga. Interesting group. The foreign devils are always entertaining. They sat around for awhile and got fulla fried dough balls and had a little international community exchange. Eventually most of the lads went back to the BOQ, but Solomon from Tonga happily volunteered to go out for a little G.I. tour of Newport. Tonga is in the South Pacific, Southeast of Fiji, in case you didn't know. Nobody else did. South sea Paradise.

Barry Cowsill was playing at the club. He was one of a semi famous family musical group that had their share of hits and national publicity in the 70's, including the hit from the musical "Hair." The Partridge Family television show was based on the Cowsills, so the story goes. Barry was glad to see Carter walk into the joint, because he needed a ride back into town with all his gear. He didn't have a car. Something about outstanding fines in Oregon or Colorado that he swore he'd paid twenty years ago. He had an amp, two big speakers, his guitar and a microphone stand. Would'a needed two cabs. When his show was over, they stuffed Barry's gear into the back of the Audi and ferried him off base and over to the center of the universe, which seemed like a good place to begin Solomon's virtual tour of Newport.

They got Barry unloaded and piled his gear up in one of the booths. The place was rocking to Otis Read, and the usual cast of characters were in the house. Gig was uncharacteristically gruff and uncommunicative at the corner of the bar, something on his mind. There was a corpulent blonde sitting next to him and she was chatting up some bald fat guy on her left, and Gig mighta been upset that she seemed to find the bald fat guy more interesting than him. She mighta been talking to the bald fat guy just *because* she thought Gig *was* more interesting, and she was playing her little maidenhead game. She had some mileage left on her. Gig was sitting there with his brow furrowed, lost in thought, a cigarette burning in one hand and a Budweiser sweating in the other. Who the hell knows what's going on in people's heads?

Bennet was there, talking to Leppy. Schooner said hello. Mike Walsh was leaning against the door jamb and held out his hand. He had a cigarette hanging on his lip. Later, he would sit in on the upright with Otis. The mighty Quinn was present, still slightly sober and in town to see his kids and wet the whistle. Gracious was sitting next to Mark at the bar. On her right was the aforementioned bald fat guy with whom the rotund blonde was playfully schmoozing for free drinks. Gig was all in black. Quinnie gave Carter a big hug and said he was singing Sunday and wouldn't he come down? Mark drives a bus for RIPTA up in Providence, and he sings whenever someone asks. He's such a good hearted soul and Carter promised to try and make it. James was there, just in from Switzerland, getting away from his bride for a while, looking fit; and Frankie, who shared the latest on the continuing saga of Area 22. Alan, having his one; Eddie, his two; Lawson, on a hit and run with his usual set up of Heinekin and midnight orange juice; Potter, showing off one of his new knives; big Ron, with his Jets hat on; the only guy in the joint who isn't a devoted Pats fan; Piney, in full Revolutionary kit, smelling of gunpowder; Mike the cook, in his kitchen whites. Tiny, Deb, and Tommy. Bill, who wanted to play; McGraff, who didn't; and skinny Timmy, all perched on a stool. Most of them had a Bud on the bar and a cigarette burning. McGrath was drinking something different; but then he is. Cigars and whiskey for my men. Beer for my horses.

Otis saw Carter, cracked a grin and kept on pickin.' His buddy and former musical partner Ridley is a famous novelist now. Bobby the fisherman was sitting in the window booth with his girlfriend who's name Carter couldn't remember. Just coming back from the head was Bobby the elder; the other Bobby, a sophisticated old black fellow who was always ready to stop a fight with a single authoritative blow, if anyone dared. Buster, the owner of the joint, was behind the bar, giving Lisa a hand during the rush.

There were a few missing, regulars already done and gone, a few more doubtless on the way. The air was thick with cigarette smoke and the clink of glasses and bottles put down hard on the bar and the din of roaring conversation. The Red Sox were on the overhead TV's, and Otis was picking a lead on his Yamaha, remembering something seminal from the 70's songbook and half the congregation had their heads back, singing along.

“Let’s go,” Burns said. Solomon from Tonga was looking around and taking it all in, thinking he’d get a beer, thinking he’d come here from halfway ‘round the planet and never seen anything anywhere quite so exotic as this. Carter was just getting started himself, making the rounds; but Burns claimed the vodker here gave him a terrible hangover, unlike any other vodka he drank anywhere else on the island. He claimed they put Popov or some other ultra cheap shit in the Ketel One bottles. Sacrilege. Most people couldn’t tell the difference between one vodka and another, especially if you’re mixing it with fruit juice. Carter’s solution to that was English ale. But Burns was a vigorous proponent of standardized weights and measures, and when it came to the consumption of alcohol, vodka was his poison, and his passion. He required the pure. Attitude wasn’t a problem.

