



TRINE

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FIREBALL INSTILLS FEAR

Witnesses to the fireball streaking across the nighttime heavens last Monday believe it was an omen of dark tidings.

Mr. Charles Gibbons, manager of a farmstead on Lower Berman Road, said he was awakened by persistent neighing from the horses. He was walking to the barn to investigate when he heard an uncommon noise from above.

“I looked up and saw a dazzling burst of light as brilliant as the sun,” Mr. Gibbons proclaimed. “A band of vapors trailed behind it, in thrall to its power and heralding doom.”

Indeed, the very next morning, a calf from his herd fell into a ravine, impaled itself on a fence post and perished.

“A sign of its evil,” he said.

Miss Henrietta Angstadt of Pear Street was in her back yard when the luminous object appeared. She said it made a harsh sound like bacon strips sizzling and appeared to descend toward Copernian Ridge.

“It gave me such a scare that I took cover under the nearest roof, which happened to be the outhouse. When I emerged, everything

seemed different. A mist hung low over the land and the shadows were ill-defined. Later when sleep finally took me, I had the most peculiar of dreams, that something vile had entered the world, and that the future would be darkened by great trials and tribulations.”

But Professor Robert Summersby of the School of Natural Science at Pennsylvania State College believes the fireball was a natural event, although quite rare.

“It was likely a meteor that survived its plunge to Earth,” the professor stated.

He and his research assistant made the two-day trip to Gracious on horseback with the intent of searching the mountains for where it came down.

“If we can locate the meteorite, or even just fragments that survived the dramatic fall, its composition may answer important questions about the universe and our place within it,” Professor Summersby said.

THE FIRST PART

ORJOS: *The discordant one is fatally compromised. Repressed pain has created narcissistic instability. His self-destructive behavior will continue unabated.*

SILSO: No doubt he is troubled. Yet he is not the tragic figure you suggest. Profundity resides within him.

ORJOS: *A lost cause. When confronted by the Pestilence, he will capitulate.*

SILSO: Hidden strengths may yet emerge.

ONE

*The Mercy of Gracious, yeah yeah;
The strength of its bones, yeah yeah;
Forever calling, yeah yeah;
Its wanderers home.*

The ridiculous song splashed Brad Van Reed like a bucket of slime, its abrupt recollection a consequence of geography. He was turning onto Rural Route 57A, the main road into Gracious, Pennsylvania.

A wanderer home.

It was a cool Friday steeped in sunshine, the air alive with scented breezes, peppermint and pine, as pleasant a late May afternoon as these mountains were likely to offer. He fought an urge to steer his old Ford pickup onto the shoulder, make a U-turn and accelerate in the opposite direction with the haste of a man being pursued by a starving T-Rex.

*The Mercy of Gracious.
Yeah yeah.*

The upbeat melody and on-the-nose lyrics had been composed in that prehistoric and overrated Boomer era – the 1960s – by some Beatlemania-stricken local. “The Mercy of Gracious” had been given the seal of approval by the Gracious Chamber of Commerce and drilled into generations of elementary school victims by teachers dedicated to brainwashing young minds. The truth was, the town and its environs did *not* represent the center of the universe, something Brad eventually realized after growing to understand the manipulative nature of adults. An interstate-deprived town surrounded by wilderness on the edge of nowhere should *never* be mistaken for merciful.

The song triggered another unpleasant memory: his initial escape attempt from Gracious a decade ago. He’d been a 14-year-old videogame junkie harboring a black attitude to match his goth-chic attire. During active-shooter drills at middle school, he sensed teachers and classmates watching him like a hawk, all convinced he was the kid most likely to get hold of an AK-47 and make the nightmare real.

Such hatefulness had never crossed Brad's mind, not then, not now. He'd been too proud and tough to show it, but their suspicions hurt, and left him feeling even more isolated. Then had come the night his aunt and uncle dragged him to a school-sponsored intervention, where an oblivious psychologist and a timid guidance counselor took turns spouting platitudes about learning to control his anger. That's when he'd decided to run away.