“Highball,” was all he said, and he headed for the door. Carter knew what he was on about, but he didn’t believe it. Buster wouldn’t do that, *would* he? This is a guy who’s done some pretty nice things for the community, and he’d been a friend of Carter’s for years. Burns had no such faith in the character of man, and considered profit to be enough of a motive. Human nature more than compensated for the rest. Self abuse and volume hadn’t yet entered into his equation. He fished out a cigarette and lit up. The gentleman from Tonga followed Burns outside. Carter shrugged. He had to admit, he hadn’t heard a nice word about Buster in awhile. He’d actually been accused of stealing tips from his bartenders; and he was famous for getting bands in at a significant discount, and then coming up lame when it came time to pay.

You didn’t like to believe that kinda shit about your friends.

Carter knew just about every musician in the city, and some refused to perform there now, because they’d been shorted. There were some hard feelings. Carter was conflicted by it all. Despite this growing reputation for chicanery, the place had a great music scene; a tribute to Buster Brown, who offered the only really consistent music in Newport. At Christmas every year he threw a huge banquet, a gesture of holiday good will and a helluva meal, obviously at considerable expense to him; but free to anyone who walked in the door. Merry Christmas. What other bar owner did *that*...? A true locals joint, it was a relaxing alternative to the club scene meat market mentality going on nearly everywhere else. The people who hang out at the Center of

the Universe are the salt of the Earth. Carter loved the place, loved the people; and he still genuinely liked Buster; despite all the talk; but he wasn't about to go AWOL at a time like this, so he followed Burns and Solomon out the door.

It was cool and dark and quiet on Marlboro Street. Just for an instant. Then six cars poured off Broadway and motored past. In the lead was a shiny boom box on wheels with the driver gyrating in the cockpit, his head bobbing up and down and the car seemingly bouncing on the blacktop. You couldn't call it music, but it was deafening 'bout to blow yer eardrums. Last in line was a lean young white girl in a new BMW with a cell phone glued to her ear. She was gabbing like mad while she was driving. The car had Massachusetts plates. Rich little Boston tramp.

“What could she possibly be talking about?” Burns asked rhetorically. “She should have that phone surgically implanted on the side of her head, so she can keep both hands on the wheel of the car that Daddy bought her.” She should make it easy on herself, he thought. Sitting next to her was a glassy eyed young man wearing a baseball cap turned backwards. “Her boyfriend looks pretty hammered.”

“It's love,” Carter deadpanned.

The three of them kept to the sidewalk down past the Jailhouse Inn and took a left on one of the short side streets that connected Marlboro with Washington Square, which was a beehive of headlights and downtown Friday night party hearty activity. All they needed was a break in the weather.

There was some guy urinating on the side of the Newport National Bank. His feet were wide apart so he didn't stand in his own piss. It was quite an impressive fountain. The stream splattered off the wall and made a urinary rivershed out and onto the sidewalk. They had to step over it. Amazing this kid could have the presence of mind to piss on the side of a public building with crowds of people walking past him and yet know enough not stand in it. Solomon looked at this man and they could see the horror on his face. He didn't comprehend it. He was visibly embarrassed for America. A guest in our country, and he was humiliated for us.

Tonga doesn't even qualify as a third world nation, it is so small and remote, but he didn't think one citizen in his entire country would ever stoop to such an offensive and disgusting act of public disgrace. He didn't know anyone who would get that senseless, no matter how drunk they are. Don't people here have any respect for themselves? It was quite an education for the black man from Tonga. Carter knew the atmosphere would get worse, the farther down the strip they ventured. Zooport was alive and brewing early, and Summer was still a few months off.

Everything culminated at Via Via after last call when the bars let out. That was always a compelling look at emerging humanity. You want a cultural study on the well bred post adolescent youth of Southern New England, go to Via Via after hours on a Friday night. People were jammed in everywhere, clogging the sidewalks, spilling and milling about out into the middle of the road, shouting and chatting with each other and laughing, stopping traffic, many of them staggering from too much drink.

There is a noticeable police presence. Bike patrols and foot soldiers and squad cars are plainly evident, but the police are outnumbered five hundred to one. Solomon was amazed so many people were conspicuously drunk in public. It was pathetic. That and the litter. He was confounded at how these people disrespect their land. What struck him just as much were the fat people. It didn't seem to matter, male or female, old or young; and so many of them were young kids. Teens and twenty somethings. So many of them were fat. Really *fat*. What do they *eat* here in America?

Just in front of them a gaggle of teenage girls were loitering on the sidewalk. Couldn't of been more than fourteen years old, each having a Brittany Spears look alike contest, their faces made up and their accessories exposed, trying to ooze sex and wanton desirability; every one of them slightly overweight and bulging at the seams, fannies wide and hips already spread; perfect child bearing tarts, with their belly rolls exposed like little dough girls. Carter noticed Solomon's eyes.

"Bovine growth hormone," Carter cryptically explained. He was especially sensitive to the shape of young America, because his own kids were teenagers; his youngest a senior in high school now. He often picked her up at school and was amazed at the children spilling out, so many of them overweight. It seemed to affect the girls even more than the boys. Fat girls.

And their parents? Where the hell were their parents? Did they know where their daughters were? These were little girls hanging out like hookers on the street. The stories he was hearing about how early these kids were sexually active, and how they were engaging... Jesus.

Solomon turned, unsure of what Carter meant. Bovine growth hormone? What do cows have to do with it?

"It's epidemic," Burns said, nodding towards them.

Solomon turned and was staring a hole in an obscenely fat woman walking down the street along side them. She might've been thirty-five. Probably out looking for her daughter, Carter thought.

"Fat women," Burns said without a trace of arrogance. "They'll suck the life outa you and they'll eat all yer chow."

They turned the corner where Harold's Camera used to be, a landmark on that corner for so many years. What ever happened to those two guys? Two jolly Greek brothers, made for retail. He'd forgotten their last name. Now it's a Banana Republic takes up half the block fulla clothes that cost too much. His Mom bought him a pair of khaki shorts in there for his birthday and he politely asked her for the receipt and returned them. He knows he isn't supposed to shop in Walmart, but he bought three pairs of shorts and two Hawaiian shirts all for the same price as one pair of shorts from Banana Republic. He couldn't get over how trendy it is in there.

They made their way down the stretch past the Brick Alley Pub. There was a long line waiting to get in. Harold passed away, I guess, Carter thought. He and his brother had that store fifty years. Now it's an oxymoron.

"Highball." Burns pushed the word out of his mouth like a mantra. He looked at all the people everywhere and he wanted to stop walking in it. Tough going. One thing to sit in the window at the Tropical and watch it go by, admire the pretty girls and have a few cold ones; but wading through this quagmire was a chore. Somehow the thought of a drink made him want more smoke in his lungs, so he pulled his pack of Marlboros out and fished one up.

He offered a cigarette to Solomon and Carter, but both declined. Burns found a book of matches in his pocket and struck flame. Squinting his eyes, he focused on the end of his fag as it started to glow. He shook the match, pulled the gray smoke deep into his starving lungs, and threw the match in the street. Carter watched the match fly and land on the cobblestones.

More litter. Later he would throw the butt. He'd heard those goddamned filters last forever, made of some kinda indestructible quasi plastic shit. Just what you need on the end of all that wholesome tobacco smoke.

He looked down at their feet as they walked along Thames Street. The cobbles used to be ballast in the old wooden sailing ships. A corner in the triangle of trade, the slavers unloaded their cargo of rum in Newport, after unloading a cargo of slaves in the Caribe; and Carter could feel the colonial energy of conquest and squalor and misery coming out of the ground. It was weird. He ignored it, for the most part, part of island heritage; but he felt that energy in the stones beneath his feet. He smelled perfume and looked up to see a group of five or six young trendsetters walking down the street in their little go to meetin' outfits. It didn't matter it was 45 degrees and there was still slush on the ground. They were on parade. One of them was especially choice, a large breasted model, nice white teeth, green eyes, gorgeous smile, strawberry blonde hair, open blouse swelling suggestively, just barely shy of revealing her Susan B. Anthony nipples, tight tight pants that hugged her creamy thighs, a vee like you wanna ummmm. Nice all the way up. Burns' eyes followed Carter, and then moved to the girl.

"Murder," he said. There was six of them. This one, she was amazing. Heads kept turning and she walked down the street in splendid isolation, well buffered by her prophylactic gang of six.

Murder.

Carter looked a little too intently at this girl as she promenaded past. Jesus. He couldn't help himself. He didn't like to be obvious, because so many men are idiots about it, and it can get creepy for a woman pretty quick; but in this particular instance, Carter was safe. She was completely unaware of him. He was invisible.

Did I tell you I can breathe through my ears?

"And they're putting their legs up in the air for boys who climb on board without a care for how to really pleasure a woman." Burns was teasing the shit outa him. "Some guy shaves his head and wears an earring, pants hanging off his ass with his drawers showing and his baseball cap backwards." Dude.