He hadn't thought it through. A no-nonsense cop – what other kind were there? – caught him at the town limits and hauled his ass back home. Uncle Zack threatened to drag said ass out to the garage and beat some sense into it with the old razor strop used on his own butt in less enlightened times. Aunt Nipa's pleas for a reduced sentence instead resulted in Brad being grounded for a week with no TV and confiscation of all things digital.

The iron fist, the velvet glove. Grim Uncle Zack, always ready to punish. Kindly Aunt Nipa, always lobbying for understanding. She meant well but a week of enforced boredom hadn't exactly been a mild sanction. He'd rather have taken the beating.

“Shit!”

He slammed the brakes as three white-tailed deer, a doe and two fawns, darted out of the woods. The F-150 was too old to have anti-lock brakes and shuddered as it skidded to a halt. Another few feet and the trailing fawn would have been roadkill.

The trio raced into the trees beyond the opposite shoulder and vanished. Brad scanned the woods where the animals had appeared, wary of stragglers. None were visible but something else was.

It dashed out of the woods from the same spot as the deer. Presumably a human male, it was short, barely five feet. From the neck down it was clad in some sort of camo-rubber outfit, fetishistic swirls of green and tan. But the headgear truly established its freak cred.

The boxy, tight-fitting wooden helmet looked to have been built by a carpenter unfamiliar with the straightedge. None of the angles were quite ninety degrees, giving the head a lopsided appearance. The helmet was open at the front, but the face was hidden by frosted goggles and a nose-mouth grill that would have made Hannibal Lecter envious.

The creature halted in front of Brad's truck. It seemed to glare at him, as if pissed off at having its deer pursuit interrupted. Raising a rock clutched in its fist, it smacked the rock down on his hood three times in rapid succession, then took off after its prey.

The hood bashing left new dents. The truck was decades beyond pristine, so they pretty much just complemented the dozens of other indentations. Still, someone messing with one of his possessions never failed to stir his anger. Brad considered chasing after Boxhead and giving him a serious ass-stomping.

He forced calm. It wasn't worth the effort. Besides, he was approaching Gracious, which had always been a magnet for the bizarre. Best to move on and consider Boxhead as just the town's latest incarnation of weirdness.

When he was in fourth grade, a deacon at the Methodist church suffered a breakdown and tried making his kids go to school in the nude. In high school, a popular cheerleader apparently forgot how to speak English and began babbling in an unknown language, which the local nerd colony suggested was a variant of Klingon. And only days before Brad's newsworthy getaway from Gracious two years ago, the reclusive Swanteri brothers, Hiram and Amos, abandoned their farm, purportedly to take up a feral existence in the wilderness out around Copernian Ridge.

The Mercy of Gracious. One fucked-up little town.

He depressed the gas pedal and continued his journey. A mile or so later, Route 57A looped around a series of bends between imposing tree-covered hills before emerging onto Lakamoxin Street, the town's main drag. Retail establishments fronted by angled parking spots and hungry meters were interspersed with row homes. He passed Moxie's Bar & Grill, which had always been the best downtown place to drink and eat and drink some more.

A block farther on was the Roberta Hotel, at five stories the tallest structure in town. Across from the Roberta was Majestic Beauty Salon & Bicycle Shop, run by a sixty-something husband and wife. Diego Rodriguez did hair and nails, Alondra Rodriguez, gears and spokes. The vacant lot beside their combo biz had been a Burger King until an unknown perp, reputedly hired by Moxie's, torched the restaurant and the chain elected not to rebuild.

Just beyond, Brad turned into the small lot for Fenstermacher's Emporium. The hardware-and-sundries retailer was decidedly old school and even more cramped inside than he remembered. Floorboards were spotted with throw rugs, their once bright colors weathered to crap brown. Stuff – that was the polite word for it – was piled everywhere, crammed onto sagging shelves or suspended from wiry ceiling grapples.