Some band in the Garden was trying to break the plate glass window with their grunge rock, and the place was packed with kids who were blowing out their eardrums. Carter couldn't see how anyone could hold a conversation in a place like that. You can't hear and every time you take a breath to shout you gotta inhale all the fucking cigarette smoke hanging solid in the air.

The street was filled with party people staggering about with their arms around each other, talking and shouting and laughing and carrying on, going from one place to the next. Some of them used the sidewalk, but it was too crowded, and it all spilled into the cobblestones.

If you drive a car in Newport, you don't want to try and drive downtown on a Friday night. Most of them were young professionals from Providence and Boston, down for the parade. Some of them drove in from Connecticut or New York and were here for the weekend, maybe at a time share, or one of the local hotels. If so, they'd booked it months in advance.

"This carnivaal needs a Ferris wheel," Burns said. He had to step off the sidewalk because another bunch was crowding by, four pretty young girls with suggestive outfits, pushed up breasts and bare midriffs and baby fat. Three or more women in a group and it was murder. Burns had his leather on. It was cold out. These girls were undressed.

"Murder."

Walking right behind sniffing 'em were four guys with shaved heads, and the baseball caps. Striped apes. Shirt tails out. Sneakers. Baggy pants hanging down with their boxer drawers exposed. Fashion statements galore. Earrings shiny. White bros from a nice hood.

"A nice big Ferris wheel, and a cotton candy concession."

"Right here in Queen Anne Square," Carter nodded, going along for the ride. More of the local young punkers were loitering, mostly girls sitting in a caucus along the sidewalk with their black leather and silver studs and chains and piercings with spiked purple hair and painted faces like the Rocky Mountain Horror Picture Show. Fourteen years and counting. They didn't know they had somewhere else to go.

A group of the boys were in a loose circle up on the grass, diverting themselves with a game of hackey sack. Trinity Church steeple was lit up like Christmas behind them. Carter was appraising the young demons and thinking of his own kids, marveling at his good fortune. "*Step right up,*"

Carter shouted, “*See the bearded lady, and the alligator man.*” What a goof. People walking by him looked around, wondering what they were missing. Carnivaal.

“What we really need is a midget,” Burns said.

This got Solomon looking around. A midget? He couldn’t believe this place. It was foreign as hell.

“Can’t get enough midgets,” Carter acknowledged.

“We could put in a little midget theme park, with little midget houses and little gas lamps and little yards and little fences.”

Solomon was trying to figure this conversation out. It didn’t make sense to him. He was struggling with meaning that wasn’t meant to be.

“When’s the last time you saw a midget?” Burns asked.

“I saw one the other day,” Carter offered. “He was standing in the middle of Hall Avenue, pushing a full sized lawn mower.”

“A little midget world,” Burns was creating his theme park.

“So I slowed down, and he didn’t move. He was standing there in the middle of the street.”

“People would pay to see that,” Burns stated emphatically.

“Finally he looked at me and my car, so he pushed the mower to the side and got outa the way. As I was driving past him, he said ‘Sorry, I was spacing out.’ And I wondered, was that a *little* space out?”

“We could have a giant midget convention,” Burns continued. “And trolls,” he added. “We should get them out in public where they can be seen. No sense in them just sitting at the bar.” Freedom’s just another word.

Carter’s cell phone rang and he dug it out of his pocket and looked at the LCD. It was Dugan’s land line. He flipped it open.

“We’re looking for midgets,” he said into the phone.

“Yeah. I think a Ferris wheel would be just the thing for this place,” Burns recited again, deciding it would be a good use for the Trinity steeple. Put a ferris wheel on that. “And a cotton candy concession.” He could smell beer spilt in the street.

“Queen Anne’s Square,” Carter said into the phone.

“Right next to the midget theme park.”

Solomon was unable to follow any of it. Things like this don’t happen in Tonga.

"We could have midget tennis matches up at the Casino."

"Picking our way through the crowd. Headed for the Tropical."

"Midget football. And midget NBA basketball. The MNBA." They deserve a little recognition.

Tonga was a civilized place.

"And some nice fresssh highballs," Burns added.

"They're swarmin'... It's like summer down here."

"Might be some trolls at the Tropical," Burns said. No telling who'd show up. "They need to get out."

Solomon wondered what he meant by that. Trolls?

"Yeah. Got warm all of a sudden," Carter agreed. "We got a couple minutes before it snows again," he said, familiar with New England weather, "but by then we'll be in the Tropical." He looked at Burns, who raised his eyebrows, wondering who it was on the phone.

"Dugan," Carter qualified. "Sez he might come down, but I don't believe him." He sounds pretty much weathered in at home.