Frying pans and house paints. Expensive solar panels and cheap tool sets. Lottery tickets, bargain-bin clothes and all sorts of vintage items, including a mint-in-box Commodore VIC-20 that aging proprietor Harry Fenstermacher insisted was a valuable antique. The computer fit with Harry's retail philosophy, which was to cater to all tastes by stocking at least one of every imaginable item, new and used. Some of the stuff had been here since Brad was a kid. There were no customers, another emporium hallmark. A Home Depot in Trevorport, fifteen miles south of Gracious, tended to vacuum up locals.

Harry sat behind a glass counter stocked with bins of hard candy. He was engrossed in

a book on his favorite subject, World War Two. A squealing tabletop fan begged to be put out of its misery.

“Hey,” Brad called out.

Harry drooped his reading glasses to the tip of his nose and looked up. Brad felt like he was being scanned by a TSA agent. It wasn’t the first time his appearance had prompted an optic pat-down. His ragged sweatshirt and jeans, pony-tailed hair and tattoo of a coiled pit viper on his wrist were catnip for law-and-order types. Of course, Harry had other more personal reasons for mistrusting Brad.

“Well, shit,” the proprietor finally responded. His voice was Darth Vaderish, deep and solemn. “The prodigal son returns.”

“Yeah yeah.”

“Gracious doesn’t deserve you.”

“Coming back must be punishment for something I did in a previous life.”

“More likely in this life,” Harry said with an accusatory glare.

Brad had walked straight into that one. Ignoring the subtext, he pushed on, trying to maintain an air of politeness.

“How’ve you been, Harry?”

“Gettin’ by. You?”

“Same.”

“North Carolina treating you well?”

“It’s not Gracious.”

Harry didn’t rise to the snark. “Family doing okay?”

“Haven’t been out to the house yet.”

The proprietor raised an eyebrow.

“I know, I’m an asshole.”

“And who said people don’t get smarter with age.”

Brad offered a twisted smile.

“So, you figured to come in here first and get the lowdown?”

“Something like that. Aunt Nipa called, said Kristen’s been having some problems.”

He didn’t add that his aunt had practically begged him to come home.

“Uh-huh, heard about your sister a while back,” Harry said.

“This was the earliest I could get away.” That wasn’t exactly true. It had taken Brad a good week to overcome reluctance to get on the road. As departure day approached, his anxiety had gone through the roof. Drinking hadn’t helped.

“You see my aunt and uncle lately?” he asked.

Harry shook his head. Brad absently toyed with the door of a pre-owned toaster oven, trying to work up to the question he’d really come here to ask. Instead, he detoured and related his encounter with Boxhead.

“Anyone else spot the freak?” he concluded.

Harry shook his head. “Been some new faces around town, though, including a pair of real nasty types. A big-ass skinhead. Gotta tip the scales at close to three hundred. He and his skinny pal got into a fight with Joseph at Moxie’s the other night.”

Pretty much everyone got into a fight at Moxie’s. Brad had almost been arrested once for punching out some dickhead at the bar who’d called his sister retarded. Still, Joseph LeFevre had always seemed a peaceful sort. The old Creole had been a fixture around town for as long as anyone could remember, which meant he was about a zillion years past the age where he should be trading punches.

“There’s also this creepy rich dude being driven around in a limo,” Harry said. “Showed up recently. Nobody seems to know what he’s up to.”

Gracious didn’t attract one-percenters. “Maybe looking to invest in the area? Bring back manufacturing?” When Brad left, the township had been trying to redevelop Eckenroth’s, once the area’s largest employer. The regional economy had taken a big hit when the owners received a generous tax-credit deal to move operations to a new facility in Georgia. The factory had been abandoned for years.

“I doubt he’s looking to invest. But he did make some serious purchases from me.” Harry darkened. “Unlike some others I could name.”

It was a familiar complaint from Harry, directed at those who browsed at the emporium but purchased online.

“At least you’re making money off him.” *Quit stalling*, Brad chided himself. *Just ask him*. Instead...

“What did Moneybags buy?”