"Ask him if he can bring along a troll," Burns said. "Folks don't cotton much to trolls, but we can use one." They're under rated.

"See if you can find a midget," Carter said again, ignoring Burns' request for a troll.

Cotton much?

"No cover charge if you bring a midget."

Solomon had never seen a midget for real. Just on the television. He'd seen The Wizard of Oz. Only midgets he'd ever seen were on the TV. He'd actually heard that during the filming of the movie they'd hired just about every midget on Earth they could locate. It was like Burns said; and with all those midgets in one place for the first time in the history of the world, nature had it's way; and supposedly every time someone opened a closet door there were two midgets in there fucking their brains out. Proof that Darwin was right. Survival of the species. All those little people in midget heaven. They were having themselves a giant midget orgy.

"Carnivaal," Burns said again.

They have television in Tonga. It's a civilized place.

"People would pay to see that."

"Later," Carter said.

"Can't get enough midgets."

New York City, A.E. 3

## Lest We Forget

Salaam bin Laden evaded capture and cowered in the shadows while the Taliban took the brunt of U.S. reciprocity for the attack on 911. Despite their rhetoric and Afghanistan's record of repelling all invaders, from the Russians to the British Raj and even back to Alexander the Great, *this* time, against the will and might of America, Afghanistan was methodically crushed, and quickly conquered. The Taliban barely lasted through the first months of that winter in 2001-'02, losing every city they held before the end of December '01. It was a brutal show of military strength and the shrewdest operational planning, employing native Afghans to do much of the fighting, and leaving what remained of the Taliban with no place to run but into the haunt of their own unforgiving interior mountains, where their supply lines were cut and they were systematically bombed and starved and exposed and annihilated.

Bin Laden never came out of hiding to fight for those who had supported and sheltered him. On one occasion he produced a video clip designed to incite and provoke the wrath of Islam. It was filmed where the setting would not reveal his presence, and some argued that he had made the tape even before 911, as post operative propaganda.

Many thought him dead, buried by bombs in the Afghan caves. Those who insisted he was alive believed he was at large in the no man's land between Afghanistan and Pakistan. The Islamic fanatics who followed him were convinced he was a prophet of God. In the Fall of 2002 there was an audio tape; and another in early 2003. The message was the same, full of righteous hatred and exhortation to armed conflict and terror; to worldwide jihad and Islamic intolerance; and yet as the months passed, the hunt must have taken its toll. In late 2003 he was resurrected again in the American press, where it was reported bin Laden was alive and still directing al Qaeda.

Following the early May suicide bombings on three residential compounds in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, which killed 25 people, including eight Americans, the press even suggested there was a power struggle between bin Laden and his higher ups, over policy and targets. It had been two years since a picture had been seen, and bin Laden appeared hackneyed and gaunt. His beard had grown longer, more gray; and he looked undernourished; less like a warrior, more like a cleric.

Salaam bin Laden slipped out of Afghanistan by wearing a burqa and posing as a woman. He migrated by boat to Africa, where he could operate in absentia. He was living in a crude hut in Sudan, along the Blue Nile, in El Gezira, South of Khartoum. A gang of skinny boys did not take to the tall, unkindly stranger. He was purported to be immensely rich and famous in a far off land; a holy man, a prophet of God; but young people have a native instinct, a sixth sense that tells them sweet from rotten. They can smell the inner core of things, and they know. It raises the hair on their back, and they growl the alarm. Few of the villagers were impressed by the man. They had been watching him, measuring him, and the spirit of his living did not support the character of his words.

The villagers had only their gut to guide them, and bin Laden had brought unwanted danger to them all. One day he demanded time alone to meditate, and he ordered his people out. His wives and children were in their own huts; and he was left to himself by his bodyguards and sycophants, who thought him safe in this forgotten, rural hole on the map in godless Sudan. They needed a holiday from their jihad. Things had not gone well for them since the fall of Afghanistan. It was embarrassing. They were holy warriors of Islam, emboldened and sustained by their immense success on

911; and yet the infidels had invaded their homeland and cut them off at the knees. Suddenly they were removed from their native soil, and hiding in this barren wasteland that Allah had apparently forgotten.

Three of the more rebellious village men found bin Laden alone and they entered his hut unbidden, confronting him. Their women were complaining. Life was hard enough in this remote and hellish place, where drought and famine and civil war had ravaged the countryside; and now the locusts, which seemed to appear out of nowhere, as if their eggs were the very grains of sand. The children were fearful and hungry. The elders were alarmed, and there was talk of bad juju.

The men who confronted bin Laden were young and hotheaded, and they did not seek his words. He had brought disharmony to them. He carried violence and suspicion into the village, and from their perspective, there was only one way to deal with this.

The young men did not have permission to approach him. The elders had not consented to any action, but these firebrands knew what to do. They were zealots for their own cause. The elders were timid old men who thought too much and spoke with guarded words. They would make their judgments and proclamations, and then do nothing. It was all rhetoric, and this situation required action. There was too much talk.

That was exactly what they got from bin Laden. He claimed to speak for Islam, but these young men wanted to lie down with their wives and have peace in their huts. They were not bad Muslims, but they did not want jihad. They wanted rain, and a good harvest; fat goats and smiling, well fed children. They were not consoled by words or holy visions. Seeing the anger in their eyes, bin Laden berated them, calling them selfish and cowardly, trying to shame them; and they reacted as men will do. Humdulilah!

“He is so full of himself that he forgets who he really is,” one of the young men said, and he struck bin Laden with his staff. Mashallah!

“He is a fool on a man’s errand,” said another, raising his hand.

“Inshallah,” said the third, mocking bin Laden, and they began to beat him with their walking sticks.

When faced with his undoing, bin Laden pleaded in a fearful voice, first to man and finally to Allah, but neither responded to his wail. He was dispatched with a sharp blow to the head. Blood for blood.

Bin Laden's corpse was put on public display in the village square, where his body was hung from the outstretched arm of a dead acacia tree. The area was cordoned off and a crude memorial was created in this little village on the Blue Nile, where Salaam bin Laden was hung up and barbarically allowed to decompose. Let the rich man bloat and perish, the elders said, finally ruling in favor of common sense. In a land savaged by AIDS and famine and years of civil war that had caused millions to be murdered and displaced, bin Laden's body was a convincing monument, where he rotted in the hellish African sun.

To some it seemed too much like a crucifixion, and they objected. It is not holy Islam. It is gruesome. He is unworthy. There were many opinions. The Sudanese government had not known he was there. They no longer harbored terrorists, and were secretly cooperating with the U.S. government in an effort to be taken off the black list; so they were officially embarrassed as well as diplomatically humbled to discover bin Laden's corpse had been hung up in the square of a tiny village just down the road from the capital city. It was revolutionary.

The Sudanese people considered the spectacle a rich irony. The more withered and blackened his carcass became, the more clean, wealthy white people heard about it and traveled to the dark continent, where bin Laden's corpse conveyed a stark and compelling message to the civilized world. Reality is a cruel mistress, and not dressed up.

The site became a shrine, and many pilgrims journeyed to Sudan to see what remained of bin Laden, and to look upon his shriveling, lifeless form. People wept for the loss of life he had taken, and the horror he symbolized. Many arrived from America, and more from all over the world, for there were many foreigners and many faiths in those towers; and their relatives needed closure and release from their grief. Some brought offerings and relics, a piece of jewelry, a lock of hair, a treasured remembrance. Some brought flags, and some brought ashes from the site of the Event, a world away. Sudan has more than it's own share of terror and madness, much in

evidence; and yet strangely, as to a holy place, people were allowed to come and go; and the country opened it's arms.

Many approached bin Laden's corpse to look upon his face and ponder. Some would pray. Some would spit and curse. Some would weep. Some considered him a martyr, and they cried "Allah achbar!" and turned to look into the penetrating eyes of those who knew better. There is so much cruelty in the world. People traveled a long way to access this foreign place, this terrorist's misplaced memorial to anti-terrorism; designed in dementia by bin Laden himself; and the offerings of anger and grief and penitence piled up in honor of his death.

Next to his corpse were three flags flying permanently, under halogen lights at night, donated and erected by the American Red Cross. The sun never set in this hardened place. The Saudi Arabian flag flew to one side of bin Laden. As a show of solidarity, the royal family sent the flag, which has a white saber beneath the legend "There is no God but God, and Muhammad is the Messenger of God" in white Arabic script, on a background of rich green, the traditional color of Islam.

Not to be outdone, on bin Laden's other flank was Old Glory, with her familiar stars and stripes. Next to that, on the outside, was an unusual banner that had created quite a stir in Sudan when it was bravely and defiantly stood up by a young woman from New Jersey who lost her husband in the South tower on September 11, 2001. While local tribal authorities initially balked at the idea, the third flag was allowed to stay; and that pennant became perhaps the most powerful image of the site, excepting the macabre corpse of bin Laden himself.