“All kinds of different stuff. A refurbished laptop, a box of jar candles. Even sold him that antique chamber pot I’ve had for ages.”

Brad steeled himself and finally blurted it out. “How’s your granddaughter?”

For a moment it seemed like Harry wasn’t going to answer. Or worse, leap over the counter and punch Brad in the face.

“You two been keeping in touch?” the proprietor asked, his demeanor calm. “Phone calls? Texting?”

“Nope.”

“No social media at all?”

He shook his head. “Ghosted her the day I left. Figured Felicity did the same to me.”

“Sure as hell hope so.”

“She home from college for the summer?”

“Yep.”

“Working for her dad again at the bank?”

“Yep.”

“Still hate me?”

Brad expected another yep but Harry hesitated. “I’d say she thinks of you more like a nasty virus she finally got vaccinated against.”

“What went down between us... the wedding... all of it. Felicity didn’t deserve that. I’m really sorry for what I did to her. For what it’s worth.”

“Ain’t worth shit.”

That was Brad’s cue. He headed for the exit.

“Oh Brad, one other thing,”

He turned in the doorway.

“Don’t mess with Felicity’s head again. Cause if you do, I promise that some folks who actually care about her will fuck you up but good.”

“Yeah yeah.”

TWO

The house where Brad grew up after Mom died was ten miles west of town. The private lane angled off Heckmeyer's Road and curved through a forest of maples and black walnuts to terminate in a small clearing. An old Chevy Blazer was parked in front. The door of the separate garage was up, revealing Uncle Zack's pride and joy, a restored lime-green Plymouth Valiant that came off the assembly line in 1976, the U.S. bicentennial year.

The three-story dwelling was pre-World War I. Clapboard siding, windows with shutters and asphalt-shingled roof were standard for the region. But the mortared stone foundation dated to the 1700s, an earlier house having burned to the ground. A low picket fence on three sides separated a narrow strip of lawn from tree-smothered hillsides. Foliage crept right up to the fence, poised to overwhelm it should the zombie apocalypse ever put an end to weed whacking.

Brad turned around in the clearing so his truck was pointed back out the lane. A glance in the rearview mirror revealed no one emerging from the house to greet him. He imagined Aunt Nipa and Kristen wanting to do so but being restrained by Uncle Zack. His uncle had probably coached them not to let Brad know they were excited to have him home.

Stepping onto the porch he noticed something odd. The side facing the garage sloped downward. By the end of the porch it was a good six inches lower. And beyond, closer to the garage, a circular area bore fresh gravel. A large hole appeared to have been filled in recently.

The screen door sprang open disgorging Zack Manderbach. He was mom's uncle, technically Brad and Kristen's great-uncle, although they'd never used the formal term. A bear of a man who'd turned 81 in March, he hobbled onto the porch with his unique walking stick, a twisted piece of lacquered hardwood. Having survived two tours in Vietnam with barely a scratch, he'd lost all the toes and a chunk of his left foot in an industrial accident a month before he was scheduled to retire from Clark's feed mill.

"Hey," Brad offered.

Uncle Zack grunted and held the door open. Brad slipped past.

The living room looked the same as when he'd left, a monument to retro. Rose-patterned wallpaper clashed with paisley-upholstered furniture. A squarish television was built into a cabinet, connected to a rooftop antenna that could access a grand total of four

channels. Atop the cabinet was a DVD player vintage enough to still have a slot for VHS tapes. His aunt and uncle were also afflicted with an old-folks aversion to cell phones. Communication with the outside world was strictly via landline.

The locked gun cabinet mounted on the wall held two old hunting rifles and a pump-action shotgun. Their inherent masculinity was tempered by Aunt Nipa's handiwork, a set of doilies tethered to the glass door.

"Something to drink?" Uncle Zack asked. "Got iced tea or water."

"No thanks. Where are Kristen and Aunt Nipa?"

"Shopping. A woman from church drove them down to the mall in Trevorport. We didn't think you'd get here till tomorrow."

"Got off a day early."

His uncle settled into the recliner. Brad perched on the arm of the sofa closest to the door.

"Still working for that construction outfit in Charlotte?"

"Yeah," Brad said, gesturing toward the front picture window. "What's with the crooked porch?"

"Sinkhole formed under the corner of the house. Just happened a few days ago. Before that, another one opened up closer to the garage."

"Yeah, saw the fresh stones."

"Took three tons of 2A modified stone to plug it."

"Whole house isn't going to sink, is it?"

"Foundation's strong."

They were silent for a moment.

"Got a crew coming out next week," his uncle continued. "They're gonna jack up the edge of the house and fill in the second hole."

"Sounds like a plan."

More silence. Brad regretted arriving a day early. Dreams of escape were already percolating. He wished he hadn't promised to stay the whole weekend.

"When are you expecting them back?" he asked, checking his phone. There was another text from the girl he'd slept with last Saturday, asking why she hadn't heard from him. He deleted it.

"Should be soon," Uncle Zack said.

"Aunt Nipa wasn't real clear about what's going on with Kristen. Just said she's having some problems."

His uncle withdrew a paper from his shirt pocket and carefully unfolded it. “The psychiatrist wrote this down for us.”

“She’s seeing a shrink now?” Brad should have guessed but it still came as a surprise.

“Diagnosis is positive-symptom schizophrenia,” Uncle Zack read from the paper.

“Delusional thoughts with occasional hallucinations.”

“She’s having hallucinations?”

“Gonna let me finish?”

“Sorry, go ahead.”

“Imaging studies negative. Screening for alcohol and drugs negative.”

“Christ, she’s only eleven years old. What the hell are they doing all that for?”

Uncle Zack glared.

“Look, this is a bit of a shock, okay?” Brad figured his sister was just having a more serious version of her anxiety bouts, which had plagued her at least since kindergarten. But those usually just left her emotionally tender for a few days. They always passed.

“The doc said they needed to rule out physical causes for her illness.”

“I suppose that makes sense.”

Uncle Zack continued reading. “Excessive fears related to specific areas within the home.” He paused. “Unhealthy attraction to an inanimate object.”

Brad didn’t have to ask about that last one. The amulet. The damn thing should have been buried with their mom.

“So, the shrink has some kind of treatment plan?”

“She’s considering putting Kristen on a mild antidepressant. Worried about going overboard with drugs on account of her age, though. We’re supposed to take her back to the hospital next week. She thinks a team approach is the best option. Psychologist, social worker, nurse. So far, Medicaid’s picking up the tab.” Uncle Zack grimaced. “Bound to be deductibles, though. I’m guessing that when all is said and done, ain’t gonna be cheap.”

Brad wondered if his aunt had asked him home because they were having money problems. He had a few thousand in savings and would help if he could, but it wasn’t like he was earning a fortune. His job was still bottom rung, a basic laborer. And construction projects tended to be erratic, which meant he spent a fair amount of time out of work.

“How’s Kristen managing in school?”

“She’s not. They said she was too disruptive to continue regular classes. The district’s paying for a part-time tutor for the rest of the school year so she won’t fall too far behind. As for starting sixth grade in the fall...? Uncle Zack trailed off with a shrug. “Who the hell

knows?”

Kristen was whip-smart, one of the brightest kids in her class. Brad was sure she'd catch up no matter what happened.

He heard a vehicle and went to the window. An SUV pulled up. Aunt Nipa exited the front seat with two bags of groceries. Kristen hopped out of the back. The gray-haired woman behind the wheel did a three-point turn to head back out the lane, but paused as Aunt Nipa leaned in the driver's side to chat.

“Brad's here!” Kristen yelled, spotting his truck and dashing toward the porch. “I have to tell him about the shoo spots!”

“What's that about her shoes?” Brad wondered.

“Not what you wear on your feet, the other kind of shoo. You know, go away?”

Trust me, I'd like to.

“Just make sure you take it seriously,” his uncle warned. “Else she gets really bent out of shape.”

Kristen raced through the door. She brightened to a major-league smile at the sight of Brad and rushed into his arms.