This flag was first developed by Benjamin Franklin and championed in one of his inflammatory newspaper articles. The design had several incarnations, one of which was a red and white striped interpretation used for the first U.S. navy jack. The flag planted at bin Laden's side is considered the first version of this theme, often called the Gadsden Flag, named after U.S. naval officer Christopher Gadsden of South Carolina, who commissioned the pennant in 1775 for his colonial fleet. On an unbroken yellow background is a coiled rattlesnake with thirteen rattles, representing the original thirteen colonies, and under the coiled snake is the irrefutable legend,

"Don't Tread On Me."

Salaam bin Laden's corpse rotted like the merely mortal man he was. He decomposed and mummified in the relentless sun of Sudan, where he would return to the hot brown dust. His evil would mingle with the Earth and be purified by the microbes and the offerings and tokens of personal recollection and remembrance that were spread in concentric circles around him, piled up in waves of flotsam and jetsam strewn like flowers at a grave.

It was profoundly horrific in the most thought provoking way, and yet strangely touching. Almost unspeakable. In close to the corpse were thousands of boxes and cans and jars and funeral urns full of ashes and cinders and flowers and metal and glass and earth and shredded debris from the fallen towers; buttons and shoes and photographs and locks of hair; relics brought all the way from the other side of the world to represent and remember the sacred lives and remains and remnants of all the Christians and Hindus and Hebrews and Muslims and others that bin Laden's terror had so savagely extinguished. It was like a bomb had gone off here.

The symbolism of this was evident to everyone. Footpaths had to be carved into the mass of offerings. Volunteers were constantly clearing a path to the front, moving things to make more room so those who had business here could have access to their private moment; and egress back into their world, forever changed. The ashes of the dead were given a priority to all other offerings, save the flags; and when bin Laden's corporal body was gone, it was supposed the flags would fly forever on, over the ashes, like the eternal flame, their message untarnished and sure.

It was a moving experience to be in the midst of this compelling flood of emotions. The site was visited by citizens of every continent, who felt a connection with the terror unleashed on 9-1-1, and they suffered the undying anguish of the friends and families of the dead.

One morning it was noticed that bin Laden's head was no longer attached to his body. The ghastly news spread quickly. The people in the shrine were asked to leave, and the media petitioned to get a camera inside, but the memorial was sealed with militia and no one was allowed in until the authorities determined what had happened, and how. Always with an eye on things, the U.S. National Security Council inserted a team of

investigators who seemed to appear out of nowhere. The Sudanese government was not amused.

It did not matter. Despite all that propriety suggested, the Americans tried to take control, as American officials are so apt to do; feeling empowered by their lordly status; but nearly everyone resented their intrusion. Some suspected the Americans themselves of taking bin Laden's head. After a brief and contentious political scrimmage, the locals prevailed.

The first man to enter into the shrine was a grizzled, one-eyed Afghan, a decorated veteran of the Soviet-Afghan war. This man had fought with the mujahideen, when U.S. Congressman Charlie Wilson was funding and arming them against the Russian Bear. Later he fought with the Taliban against the Americans. Interesting how things evolve. Now he was amongst those Afghan tribal factions who were cooperating with U.S. forces, and as a reward for his patriotism, he had been awarded the plum post of senior on-site operations officer.

He gruffly insisted upon going in alone. The young Sudanese rag tag militia objected, but they begrudgingly respected the old warrior; and although the clerics loudly claimed to have jurisdiction, the veteran soldier marched into the shrine while everyone else was quibbling. He ordered his subordinates to keep everyone out while he went into the memorial alone. With an iron stomach, an antiquated gas mask, and a digital camera hastily requisitioned from one of the rubbernecking CMM reporters, this old Afghan warrior picked his way through the heaps of accumulated offerings to find out what happened to Salaam bin Laden's head.

He came back empty handed.

"It's gone," he said in his native tongue. He was completely mystified, but not being a well educated man, he was willing to admit his limitations; and suggested that someone else might better have a look; "someone with two eyes," he said. "Someone with more skill in the dead."

He held up the digital cam and delightedly showed off the pics he had taken. These were quickly confiscated by CMM and published on their website that night, and in a wide variety of newspapers the next morning.

Salaam bin Laden's head had been cut off. That was clearly evident. But as to anything else, there was nothing certain except the mystery of how, and why, and what happened to it; because bin Laden's head was missing.

It was a grisly spectacle. A trio of forensic scientists were hastily assembled and brought in to investigate, and there was some talk of a formal autopsy, but it was decided to leave bin Laden as he was, in the shrine, where his corpse belonged; rather than pulling him out and moving him. They did not touch the remains, but cautiously examined the body from the safety of three wooden ladders. The scene made an interesting artistic study, with two of the three dressed in white protective gear and gas masks, and the locusts flying in their midst.