“Hey kiddo! Great to see ya.” He leaned over for the embrace. She hugged him super-tight, as if desperate for reassurance.

She finally broke away. He took a step back to take her all in. “Wow, you are getting to be a big girl. Definitely grown a bunch of inches since I last saw you.”

It wasn't just her height. She had a more mature look about her even though she was clearly still preadolescent. Maybe it was the V-neck sweater and pants outfit, or the blond hair trimmed shorter than he remembered, or the serious way she seemed to be studying him. They'd Skyped over the past two years – holidays, her birthday, a few other occasions. But the changes hadn't been as noticeable onscreen.

“So kiddo, what have you been up to?”

She ignored the question. “Brad, are you going to sleep in your old room?”

“If that's okay with everybody.”

“You just have to be careful in case you have to go to the bathroom late at night.”

He grinned. “What's the matter, afraid I'll wet my bed?”

“Uh-uh. There's a shoo spot in the hallway right outside your door.”

“Oh yeah, I heard something about those.”

“Uncle Zack put masking tape around them to mark them off. You mustn't step past the tape. There's another shoo spot in the kitchen next to the refrigerator. And there's one in

the back of the basement near the water heater.” Kristen frowned. “At least I think that one’s a shoo spot. There’s something different about it. Something strange.”

“Strange, huh?”

She nodded, oblivious to the irony. Brad struggled to hold back a grin. He couldn’t help being amused at how utterly serious she looked.

“So exactly what are these shoo spots?”

She shrugged.

“You don’t know?”

“Uh-uh.”

“So what happens if I step on one.”

“You mustn’t,” she whispered.

“How come?”

Kristen turned away, stared at the wall. She slipped a hand under her blouse, her fingers tracing the links of the silver necklace until they reached what hung from it out of sight. The amulet. Clutching the tiny triangle was something she did when anxious or afraid.

Brad heard the SUV driving off. A moment later Aunt Nipa entered. Uncle Zack got up from his chair and she handed him the shopping bags. He ferried them through the hallway, past the dining room entry and into the kitchen.

His aunt’s jet-black hair, a dye job, was styled into bangs. She had a petite figure and was a foot shorter than his uncle. They’d always seemed an odd couple, and not just physically.

Aunt Nipa’s cheeks widened with delight. She gave him a crushing hug.

“Missed you, boy!”

“Yeah, same here. Good to be home.”

Her lopsided expression indicated that she knew he was fibbing about that last part.

Brad had just turned 14 and Kristen was still a toddler when Mom died. His sister had been a precocious baby, already walking confidently by her first birthday. Aunt Nipa had served as a decent surrogate mother to them, doing her best to care for an infant and tame Brad’s wilder instincts with plenty of affection and heart-to-heart talks. His teen years would have been even crazier without her steadying influence.

“I’m ordering pizza for supper from Arantino’s,” Aunt Nipa announced as Uncle Zack returned. “Sound good?”

Kristen wagged her head. “I want green peppers and sausage. But not the hot kind.”

“They deliver this far from town now?” Brad asked.

“I give the boy an extra tip.”

“Listen, I’ll pay. My treat.”

“*Sha*, Bradley Van Reed,” his aunt scolded. Although having emigrated to the States some four decades ago after meeting Uncle Zack in Taiwan, she retained a few snippets of Mandarin Chinese, her native tongue. *Sha*, as Brad recalled, meant something like “foolish.” It was one of her favorites, often used in conjunction with his uncle’s full name.

“Okay, deal,” Brad said. “But let me take you all out for dinner tomorrow night.”

“That sounds nice, doesn’t it,” she said, turning to Uncle Zack, whose expression suggested otherwise.

Kristen opened the roll top desk beside the TV and withdrew a box of crayons. “I’m going to color the tape around the shoo spot outside Brad’s room. Just to be extra safe.”

“That’s a good idea, sweetie,” Aunt Nipa said, forcing a smile.

His sister dashed off. Brad had a hunch he’d come home too late to do much good.