The village did have a ju ju man for special occasions and deaths of distinction. He attended. A German physician who happened to have some experience in forensics was there to lay an offering at the shrine. He had lost a son who worked in the North tower. The doctor from Leipzig volunteered for the examination and was enthusiastically drafted. The only other individuals who qualified were the Americans from the NSC. One was chosen.

They wore NBC masks, courtesy of U.S. Special Forces. All but the ju ju man, who refused to put that thing on his face. The conversation between them has been the subject of much deliberation, but never released to the public. The ladders were free standing and of a type employed for picking fruit; and strangely, the ladders were apparently from an apricot orchard South of Kabul. There isn't much fruit in Sudan. No one knew how these ladders arrived on the scene, but their utilitarian value was put to use.

The Afghan officer was amused beyond words, and watched this scene unfold while he smoked. Prior to 1980, Afghanistan didn't produce opium; but after the US/CIA backed Mujahideen won the Soviet/Afghan war, Afghanistan produced 88% of the world's opium in 1988. He'd watched *that* too, noting the change in official policy that the Americans brought, and the duplicity in their clean shaven faces.

When the Taliban came to power, they destroyed most of the opium fields, citing Allah's will and reducing opium production by 94%. This put a helluva crimp in the cash flow for the CIA, and it was determined that

something had to be done about these religious fundamentalist Taliban extremists. Ironically, on September 9<sup>th</sup>, 2001, the plans for an American invasion of Afghanistan were on President Bell's desk; and two days later, on 9-1-1 we had the excuse to invade. Today, Afghanistan produces more than 90% of the world's heroin, and they break new production records for opium every year.

It is a strange world to live in these days, he thought. He smoked his cigarette down until it was burning his fingers, and then he threw the butt on the ground. Three locusts flew up in response, and he swatted at them, but missed.

Everyone seemed anxious to add an element of symbolism whenever possible, and it was a peculiar scene indeed, two men clad in pure white, high tech space age protective clothing with state of the art NBC gas masks; the third man nearly naked, with only a hand woven goat's hair blanket to shield him from the stink. The three of them were standing precariously atop the tall, skinny ladders; huddled about the withered, blackened corpse of the terrorist Salaam bin Laden, peering studiously at his decapitated torso. It was grisly business. The head had been crudely severed, as if by a blade so dull it went through flesh and vertebrae like a crosscut saw; leaving a flat, ugly stump. The body itself was desiccated, dried like a mummified prune in the fierce desert sun.

Ironically, his head had been a compelling part of the exhibit. Insects had taken his eyes first, leaving deep, empty sockets, and the skin on his skull was stretched paper thin and dehydrated, like translucent brown parchment.

It looked like something from an Indiana Jones movie. The cartilage of his nose was shrunken, reduced to little holes where the nostrils had been. The ears had withered, leaving two more holes into the skull. His teeth were exposed, the lips gone; his mouth drawn back in a hideous grimace. The people would remember that face, and for some it would come back to them in their dreams, a mask of death. The flies remained, in an archetype of his head; a swarming sculpture buzzing aggressively around the newly exposed, ragged dry flesh where the skull had been harvested from his body.

Media and news broadcasters were almost as numerous, pressed like insects against the barricade; and photographs were taken from every conceivable angle. The most compelling image, printed in the New York Times Sunday Magazine, was less revealing of the actual forensic examination than of the entire scene itself, taken with color film but almost completely black and white and eerie, smoke filled shades of gray.

The image was snapped on site in Sudan and then computer enhanced by the Times photo lab gurus in New York, who deftly superimposed it into an early shot of Ground Zero in Manhattan, just after the towers fell. The figures clad in sanitized white, with gas masks; and the lone, nearly naked, deathly skinny black man, perched upon the tall, dark ladders in a huddle around bin Laden's headless crucifixion; dwarfed by the immense mountain of twisted steel and wreckage on Ground Zero with the one remaining façade of shattered tower barely standing like a skeleton amidst the billowing bloom of dust and debris.

They actually used three photographs to create the final image. Something old, something new, something borrowed. There was something otherworldly about the photo montage, so convincing was the picture; a classic piece of photo-journalism, completely fabricated; more real than real life. It was a marriage of black and white and read all over, three images in the one; and looming in the background like a Phoenix risen from the ashes of the wreckage was the newly constructed Celestial Hotel, built upon the shores of Central Park and now the tallest building on planet Earth, taller than the twin towers had been. Gleaming in the bright sunshine of our brave new world, the Celestial Hotel was a testimonial to our enduring future, tall and immense and more grandly sensational than any building mankind had ever built.

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